

Where the Wild Things Are

A tour of three centuries in the history of the six-million-acre
park known as the Adirondacks

James Gorman

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The Adirondacks

A History of America's

First Wilderness.

By Paul Schneider.

Illustrated. 368 pp. New York:

A John Macrae Book/

Henry Holt & Company. \$25.

If wilderness were, as it is naively supposed to be, simply land untouched by anyone other than noble savages or hunter-gatherers, this book would have to end almost before it begins. Perhaps it could simply state that from time immemorial trees fell in upstate New York and no one heard them. But the point of “The Adirondacks: A History of America’s First Wilderness,” which in fact is a thoroughly readable and entertaining tour of more than 300 years in the history of what is now the Adirondack Park, is the paradoxical notion that wilderness is not only a human invention but a New York invention.

The argument is well conceived. The notion of preserving forest and stream appeared early in this part of the country. “The tradition of ecotourism here,” Paul Schneider writes, “goes back at least as far as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1858 camping trip to Follensby Pond — the famous Philosophers’ Camp.” “Of course this was not ecotourism as we know it. Apparently Emerson and Louis Agassiz spent some of their spare time on this trip shooting their rifles at empty ale bottles.

Government was on the preservationist path early as well. The New York Forest Preserve was created in 1885, and it led to the formation of the Adirondack Park in 1892. In 1894 the New York Constitution enshrined the provision that the lands of the forest preserve “shall be forever kept as wild forest lands.” Now the park includes six million acres of mixed public and private land and, in addition to being a great resource for lovers of the mountains and woods, is an endless source of argument over how restricted the private land should be.

But “The Adirondacks” is not primarily about politics, or philosophy. Mr. Schneider, who has written for such publications as Audubon and Esquire, is first and foremost a teller of tales. His book is a roughly chronological, swiftly readable account of Indians and trappers, redcoats, hermits, magnates, reprobates and esthetes. It also drops the most interesting names. Almost everyone who spent any time in the Adirondacks is mentioned here: John Brown, J. P. Morgan, William James, Maxim Gorky — to pick a few.

This approach is all to the good. On a purely selfish level, I find Mr. Schneider’s stories immensely satisfying. My family and I have spent parts of the last 20 summers in the Adirondacks. When you vacation there or live there year round, the lore can become almost as fascinating as the mountains, lakes and streams themselves. And on

a more principled note, it seems only right, if this “wilderness” is a human invention, that the people have pride of place in its story.

The book is billed as a history, but it might be thought of as a biography of a place, a life of the Adirondacks. It starts with the arrival of Europeans on the boundaries of what is now the park and tracks subsequent periods of fur trapping, mining, logging and vacationing. This history is interspersed with vignettes from the present day, when logging and trapping still go on, and when the current vision of unspoiled wilderness is achieved, in part, by destroying old camps and poisoning unwanted fish to make the woods and ponds like new again, with certifiably native brook trout.

None of this is particularly new, and Mr. Schneider acknowledges that he has drawn on a wealth of writing about the Adirondacks, but the park’s story comes to life in his hands. For one thing, he has an eye for detail. When Europeans first encountered the mountains in the early 17th century, he writes, the region was well enough traveled by the people of the Iroquois Confederacy that commonly used paths, like one from the Raquette River to the Saranac Lakes, “were worn a foot or more deep by centuries of foot traffic.”

Mr. Schneider pins down the way the Adirondacks drew society and money to the area in one sentence: “The price of admission on the St. Regis Lakes by the middle of the Gay Nineties was better than \$4,000 an acre.” He is speaking here not of the truly rich but of the second wave of money.

And he has peopled his history with one remarkable character after another, quickly and deftly drawn. One such is William Johnson, who arrived from Ireland in the early 18th century to oversee an uncle’s holdings in the heart of Iroquois land. Johnson learned to speak Mohawk, sometimes dressed in a breech cloth, joined in Indian ceremonies and games, and defended the interests of the Mohawks while making sure that they continued to kill the French.

Johnson drank, and lived, like a lord. He kept slaves, played host to hundreds of Mohawks at a time and employed three dwarfs, two as waiters and one, Billy, as a dinnertime violinist. He may have been the first wealthy man to have summer houses in what is now the park — two of them. On occasion he had his valet, Pontioch, row him down the Sacandaga River while Billy provided fiddle music and Johnson fished and shot ducks.

Later, in the 19th century, the requisite sturdy and vicious white trappers appear: Nat Foster, for instance, who made a habit of killing Indians and was never convicted, or William Wood, who lost his feet one winter when they froze but managed “to attach snowshoes to his stumps and kept right on trapping.”

The countless facts are irresistible. In the middle of the 19th century, Mr. Schneider writes, a good lumberjack cut about 20 trees in a 15-hour day and was paid 75 cents a day. Forty loggers in one camp ate 400 hard-boiled eggs at a sitting. Lucy Carnegie spent \$200,000 to remodel her camp — in 1902. Vice President Theodore Roosevelt was lunching near the top of Mt. Marcy when “a guide rushed out of the woods with a telegram: President McKinley, who had been shot by an anarchist the week before,

had taken an unexpected turn for the worse.” Secretary of War Henry Stimson was at the Ausable Club in Keene Valley when the Enola Gay dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

I do have one small worry about these facts, which arises from my surprise at reading that fishing for trout in the waters of the private Adirondack Mountain Reserve is strictly catch and release. Since I have cooked and eaten some of those very trout, I checked this statement with one of the members of the committee that sets the regulations. The point is minor, but Mr. Schneider just plain got it wrong. I hope it was a rare mistake.

There is a particular waterfall in the High Peaks region of the park that is my favorite place on the planet. Above the falls parts of the bank are solid rock, and in the rock are a few old iron spikes, probably a legacy from a logging chute. The waterfall is clearly not pristine, not untouched. But the way it has been touched adds poignancy and richness to the place, a human history as well as natural beauty.

In describing the logging business at its peak Mr. Schneider writes, “There was no forest, really, only trees.” Without the people and their stories, without the lore, without iron spikes in a brook’s rocky bank, there might be a forest, but there would be no Adirondacks.

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