Adventures in the New Wilderness

Lee Manchester
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by Lee Manchester

Jay, Essex County, New York
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Front cover photo: Trail ladder on the southern end of Indian Pass

Back cover photo: The “Island in the Notch,” Wilmington Notch

The eagle insignia used throughout is a photograph of the stylized eagle affixed to a tree at the summit of Eagle’s Eyrie, a hill overlooking the northern end of Placid Lake.
FOREWORD

About this ‘Wilderness’

This is a collection of stories I love, about doing things I love, in a place that I love: the Adirondacks.
I couldn’t be happier than to share them with you.
They relate some of my experiences exploring the Adirondack “wilderness” in which I live, especially the forgotten or little-visited sites in these mountains.
These places are part of a new kind of wilderness being created in northern New York on the huge tracts of state Forest Preserve land that dot the vast territory encompassed by the famous “Blue Line” boundary of the Adirondack Park.

About half of the six million acres contained within the park are privately owned. Development on that land is carefully regulated by the Adirondack Park Agency, with an eye toward preserving as much open space as possible. But regulated development can, does, and should occur on the privately held lands of the Adirondacks, where more than 100,000 year-round residents live in more than 100 hamlets, villages and towns, most of which have thrived for more than two centuries. That is how we make our living here.

The “park” part of the Adirondack Park, therefore, really consists of the large tracts of state-owned land within the Blue Line, whose combined extent totals nearly three
million acres. These lands, many of them former lumber stands taken for back taxes, are being allowed to devolve into an artificially “wild” state, where—except for backwoods trails and an occasional Adirondack lean-to—the things of man are rarely evident, if at all.

It is to that new wilderness of the Forest Preserve tracts, developing side-by-side with the small but vibrant communities of the Adirondacks, that I have taken retreat, time and time again, as sportsmen, naturalists and philosophers have done since European descendants first began exploring the Adirondacks nearly 400 years ago.

Access to the trailheads leading into the new Adirondack wilderness has been made easier than ever before by an extensive system of modern, paved roads. That network can be seen from many a mountaintop, stretching like a vast web through the woods from horizon to horizon.

But once one embarks upon the trail, those roads and their memory disappear. What’s real is the ancient path beneath one’s feet, the sheltering forest above, the sounds of the wind and the birds and the crickets all around, and the fresh smell in one’s nostrils of growing things, mixed with the musky smell of decay—reminders of a broader, more enduring cycle than the daily deadline, the work week, the fiscal year or the election term.

The title of this little book is an homage to the 19th century trail writers who first explored and explained these mountains to the people of their time, the most famous of whom was the Reverend William H.H. Murray. Better known as “Adirondack” Murray, it was his Adventures in the Wilderness, published just four years after the close of the Civil War, that really drew the attention of the urban masses to the freedom and refreshment available to
anyone who cared to partake of it, just a few days’ trip away into the great north woods.

Happy trails!

Jay, New York
October 5, 2006
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CHAPTER 1
(Mis)adventures in the Wilderness

I’m an expert at getting lost—and, no, I don’t mean that I’m an expert at not getting lost.

For some reason, I am especially adept at following my uninformed instincts a little too far into unfamiliar territory, equipped with nothing but a topographic map, a compass, a little water and my boundless ignorance.

I remember once, about ten years ago, climbing up a Southern California arroyo that should have been a shortcut between two arms of a long, long switchback. At the end of that dry creek bed the trail reappeared, just as it should have.

That trail, however, was not the one that me and my companion had been looking for—it was just a coyote track. We followed our “trail” a few hundred feet into the thick manzanita scrub, where it abruptly vanished. After that, the only sure way out was straight up the hillside through the brush to a fire road on the ridge high above us.

We ended up walking out of the park along that road by moonlight around 9 o’clock that evening, covered with dust and scratches, exhausted but exhilarated.
It never occurred to me that I might get lost on the first outing I took in search of “the Old Iron Road”—but it should have.

It was the first warm day of spring, and I just couldn’t stand it anymore, being cooped up inside. I had patiently outwaited the winter. I had even waited while the hillsides drained and the trails firmed up. But, one day, I could not wait no more—I had to get out on the trail.

But which trail?

It didn’t take long to decide on the Iron Works Road, the old sledge trail carved by Archibald McIntyre through the woods above the Wilmington Notch in 1814.

McIntyre’s Elba Iron Works forge was built on the pond where Lake Placid’s electric plant operates today. He tried making iron from the rich ore beds in the Cascades, between Lake Placid and Keene, but found the ore to be contaminated with iron pyrite—fool’s gold.

Rather than give up, McIntyre decided to haul in better ore for his forge. He had a road built through the woods between North Elba and Wilmington, high above the rocky narrows of the Au Sable River’s West Branch, behind Owen, Copperas and Winch ponds. In winter, when the marshy ground had hardened, he used sleds to haul high-grade ore brought over from Clintonville to his operation on the Plains of Abraham.

Though McIntyre’s Elba forge ceased operations in 1817, his road stayed in use until 1854, when the Wilmington Notch road was laid along the river.

I had hiked the southern end of the old ghost road, rising from Route 86 opposite Monument Falls, a couple of years before. It was a well-defined track, obviously graded, and hiked enough by others to be relatively open.

The northern end, coming up from 86 between the Whiteface campground and High Falls Gorge, was still
unknown to me—and not much hiked by others, either. An Adirondack Mountain Club group out of Plattsburgh had distinguished the old roadbed from the woods around it for a late summer hike in 1996, but no one else I knew had hiked the whole length of the old trail.

The romance of walking a road so long abandoned, and trodden by so few since, captured my imagination.

One Thursday morning, I pushed into the woods near High Falls Gorge where, according to the old maps, the 1814 road should have met the modern highway. I found nothing that immediately announced itself as an old road bed, but I knew where it was supposed to be, so I bushwhacked up a relatively dry stream bed into the Sentinel Range.

I knew how to read a compass and a map, and I felt reasonably certain that, old road or not, I could pick my way along the western flank of the Sentinels to the point past Owen Pond where I knew the southern end of the Iron Works Road could be found. There, at least, the going would clear up.

But pushing through the trailless brush was not easy, almost like pushing a way through solid, living tissue.

Every so often as I worked up the hill I would strike upon a deer trail, making my passage a little easier. And I kept coming upon landmarks shown on the map—brooks, rises and falls of land, and the like—telling me that, though I hadn’t yet found the road I was seeking, I wasn’t lost yet, either.

Then, for about 20 feet, I was sure I had found the old road bed: ten to twelve feet wide, apparently graded—until it was consumed in a running stream higher up.

But, a little higher still, there it was again: the leaf-covered, graded bed. This time the evidence was clear that
humans had cut this path through the woods. There on one side of the level stretch was the clean plane of a log sawed through when a yard-long section of a fallen tree trunk blocking the trail had been removed.

I checked the direction: south-southwest, more or less the direction the old road should have been heading at that spot—or close enough for government work.

‘If this is the Iron Works Road,’ I figured, ‘then I should hit a stream crossing it after I pass the rise up there on the left, and the road should continue along the base of the Sentinel Range, past the ponds and down to Monument Falls.’

And there, as I got past the rise, was the brook, running across the road bed.

I had found it: the old, old road.

For the time being, anyway.

**Question:** How do you know if something’s a trail?

**Answer:** You follow it, and it keeps on going.

I followed the Iron Works Road through the Sentinel Wilderness, passing sign after sign of the trail’s human fabrication: sawed-through logs, a rusty iron bucket left by a stream, an old handsaw handle left by the side of the path where its blade may have broken some years before.

When the trail crossed the brook leading down to Marsh Pond, however, the signs started becoming sketchier. Where the road had been so clear before, now it looked more like one stretch of false trail after another, with fewer and fewer traces of human activity. Finally, with the crossing of one more stream, all signs of a trail petered out.

For the time being, the Iron Works Road appeared to have been swallowed in the beaver defile that had grown
up around the verges of Marsh Pond, itself a steadily growing beaver lake begun some hundred years ago or more. One downed tree after another fallen trunk, all courtesy of the beavers, made the passage through the marshy, untracked woods even dicier here than through the thick scrub brush up the hillside earlier.

Forced northward by obstacles laid in my path, I found myself standing on the southern shore of Marsh Pond, looking out across the shallow waters toward Little Whiteface. Looking around at the devastation wrought on the forest by the hordes of buck-toothed, flat-tailed rodents, I thought to myself, ‘These are not tame woods; this is truly wilderness, rarely visited by humans, showing no mark of our hand and little sign of our trails.’

That was when, off to my left, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something moving: a small critter making its way along the edge of the pond, sniffing, poking into the grass, almost like it was checking traps.

‘I’ve never seen a beaver do that before,’ I thought.

And the closer the creature got, the less beaver-like it looked: no signature tail, fur longer and browner—some dark, some light—and a small, pointed, skull-like head, the fur there almost white.

The creature didn’t seem to see me, though I was standing straight up on the edge of the pond with nothing else around me. I started calling out, hoping to alert it to my presence and avoid a confrontation.


But the thing kept on coming, sniffing through the marsh, quickly narrowing the gap between us.

I’d never been charged by a small mammal before, but that’s what it looked like this critter was doing.
I couldn’t run—this thing was on its home ground, clearly better able to negotiate the swampy turf and downed trees than I could.

I did the only thing I could think of: I reared up, stretching my arms above my head, trying to make myself appear as big as I possibly could, and roared.

At that, the thing stopped, looking up, probably noticing me for the first time—then, after another second, zooming off like a streak of brown, furry lightning into the woods.

My camera was in my backpack, so I couldn’t get a snapshot of that creature, but after looking through pictures on the Web the next weekend of the various members of the weasel family, the closest match appears to be the wolverine.

That’s not a likely match, since wolverines were virtually eliminated from the Adirondacks by trappers in the 1840s, but there have been very rare sightings of the creatures here since, now and then. And if there was ever a spot for an Adirondack wolverine to live, it would be there by Marsh Pond, in that stretch of wilderness too thick to be bothered much by humans.

It was midday, and I had lost my trail. The woods and brush were so thick that I wasn’t sure I could make it by sundown to the spot where I knew the Iron Works Road would pick up again. And my little encounter with the unidentified critter had spooked me.

Rather than head out again to the base of the Sentinel Range to relocate my old road, I decided the prudent thing to do would be to find the outlet brook from Marsh Pond and follow it to Owen Pond. On the southwest corner of Owen, I knew, I could pick up the state park trail leading down to Route 86 and home.
That was the point where my day in the wilderness started turning truly nightmarish. The woods weren’t any less thick going around Marsh Pond toward its outlet—in fact, they were thicker, and marshier, and more strewn with downed trees than the terrain I’d already traveled through, all thanks to the evil beavers.

“Who’s in charge of these woods, anyway?” I muttered to myself as I slowly pushed my way forward. “They’re an absolute mess! Whoever is responsible should be ashamed of themselves.

“I want a refund!”

But, of course, there was no refund to be had—and no relief, either.

A couple of times, trying to follow indications on the map, I found myself getting more lost, not less. Every time that happened, I had to stop, re-orient myself with map and compass to the visible high points, and get back on track.

I got scared a few times, realizing how easy it would be to get completely lost, far from trails, deep in the woods, were it not for my map and compass—and what if I were reading them wrong?

A few times I caught myself praying, “Please, God, let this be such-and-such a geographic feature,” hoping I wasn’t making my situation worse with each plodding step—and, of course, if the final pond I found wasn’t Owen, I couldn’t expect God to alter reality on my behalf and transform it into Owen Pond, now, could I?

I remembered Albert Einstein, who discovered the Special Theory of Relativity, objecting to the new, less certain world of physics being created by scientists like Werner Heisenberg with his famous Uncertainty Principle.
“God does not play dice with men,” Einstein objected to Heisenberg.

Heisenberg responded, “Not only does God play dice with men, but sometimes He throws them where they can’t be seen.”

Silently, I hoped that I was not being thrown into such a place.

Finally, about four hours later, after pushing myself to keep going through the thickest, marshiest, scrubbiest woods I’d ever been in, I found the Owen Pond outlet. Across it, and up the brook’s bank, was the state park path back to civilization.

Never had a well-trodden, clearly marked trail looked so good to me as that trail did that Thursday afternoon. Bone weary, covered with sweat and dust, I plodded down that trail and up along Route 86 to where my truck was parked at Monument Falls.

“Adventures in the Wilderness,” indeed.

Phooey!

Next time, I promised myself, the only trail I’d be traveling would be one marked boldly on the map and cleared by hundreds of more qualified hikers before me.
CHAPTER 2

Back to the Wilderness—with GPS

Old roads fascinate me. When you walk them, you travel trails trodden by the pioneers who settled this area 200 years ago—and you probably have an experience of the woods and hills around you that is not very different from the one they had back then.

Some of the old roads through the Adirondacks, while no longer used by vehicles, have been kept open as trails, like the Old Mountain Road behind Pitchoff Mountain between Keene and North Elba. Others, like the original road between Lake Placid and Wilmington, are mostly just memories, their trails traced clearly on old maps, but only sketchily on the ground.

Early one year, my first hike of the spring took me through the woods south of High Falls Gorge into the hills above the Wilmington Notch along what I hoped was the old winter road cleared in 1814 to bring iron ore from Clintonville to the Elba Iron Works on the edge of what is now Lake Placid.

The map I used that spring, however, was far from precise, and since the old road had been used so little as a hiking trail in recent years, the only chance to follow it would have been to trace it from the start, exactly where it
left Route 86—and I didn’t know where that was. I got lost in the beaver defile above Marsh Pond, only finding my way out by trial and error.

The story I wrote about that experience drew a response from a reader who was more than a little alarmed that I had set out through the back country so poorly prepared. He reminded me of one of the cardinal rules of hiking: Pack as if you expected to be stuck overnight—because you might be.

The reader also suggested that, if I try to hike the Old Iron Road again, I do so with a GPS device—a handheld computer with a small display screen showing topographical maps and programmed trail coordinates. A tiny radio receiver inside the device picks up digital signals from several satellites placed in stationary orbits around the Earth. The computer takes those signals and calculates your exact location, which then appears on the display screen.

As long as the GPS device is working, it’s simply not possible to get lost.

It took me a few months to ponder the idea of purchasing this high-tech hiking tool. A good GPS unit runs anywhere from $200 to $400—and that’s without the software and the memory card needed to download the maps you’ll use on your actual hikes.

My wife, however, has an aversion to letting me get lost in the mountains again. When my birthday came along, she used the opportunity to get me a GPS.

After spending a couple of evenings reading through the manual and learning how to use the machine, I got hold of the best hard copy I could find of a topographical map showing the Old Iron Road’s path. Plattsburgh historian and Adirondack Mountain Club member Jim
Bailey had marked the map about eight years earlier as he prepared to lead an ADK group along the same trail. Comparing Bailey’s map with the topo used by my GPS, I charted the “waypoints” that would help my handheld navigation computer guide me through the woods between the Sentinel Range and the ponds above the Wilmington Notch.

And then, I was ready.

One Saturday, the perfect opportunity arose to put my preparations to use. It was a cool day, but not cold, and the sun was coming out again after several days’ sojourn behind a cover of hurricane-generated clouds.

Rather than starting out from the northern end of the Old Iron Road by High Falls Gorge, where I wasn’t sure of the trail’s take-off point, I headed farther south to the parking lot at Monument Falls. There, I knew exactly where the trail started, for I had already hiked a few years earlier along a mile or so of the old road, up to the point where a slide had consumed it just south of Owen Pond.

Before leaving the parking area and heading across Route 86 to the trailhead, I turned on the GPS device so that I could follow my progress and compare it to the trail displayed between waypoints on the screen.

Initially, I was stumped by the difference between the actual and the digital trails, but the difference was small, and there wasn’t any question—at least at the beginning—of where the real trail was.

After scrambling just a few yards above the modern, paved road, evidence of the Old Iron Road—cleared by hand axe and saw, graded by pick and shovel and brute strength nearly two centuries ago—became unmistakable: a level shelf, eight to ten feet wide, cut into the diagonal slope of the hillside.
For me, this is where the “romance” of these old roads begins. You look at how this road was cut into the hillside—not deeply, but cut nonetheless. You realize that this was done originally in 1814, when the only power equipment was driven by stationary waterwheels. And you think about the incredible effort they had to make just to travel those four miles from Monument Falls to High Falls Gorge, through what were then uncharted woods.

One can’t help but drop one’s jaw in awe—at least, I can’t.

As I hiked along, playing with my new toy, I found it kind of interesting to watch the GPS screen as my actual trail veered off from the one I’d charted.

As always, where apparent authority conflicts with empirical reality—in this case, the electronic map versus the trail under my own two feet—it’s empirical reality that wins, every time.

I mused, too, on the way the GPS device was changing my experience of hiking, at least while I was still getting used to it.

Normally on a hike, I would be walking along, my eyes on the trail and the woods around me, my ears listening to the wind in the trees and the water in the nearby brook and the critters calling—but with this new technological toy, I actually found myself referring more to the scientific instrument than to my senses and their direct experience of the environment.

I couldn’t help but wonder, to what extent do these technological tools and toys junk up our experience of the woods?

Early on, the trail along the Old Iron Road is so clear, so unmistakable, it makes me wonder how I could have
missed its beginning the first time I came up here—but I did. Even though I knew where the trailhead was, I struck off from it in the wrong direction and had to scramble up a small hillside and look downward to find the trail I was supposed to be on.

The reality is, it’s easy to lose a trail, even one you’ve just been on.

One summer, for instance, I was climbing Mount Adams to do a story on its endangered fire tower. Though the Adams trail used to be maintained by the state park people, it had been neglected for more than a decade, and most experienced hikers cautioned that it had become a very difficult path to follow. Using a little care, however, and keeping my eyes wide open, I was able to find enough evidence of the trail to follow it pretty well up the mountain.

Coming down Adams, however, I got cocky and, not paying attention, ended up losing my bearings and having to bushwhack my way through the scrub brush to a point where I knew the trail picked up again—not something I enjoyed.

And maybe that’s where something like a GPS device fits in to the hiking experience. Carrying one is not merely an act of prudence, but of humility: a recognition of how easy it is to screw up out in the woods, and of how much trouble you can get into if you lose your way. The fact is, even when a path looks perfectly clear, sometimes you need a satellite over the Atlantic and another over the Pacific to pinpoint your location in relation to the wilderness around you, helping you find your way.

One thing about mortals that never stops working, after all, is our mortality, our fallibility, the ease with which we make mistakes we don’t know we’re making, mistakes we didn’t even know it was possible to make.
The Old Iron Road trail skirted a huge pile of debris left by a 1995 slide down a chute on the shoulders of Kilburn Mountain, where now a beautiful, tripping brook flows. Hunting dogs know how easy it is to lose the scent of their prey when it crosses a river. Just so, it is sometimes difficult to pick up a thin, obscure trail again after crossing water.

On the other side of the slide was where my new GPS device first proved itself. Though I could see no sign whatsoever of where the trail picked up again through the woods, the GPS map helped me find the exact spot. I located it, pushed through the brush along the edge of the place where the slide had consumed the Old Iron Road—and there it was, the trail again, though it was clearly used much less from that point on than was the portion on the other side of the slide.

The old road beyond the slide was much more overgrown, with much more uncleared debris littering the path. It was still obviously used as a trail—sometimes—but the surrounding woods closed in more closely, making the trail a little darker, and the floor was more thickly carpeted with old leaves.

For the first mile or so on the Old Iron Road, the way to be sure you’re on it is to look on the south or east side of the trail, closest to the rising Sentinel Range. If the trail has clearly been cut there a foot or two into the hillside, then you’re on the road.

Later, however, that indication goes away. Vegetation has grown up on portions of the trail so that, to pick your way through, you can’t look too closely at the details right in front of you. You have to look past
the brush to the contours of the terrain around you to determine how the trail lies across the land.

Part of tracking a trail this way seems almost instinctive, kind of like Luke Skywalker being urged to “use the Force,” but it’s probably just a matter of broadening your perspective.

It was comforting, however, to know that, no matter what I saw around me—and no matter what I could not see, for one reason or another—if I just hiked by instruments, if I just followed that black line across the GPS screen, I would get out of there alright.

About halfway between Owen and Marsh ponds, the trail opened into the only real clearing I encountered that day, covered with thick, brown grasses. In the center was a large rock outcropping, on one end of which had been drilled two small holes, each one about an inch and a half across.

Looking at the notations marked on Jim Bailey’s map, it seemed possible that this was an old lumber camp used at the turn of the last century by J. & J. Rogers crews logging for pulpwood.

At one corner of the clearing was a confirming find: the cast-iron remains of an old stove, the same remains noted in Bailey’s short 1996 article in the local ADK newsletter.

A brook ran to the left (northwest) of the clearing, parallel to the trail marked on my GPS map. The place where the trail exited the clearing was not obvious, but I knew that if I just followed directions, I would probably find it.

And I did.

But from that point, the trail became progressively more difficult to identify, and there were more and more
places where I wasn’t at all sure that I hadn’t lost the road altogether.

Finally, standing on a rock in the middle of a brook rolling down from the Sentinel Range and feeding the beaver ponds below, I was quite sure that I had lost the trail completely. Crossing the stream and pushing ahead a short way through the thick brush confirmed my conviction. There was no road there—or if there was, it was too densely overgrown for me to find.

That was the situation for which the GPS device is really tailor-made. If I’d had to, I could have continued pushing through that brush and following GPS directions and, however difficult it might have been, I would have gotten out of those woods alright.

However, since I didn’t know how long it would take me to bushwhack through to Route 86, and since I didn’t have all afternoon—it was already getting on to 5 o’clock—I decided to take advantage of another feature of the handy-dandy little tool my wife had bought me for my birthday: the backtrack function.

I simply stopped, turned around, and traced my steps backward, letting the GPS satellite signals guide me unerringly from the trail I’d lost to the trail I’d already travelled.

And, presto! Within an hour or so, I was back at my truck and heading home to a shower and clean clothes.

I think I like this GPS thingamabob.
CHAPTER 3

Eureka! I found it!

I’ve always enjoyed “exploring.”

As a wee tyke in Birmingham, Michigan, I wandered off from my house, alone, on more than one occasion, stopping to knock on some strangers’ door several blocks away when I got hungry or thirsty or needed relief. Once the strangers got my name out of me, they would call my frightened mother to come pick me up.

The exploratory impulse stayed with me as I grew up. As a teenager, living with my family in Ethiopia, I would sometimes ride my horse in the dead of night through the streets of the capital just to see what the city looked like when it was dark and empty, a kind of urban wilderness.

It should come as no surprise, then, that hiking has always been high on my list of preferred pastimes as an adult. I really, really like the idea of trekking through an unknown forest or mountain or desert trail, with nothing but a map and compass in hand, for the sole purpose of seeing what there is to see—and maybe seeing what nobody else has seen before.

Combine that wanderlust with my deep affection for regional history, and you’ll understand why I am so interested in the “Old Iron Road,” the original route between Wilmington and Lake Placid, built in 1814 to help bring high-grade iron ore from Clintonville to the Elba Iron Works on the edge of what is now Lake Placid.
On my first attempt to identify the north end of the Old Iron Road, I merely eyeballed the terrain to pick out any obviously graded areas where an old road might have passed.

On my second attempt, I had the advantage of some fairly careful comparisons between an early 19th century map and a 1996 trail map, both plotted with GPS coordinates into a hand-held receiver.

On my third expedition, I also had the advantage of experience. Since my first adventure in the wilderness above the Wilmington Notch, I had hiked several old, disused trails. I knew what to look for in the terrain and how to find old trails under deep carpets of fallen leaves or through several years’ worth of overgrowth and blowdown.

Another advantage I had on my third search for the Iron Road’s north end was the weather.

Chuck Vandrei, a state preservation specialist, told me once that the best time of year to find a forgotten road is after a light snowfall. The snow hides the terrain’s extraneous details so that all you see is the curvature of the land, making the telltale signs of an old road or trail easier to discern.

My timing for the third hike was perfect for testing Vandrei’s theory. Flurries had fallen a couple of nights before, and moderate temperatures had preserved a light blanket of snow as it lay across the landscape.

I began by finding the place on Route 86 where the 1996 trail map said the Iron Road’s north end began, between the state campground at Whiteface and High Falls Gorge.
Pushing up the hillside, I followed the track of my GPS coordinates, zig-zagging across the slope, looking for physical signs of a trail or primitive road grading.

The terrain on the northernmost part of the Old Iron Road is steeper than anywhere else on the abandoned wilderness trail. It’s not surprising that it’s difficult to find traces of a primitive winter sledge road cut 190 years ago through the woods. Nearly two centuries of spring melts and blowdowns could well have obliterated all evidence of its passing. This trail had been identified, however, in 1996, from start to finish, leading me to believe that it might still be possible to identify it again.

It is difficult to distinguish with certainty between a shallow trough created by old-road grading and one created simply by melt-off finding its way down a hillside. Before long, however, I came across something that looked very much like a graded trail, with stones cleared to one side. Just a few steps further and I could say, without a doubt, that this was an artificially graded roadbed. I could see where it cut horizontally across the natural diagonal slope of the hillside, which fell toward the brook below.

As I continued following the new-found trail, Vandrei’s Hypothesis proved itself true: I really could see the curvature of the terrain and the shape of the graded trail much more clearly for the slight snow cover.

The trail crossed back over the brook, then continued alongside it. It was fairly open, except in places where a tree trunk had fallen across its path.

I was not the only one finding the old McIntyre road a natural pathway through the woods. Lots of woodland critters had discovered the same thing, as evidenced by the numerous tracks of animals large and small that helped delineate the trail. It was, after all, an open way through the woods; why wouldn’t they, too, use it?
There were places where my trail was indistinguishable from a melt-off brook. The only thing that identified those stretches as part of the old 1814 road was after-the-fact confirmation from GPS mapping: They were clearly parts of the regular, relatively straight trail surveyed through the woods by Archibald McIntyre’s men.

Which came first: the brook bed, carving a straight way through the forest that was ripe for exploitation by simple road builders, or the old road that eventually became a brook bed when the snow melted or the rain ran off the hillside? There are many trails, everywhere, that beg such a question.

On stretches of the old road where there was no downhill trough accommodating a new brook, and no readily apparent grading into a hillside, I could only trust my instincts to tell me that I was on the right path. My instincts seemed to be true.

Each time I found myself really wondering if I was actually on the right path, I came across one of the telltale signs that a trail had passed through that place: a log, fallen across the trail, with a section sawed out of the middle.

The first time I tried to follow the Old Iron Road through, I made the rather dark observation that the only sure way to know if your “trail” was really a trail was to follow it. If it kept on going, it was a trail; if it didn’t, you were lost.

On my third expedition, I learned a corollary to that dark aphorism: The way to stay on a trail is to keep following it. When blowdown covers a part of the path, look beyond it to where the path picks up again. Find your
way through, over or around the blowdown to the other side, and continue. The trail *does* keep going.

The path of the Old Iron Road seemed so evident to me on my latest trip that I wondered how, before, I could have gotten as lost as I did—but, you know, it’s incredibly easy to get lost in the woods, and there *were* several times on my third hike when I was not sure that I was still on the trail.

When I felt the exuberance of discovery rising in me, I struggled deliberately to settle myself down, lest I get cocky—for, in the wilderness, cockiness begets disaster.

“The day, after all, is still young,” I reminded myself, “and there is plenty of time in which to get seriously lost.”

Fortunately, I did not get lost on my north-end expedition, although I was unable to hike the Iron Road all the way through that day.

I had to call a halt to my third hike after traveling a little more than a mile and a half. It was 3:30, and the sun was about to start setting. I turned around and followed my footprints back through the snow to Route 86, arriving at my car at about 5 p.m.

Stepping out of the woods at the end of that hike, I had a really strong impression of somehow stepping out of the very early 19th century, and all that entailed up in the mountains—sparser population, simpler technology, the pioneering ethos—and very suddenly jumping a two-century gap into the modern Adirondacks.

It’s a different world in which we live today than the one that Archibald McIntyre pioneered and developed in the second decade of the 19th century.

There were two items still left on my Old Iron Road agenda, however, after my third expedition.
For one, I had not had time at the end of that day to positively identify the very last stretch of the old road where it joined the modern-day Route 86. (You’ll remember that, on the first part of that hike, I had been zig-zagging up the hillside before finding the graded road bed.)

Second, I really wanted to hike the wilderness section of McIntyre’s road all the way through, from Monument Falls to High Falls Gorge, just to confirm for sure that it could be done with the information I had been able to nail down.

I decided to take my final, confirmatory hike down the old road on the following Friday—the day after Thanksgiving.

The map I had made, combining the 1996 trail map with my own GPS waypoints, proved very reliable, for the most part. I followed the directions from my GPS receiver, matching them up with what my own two eyes could tell from the terrain before me, and picked my way along the edge of the Sentinel Range quite well—for the most part.

There was one stretch, however, where, GPS or not, I lost the trail. I knew the old road was there, underneath the leaves and the brush and the blowdown, but I just couldn’t find it.

All I could do was bushwhack through to the next place where I could, once again, identify the old road bed—and, lo and behold, there it was.

With the right equipment, the right experience and the right information, the word “lost” isn’t as loaded with fear and humiliation as it otherwise might be.

After I had hiked again most of the northern stretch I’d traveled the previous week, I reached the place where I had initially identified the McIntyre road on hike number
three. That was the point where I would have to see if I
could discern the rest of the old road as it descended to
Route 86.

Sure enough, I found traces right away of a trail: the
slight depression distinguishing it from the surrounding
hillside, and the slightly more open way left by the packed
earth and resulting deficit of vegetation.

Finally, I found the last little bit of the Old Iron Road
laying before me: a trough about ten feet wide, artificially
scooped out of the downward sloping hill, roughly graded,
ending just above the modern Wilmington Road.

I’d done it! I had walked the entire abandoned stretch
of the original 1814 road from Elba to Wilmington, where
only a few intrepid hikers and hunters had ventured in the
preceding couple of centuries or so.

And now, if you like, so can you.

Before you go, however, a few words of caution:
I had hoped, by making a through-hike, to be able to tell
my readers that, if you do what I did, you would be able to
follow the old road all the way through the mountains,
from start to finish, without question and without harm.

But that is not the case.

I was able to map it all through, sure enough—but,
remember, there was one significant stretch where I lost
the trail and had to bushwhack my way back to where I
knew the old road should be, locating it again with the
GPS receiver and the map programmed into it.

The map I’ve made is pretty darned good, and should
help you follow the old winter road blazed by McIntyre’s
crew through the plateau above the Wilmington Notch—
but there will still be places where you’ll have to look very,
very carefully to connect my map coordinates with your
own experience of the real, empirical trail upon which you are hiking.

Here is the assurance I can give you: If you get lost, as I did, but you know something about the woods as well as about GPS-based electronic maps, you will be able to use my mapping coordinates to find your way back to the trail, as I did.

But keep your eyes open. Don’t trust my account too much; rely more upon your own experience, your own observations, your own instincts. And if your woodsman’s skills are not the best, then I would say that this is probably not the hike for you—at least, not yet.
Through-hiking the Old Iron Road

If you would like to through-hike the abandoned wilderness section of Archibald McIntyre’s 1814 winter road above the Wilmington Notch, here’s a description of the trail. I’ve also included a table of the coordinates for the GPS waypoints at the back of this book.

*Distance:* 3.78 miles one way. I suggest starting at the southern end, because that portion of the old road bed is still used somewhat as a trail to Owen, Copperas and Winch ponds, and it will be easier for most hikers to go from a trail used sometimes, to a trail used rarely, to a trail used almost never, rather than the other way around.

*Elevation:* Starts at 528 meters above sea level at Monument Falls. Most of the trail is on a plateau whose elevation hovers around 600 meters, though it rises as high as 635 meters before descending to 430 meters at the trail’s end.

For *parking*, I suggest that you leave one car at the parking area off the road nearest to the northern end of the trail, just north of the big curve before High Falls Gorge. Then drive another car with a hiking partner to the parking lot at Monument Falls.

Remember: This is a completely unmarked trail. You won’t find any comforting blue or red or brown metallic discs nailed to the trees to assure you that you’re on the right path. You’ll have a set of GPS coordinates, and you’ll
have the trail itself to lead you through the woods. But that’s it.

Exercise caution, use your common sense, and please—don’t try this without a GPS receiver and marked navigation coordinates.

**Trail description**

1) The southern trailhead, an unmarked scramble up the roadside, is directly opposite the Monument Falls parking area on Route 86. (Elev. 528 m) The first part of our trail coincides with an unofficial “back trail” to the Owen-Copperas-Winch ponds area.

2) At around three-quarters of a mile, off the trail to the north, you’ll find a beaver marsh, picturesque, with Whiteface rising in the background. (Elev. 570 m)

3) At 0.85 miles (elev. 600 m) you’ll have to jog slightly upslope to go around debris from an October 1995 slide. Cross a brook below the falls, then go downslope to pick the trail back up.

4) At 1.17 miles, watch out! The more established trail turns north toward the ponds—but you want to continue heading ENE.

5) Just off the trail, between 1.51 and 1.57 miles (elev. 594 m), you’ll find a clearing that was a J. & J. Rogers Co. logging camp about 100 years ago.

6) At 1.97 miles, right in the middle of this hike, I lost the trail. I continued bushwhacking, using the GPS map, until I located another identifiable portion of the old road. Before I did, however, I had to cross a brook (at about 2.03 miles). It wasn’t until 2.12 miles that I was once again able to identify the trail as such.

7) At 2.21 miles, I reached the point where the lateness of the day had forced me to turn around on
Saturday, Nov. 19, when I attempted this hike from the northern end.

8) At 2.30 miles, I had to make a brook crossing. Beware! These are the places where it’s easiest to lose the trail, crossing from one side of a stream to the other.

9) At 2.45 miles, a huge glacial erratic can be seen to the east of the trail.

10) At 2.48 miles lies another brook crossing.

11) At 2.63 miles (elev. 615 m) was one of the many places where a cleanly cut log, showing where the trail had been cleared, indicated that I was on the right path.

12) At 2.71 miles (631 m) you’ll find another brook crossing.

13) At 2.80 miles (638 m), a handsaw handle was left, hanging in the crotch of some brush, where someone clearing the trail had probably broken the saw’s blade.

14) On the steep stretch running down to 2.87 miles (645 m), historian James Bailey in August 1996 found chunks of iron ore that had evidently fallen off McIntyre’s sledges 180 years before.

15) At 3.59 miles (elev. 476 m), you will find the beginning of the final stretch of the old McIntyre winter sled road—a kind of chute extending about a fifth of a mile, ending at the old road’s intersection with Route 86.

16) At 3.78 miles (elev. 430 m) you will reach the northern end of the old McIntyre road, just south of a culvert allowing a brook to flow underneath Route 86 and into the Au Sable River below.

Bonus: As you go left up Route 86 to the parking area where you’ve left a car (about a quarter mile from the trail’s end), you may see, on your left, one end of a curve of the original Route 86, built in 1854 by Bill Nye, Bob Scott and Peter Comstock. It was cut off when the highway was re-engineered, possibly in the 1920s. You can
walk this short curve through to the other end, which is immediately opposite the parking area.
Shore Owners
Association Trails,
Placid Lake
CHAPTER 4

Moose Mountain
and Loch Bonnie

One April day, as the last of the snow melted away from all but the highest elevations of the North Country, I started thinking ahead to my first hike of the season.

Two years earlier, my first hike of the season had turned out to be a bushwhack through the mangled beaver meadows between the Wilmington Notch and the Sentinel Range, where I’d gotten lost—something I didn’t want to repeat.

This time, I thought about trying something easy with a great view for my first outing, like Owl’s Head in Keene; or my first High Peak, like Cascade; or maybe a tramp into the Great Range itself.

But something just didn’t feel right about those options. I wanted something closer to home, something that really said “Lake Placid.”

I wanted something do-able, but not too easy.

And I wanted something unusual, something not already overdone—some kind of rare treat to serve up for my readers.

That was why I picked Moose Mountain.

“Moose Mountain?” you say. “Never heard of it!”

My point, precisely.

You can probably identify Mount McKenzie, due west of the big island in the middle of Placid Lake.
Well, look along the ridge to the north of McKenzie. There, less than two miles away, stands another peak, one visited only rarely: Mount St. Armand—or, in the common parlance, Moose Mountain.

Both Moose and McKenzie are higher in altitude than at least one of the Adirondacks’ 46 “High Peaks.” McKenzie, at 3,890 feet, tops Couchsachraga’s 3,820 feet. Moose (3,921 feet) beats both Couchsachraga and Nye Mountain (3,895 feet).

Rising from the West Lake shore, both Moose and McKenzie offer views from their summit of Placid Lake that I’ve never, ever seen in any of the standard landscape photographs of the region.

The key difference between the two summits is that you can reach McKenzie on a well-established, regularly maintained trail, replete with state park trail markers.

Moose Mountain, on the other hand, can only be climbed by using the old network of trails around Placid Lake that was created over a hundred years ago by the Shore Owners Association, or SOA. The trails I used to climb and descend Moose Mountain—the Two Brooks and Loch Bonnie trails—were cut before 1896.

Three factors had intervened to make the SOA’s mountain trails nearly unusable some years after they were initially blazed.

The first was the “Big Blow” of Nov. 25, 1950. Also known as the “Adirondack Hurricane,” this storm packed hurricane-force winds, even though it originated over the Appalachian Mountains, not the Atlantic Ocean or the Caribbean. The Big Blow damaged 400,000 acres of timber in the six-million-acre Adirondack Park, including timber on the lands around Placid Lake.
The second factor that contributed to the decline of the SOA’s mountain trails was a decision taken by the SOA itself.

“During the 1970s, the SOA voted not to maintain the trails to the summit of Moose Mountain, and although these trails were never officially abandoned, they all but disappeared,” wrote Richard Hayes Phillips in 2004. (I’ll tell you more about Mr. Phillips in just a minute.)

Then, on July 15, 1995, another freak windstorm delivered what could have been—what should have been—the coup de grace to the SOA mountain trails. On that date, a rare derecho—a cyclone moving in a straight line—tore across the Adirondacks. Also known as “the microburst,” the 1995 derecho damaged about 140,000 acres of timber, including that which was growing on the slopes of Moose and McKenzie mountains.

Had it not been for Richard Phillips, that derecho would almost surely have spelled the end for the SOA trails.

“I was sleeping in the Placid Lean-to when the microburst hit,” wrote Phillips in his booklet, “Guide to the SOA Trails: A Hiker’s Companion for the Historic Trails of the Lake Placid Shore Owners’ Association.”

After surveying the enormous damage to the remaining traces of the SOA trails that day, Phillips wrote, “Two thoughts occurred to me: if the SOA trails are not restored soon, they never will be; and if I don’t do it, nobody will. ...

“And so, on July 15, 1995, the very day of the microburst, I set out for the top of McKenzie to look for the SOA trails.”

Since then, Phillips has personally searched out the paths of the old trails to McKenzie and Moose mountains and around Placid Lake’s western shore to Whiteface
Landing, cutting away blowdown, clearing debris and replacing old trail markers with new ones. According to his account in “Guide to the SOA Trails,” the only one he had any real help clearing was the trail from Echo Bay, at the north end of Placid Lake, to Eagle’s Eyrie, a hill rising about 800 feet above lake level less than half a mile from shore.

My preparations for my hike up Moose Mountain included a study not only of Phillips’ booklet and map, but also Tony Goodwin’s standard guide to trails in the High Peaks region, produced for the Adirondack Mountain Club.

Phillips’ booklet is an excellent source, of course, for who would know the SOA trails better than him? His description of how he re-located and cleared the trails, as well as his history of the entire network, is inspiring reading for Placid-area trail lovers.

The amount of detail in Phillips’ actual trail descriptions, however, overwhelmed me while reading up ahead of my hike, although it came in handy once I was on the trail itself. Goodwin’s ADK guide does a great job of keeping its trail descriptions to a minimum, telling you only what you really need to know to make the necessary turns that will get you up the mountain.

The hike up Moose starts from the circle at the end of Chipmunk Lane, which in turn branches off the end of the Whiteface Inn road off Saranac Avenue. A set of stairs leads down to a short path across a camp lawn to a break in the fence separating that camp from the next. You go through that opening and, voila, you are officially on the SOA Lake Trail.
For the first third of a mile or so, the trail passes through one camp yard after another, close to the lake shore.

A word of advice: Stay on the path and respect the rights of the camp owners who are graciously allowing us to cross their land. If a few of us start abusing our welcome on the Lake Trail, my bet is that it will be withdrawn.

There are three critical junctions on your way up Moose Mountain: one where the McKenzie trail splits off to the left from the Lake Trail; another where the Moose Mountain trail splits off to the right from the Mount McKenzie trail; and a third where the Moose summit trail begins its final ascent at a point where a side trail branches off to Loch Bonnie.

All three junctions are well marked with signs and mileage markers. Beware, however, after the second junction, when you cross Two Brooks from the McKenzie trail. The trail up Moose goes straight north for a quarter mile after the brook crossing, and then meanders in a generally northward direction—but the initial stretch after crossing Two Brooks is so poorly marked, and the wet soil holds so few traces of a trail, that you may have to take some time to search your way up there.

Don’t be discouraged. The trail is there; you just have to have the patience to find it.

Using the track readings on my GPS receiver in combination with a mapping program, I was able to feed into my computer the figures necessary to create an altitude profile of the Moose Mountain trail for myself. The trail seemed so extremely steep, especially on the final scramble to the summit, that I wanted to get some kind of objective sense of how the land actually lay up there.
According to those data, the slope on the first 2.5 miles of the 3.4-mile climb up Moose Mountain from the Chipmunk Lane parking area varies between eleven and fifteen percent—a steady climb, but not deadly by any means.

The last bit, however, is a real killer: a thirty-two percent slope, according to my figures.

The weird thing about that slope profile, however, is that my mapping program shows the distance of the last stretch as being less than a third of a mile, rather than just under a full mile as both Goodwin and Phillips’ guides report.

No matter what the actual numbers, and regardless of the failure of either my technology or my intelligence, I can tell you this with certainty: The last stretch up Moose, from the third junction, is mighty, mighty steep—but it can be climbed, if you just take your time.

And it’s worth the effort, as you will find for yourself once you summit Moose Mountain.

The top of Moose—and most of its slope, for that matter—is covered in trees. I found only two spots that provided really good views, once I’d reached the summit—but, man, what views they were!

The first viewing spot, which you’ll find to the right off the summit trail, gives you a wide-angle, panoramic view to the west, from Whiteface Mountain on the right to the village of Saranac Lake on the left and, of course, all the wilderland between and beyond the two.

The second viewpoint, a rocky spot to the left, lays open the entire basin containing Placid and Mirror lakes, the Olympic Village, the Plains of Abraham stretching to Cascade Pass on the south, and the hilly wilderness climbing on the west to McKenzie’s summit. Beyond the
hills ringing that basin, you will see range after range of mountains, marching off to the horizon until they disappear in the distance.

It really feels, for the moment that you’re standing there on Moose Mountain’s summit, like you are gazing down from the heavens on the whole world below, all of it stretched out before you—or enough of it, anyway, to seem pretty darned impressive.

After spending some time with that vista, just drinking it in while I ate my lunch, I started the climb back down.

You don’t have to descend on the same trail by which you climbed Moose Mountain, if you’d like a little variety. Just below the summit, a second trail down the hill splits off to the left, heading past Loch Bonnie to Camp Solitude on the lake shore.

The half-mile slope down to tiny Loch Bonnie is nearly as steep as the climb up Moose on the southern trail—and, considering that the mountain still had plenty of icy snow at that elevation on April 30, my downward journey was quite as much a trial as the upward trek had been.

At the bottom of that stretch, however, was pretty little Bonnie, the trail passing through a marshy meadow on its northern rim. An ancient, floorless lean-to, erected years ago by the Shore Owners Association, still stood on Bonnie’s shore, sinking slowly into the marsh.

A mile and a half farther down the mountain you will find an odd-looking junction sign, reading “Camp Solitude, Both Ways” (you should turn right). From this point on, you will be traveling once again on the Lake Trail, which runs some distance behind the camps between Solitude and Asulykit, past Two Brooks.
Another note of caution here: Like the Moose Mountain trail after the uphill branch off the McKenzie path, this portion of the old SOA trail network is not as well marked as you might like, but you know the drill: If you find you’ve lost the trail, stop and look around for a trail marker. If you don’t find one, head back to the last place where you knew for sure you were on the trail and look once again for trail markers or the certain signs of a path.

At the end, you’ll reach your car on Chipmunk Lane, tired but exhilarated.

You’ve climbed a Placid-area mountain that very few have summited in recent years, on tough but trackable trails that have only been re-opened for a short while, and you’ve seen the town of North Elba from a perspective that few others have enjoyed.

Congratulations!
Several weeks after climbing Moose Mountain, I took another stab at “historic hiking.” My goal was to retrace the route of the Sunrise Notch trail, abandoned for many decades.

The hike became more of a bushwhack through the wild than a rediscovery of an old, well-defined trail—but I enjoyed it nonetheless, as much for what it taught me as for what I saw along the way.

The trail through Sunrise Notch first caught my eye when I was looking through some old Shore Owners Association maps before climbing Moose Mountain.

A 1919 map showed a trail branching off the path up Whiteface Mountain from northeast Placid Lake. Running from west to east along the border between North Elba and Wilmington townships, the trail joined a logging road just below a place called Sunrise Notch. On the eastern downhill slope, the map showed a place where three log huts had stood alongside the trail.

I’d never read any descriptions of any trail through anything called “Sunrise Notch” so, naturally, my curiosity was piqued.

The weekend after summiting Moose, I took a guided walk through the Whiteface foothills with Wilmington woodsman Guy “Orville” Stephenson. I asked him about
the trail through Sunrise Notch that I had seen on this old map. Stephenson told me that he had once walked through the notch from the Placid Lake side; he couldn’t tell me much about the condition of the trail, however, except that the downhill side was quite steep.

The 1919 SOA map did not depict the land much farther east than Sunrise Notch itself, so I couldn’t count on using it as a guide from start to finish on the old route.

That led me to the Lake Placid Public Library archives, where I knew a set of old state Fish & Game Commission maps were stored, dating all the way back to before the establishment of the Forest Preserve.

The first time a trail through Sunrise Notch appeared on those old Fish & Game maps was 1905. The path was shown running from the point where it branched off the trail up Whiteface Mountain all the way to High Falls Gorge, north (downstream) of the much better known Wilmington Notch on the West Branch of the Au Sable River.

An online search of old Lake Placid News issues gave me a little more information about the trail through Sunrise Notch. The first reference appeared in a 1922 story about a new trailbook being published by the Adirondack Camp and Trail Club, an offshoot of the Lake Placid Club.

The AC&TC’s “Lake Placid Country Trampers’ Guide,” compiled by the prolific T. Morris Longstreth, covered 60 different treks. Number 12 was the Sunrise Notch Trail.

I was able to locate a copy of the guide in the archives, but I could see that it wasn’t going to help me much. Longstreth’s simple directions assumed a level of trail maintenance, including signage, that no longer applied.
Pressing on with my research, I found that responsibility for maintaining the Sunrise Notch Trail appeared to have passed from the AC&TC to the Shore Owners Association of Lake Placid by 1930.

“Work of maintenance,” read a Sept. 5, 1930 LPN story, “includes the clearing of these trails twice each year, in May and August.”

A cabin in Sunrise Notch was noted on the LPN’s “Lake Placid Club News” page of Feb. 17, 1933 as being a favored destination for cross country skiers—as well as a place of refuge for two LPC visitors from Jersey City who had taken a wrong turn.

The last reference I could find in the News to the Sunrise Notch Trail was a front-page article in the July 19, 1946 issue, “SOA Seeks to Rid Notch Trail of Nettle Growth.” It described the use of a defoliant to clear out a large, troublesome patch of the stinging herb.

After that reference, however, there was nothing. It was like the trail had disappeared—and, without regular maintenance, that’s probably what had actually happened.

That was all the advance research I was able to do, but it was enough to get me started on my hike through Sunrise Notch. I wasn’t sure what the condition of the old trail would be, exactly how long it had been abandoned—even whether I would be able to find the trail at all. But I knew that, by making my way through the little gorge from the Whiteface Mountain trail to the Au Sable River, assisted by my GPS receiver, I would not get lost, trail or no.

After dropping my car off at the High Falls Gorge parking lot, my wife drove me up to the Connery Pond trailhead, about a mile in from state Route 86. The “trail” from Route 86 past Connery Pond to Whiteface Landing
is really an old Jeep road; it’s marked “4WD” on the U.S. Geological Survey’s topographic map.

It’s a pleasant but uneventful 1.9-mile walk from Connery Pond to the junction with the branch leading to Whiteface Landing, and another three-quarters of a mile or so to the spot where the Sunrise Notch Trail spurs off to the right.

From the three maps I was using as references, it looked like that junction would be pretty easy to identify, once I reached it.

But it wasn’t.

I only realized I had missed it after I saw the locator mark on my GPS screen moving well past the spot where the junction had to be—and where I had seen no trace on the ground, whatsoever, of a trail junction.

That was the place where I had to decide whether to go bushwhacking or not, looking for the old trail.

My decision?
Sure, why not!

If the brush got impossibly thick, or if I realized after an hour or so that I was just wasting my time, I could backtrack using the GPS receiver, return to Connery Pond and walk up Route 86 to High Falls Gorge.

I made a couple of false turns before I finally saw, across a brook, the kind of terrain that looked like it might once have been a trail. When I got there, I found that my hunch had been correct.

This was the beginning of the old SOA Sunrise Notch Trail—there was no mistaking it. The way was open, straight, and lightly graded, punctuated on either side by the clean-cut ends of logs that had been cleared from the path.

The trail was clear as a bell, though a little wet.
Unlike the Lake Shore, McKenzie and Moose Mountain trails on the West Lake that I had hiked a couple of weeks earlier, I saw no old SOA trail markers along that first part of the trail. I did, however, pass a blaze—a piece of blue engineer’s tape tied around a tree alongside the trail—which led me to hope that more of these might be tied around trees to lead me through Sunrise Notch to the Au Sable River.

But that was not to be.

After less than a quarter of a mile, the identifiable trail came to an end at a small, uncharted brook—after which there were no more signs of any path at all, old or new, for a long way.

I could see Sunrise Notch, however, less than a mile ahead, and I knew that once I reached it, all I would have to do was find my way down to the river, and my adventure would be over. Even if I never found one more trace of this old trail—the last written reference to which had been published 60 years before—I couldn’t get lost.

It might be a difficult bushwhack, but the distance was short enough—just two miles to the riverbank—that I could be forced to crawl, literally, and still have plenty of time to make it to High Falls Gorge before they locked the gates on the bridge.

I decided to go ahead.

A low spot to the left of where the trail should have been had become home, long ago, to a now well-established marsh, ridges of high soil and grass dividing channel after channel of flowing water, like a boggy patch of organic, topographic lace. Rising above the marsh, due north, was the summit of Whiteface Mountain, covered in cloud.
For a while, I tried going through the marsh rather than around it. Both ways had their difficulties. Going around the marsh meant pushing through brush or keeping my footing on the sometimes steep surrounding hillside; going through it meant jumping between the high, grassy ridges across the little brooks meandering through the flat place.

Either way, the only way to make good time toward Sunrise Notch was to take it slowly—which may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it’s not.

Bushwhacking drives me a little nuts because of its inherent difficulties: the woody, vine-like shrubs reaching up from the soil to wrap themselves around my ankles and calves; the thick brush blocking my way; the myriad tangles of blowdown to be climbed over, under or around.

On my way to Sunrise Notch, I finally came to understand that it was the state of “nuts-ness” generated by my frustration that most impeded my forward motion, far more so than any of the physical delays that naturally go along with bushwhacking.

I started slowing down, taking each step more carefully, more deliberately. When any given step became impaired by brush or muck, I stopped, taking a second to look at the problem before making my next move.

The result was a big reduction in my level of “bushwhack frustration,” a big increase in my appreciation for and enjoyment of the terrain through which I was passing, and a significant boost in my actual speed.

To hurry up, I’d had to slow down.

Climbing up into the forest on the other side of the marsh, I got my first big, ironic surprise of my Sunrise Notch journey. With no other signs of any sort of trail anywhere nearby—no open path, no sawed log-ends, no
identifiable grade cut into a slope—I looked up and saw, nailed to a tree, the painted metal disc of an SOA trail marker.

Then, maybe 20 feet farther, I saw another.
And then, there was nothing.
Those were the only trail markers I found on the entire trip between the Whiteface trail and the Au Sable River.
Which is not, however, to say that I didn’t find any other signs of the old, abandoned trail.
There were several, as a matter of fact, scattered along the way.
Even where there were no visible signs of a trail, I wasn’t worried. I could see where I was going, and I knew that I was headed in the right direction.
And in the most difficult stretches of bushwhacking, I had one signal consolation: If the journey through Sunrise Notch were an easy thing, someone else would probably have written about it already. I was really enjoying my jaunt up this path that had, of late, been travelled by so few others.

The first half of the trail, from the point where it splits off from the path up Whiteface Mountain until it reaches Sunrise Notch, has very little increase in elevation, just 250 feet in the mile or so travelled.
After reaching the height of the notch, however (Longstreth marks it at 2,325 feet above sea level), the next mile down to the river bank (elevation 1,500 feet) really plunges. Even more steeply do the sides of the notch rise on either side of its tiny brook to Little Whiteface Mountain on the north and the unnamed western prominence above the Wilmington Notch on the south.
It was on this downward run to the river that I found the most indications of the former trail and some of the activity that had occurred along it.

My first discovery was really curious. Walking through the woods, my eye suddenly caught on a heavy iron hook, maybe eight inches long, hanging from the branch of a tree. Stopping to examine the thing, I saw that all around, buried in the leaves, were long iron bars and unfamiliar-looking pieces of long, flat, three-inch-wide forged metal. I had no idea what it all was; digging around a little, the only item I found that looked like anything I might recognize was a broken saw blade.

Closer to the river, but higher up the southern slope of the notch, I made my second discovery. All of a sudden, I found myself walking along a stretch of clearly graded trail, cut into the hillside. Whether it was part of the old Sunrise Notch Trail, or the logging road shown on the 1919 SOA map, or some other undocumented path, I couldn’t say. Many years of neglect had washed away parts of the grade or covered it with eroded soil from the upper hillside, and many, many fallen tree branches had made a maze of much of the remainder of the path. But, still, there it was—at least, until it was gone, leaving me to find my own way through the woods again toward the Au Sable.

Farther down the slope I found a small stretch where saplings had been cut, either with clippers or a handsaw, to clear a path.

Yet farther, I found a nail sticking out of a long-fallen tree trunk, the nail rusty but by no means ancient, another indication of human activity along the Sunrise Notch Trail—unaccompanied by any other indicators of anything that still looked like an actual trail.
It wasn’t long after that when I finally found myself pushing through the last bit of brush into the open air on the Au Sable River bank, just downstream of the Wilmington Notch. From there, it was just half a mile to the bridge at High Falls Gorge, where my car was parked.

After bushwhacking for several hours, that final half-mile walk along the river seemed like a stroll across an open, manicured lawn.
CHAPTER 6

Eagle’s Eyrie

Just seven-tenths of a mile up a side path off the old main trail around Placid Lake stands the summit of Eagle’s Eyrie, one of the region’s little-visited treasures.

Eagle’s Eyrie first caught my eye one winter as I skied around the frozen lake, visiting the ruins of one of the camps that used to stand on Placid’s northernmost peninsula.

That spring I learned that, a few years before, Richard Hayes Phillips had generously undertaken the monumental task of re-opening the old Shore Owners Association trail network around the lake.

My first trek upon the re-opened SOA trails, at the end of that April, had taken me along the West Lake shore to Moose Mountain and Loch Bonnie.

Later that spring, as soon as the rains let up, I took my second trip on the SOA Lake Trail, heading from the Whiteface Landing junction on the northeast end of Placid Lake to Eyrie Landing and Eagle’s Eyrie summit.

One stretch of less than half a mile of the old trail was kind of sketchy, skirting around and through some pretty heavy beaver activity—but, for the most part, by carefully watching for the circular trail signs and blue blazes left by Mr. Phillips, it was surprisingly easy to find my way to some amazingly beautiful, rarely visited spots on the north
end of the lake, just a few miles from the busy heart of the Olympic Village.

I parked my car at the Connery Pond trailhead, a mile in from Route 86 northeast of Lake Placid. From there, it was a 1.9-mile hike on a state park trail to the Whiteface Landing trail junction, another 1.3 miles on the SOA Lake Trail to the junction at Head Brook, and an additional 0.7 miles to the summit of Eagle’s Eyrie.

Including three one-tenth mile spurs to Whiteface Landing, Eyrie Landing and the viewpoint below Eagle’s Eyrie summit, my total trip mileage last Thursday was 8.4 miles—and great miles they were.

My adventure began when I struck out from the Whiteface Landing junction. Several trail signs stood at that junction, and though none of them pointed to the path I wanted to take, I could see it there ahead of me, a somewhat open way through the brush heading almost due north.

Initially, I didn’t have much trouble finding my way. The path itself was easy enough to follow, and it was regularly marked with either plain white plastic discs or blue blazes (pieces of engineering tape) tied around the trees alongside the trail.

At 0.3 miles, I came upon the southern edge of the toughest part of the trail: an expanse of beaver marsh fed by Whiteface Brook. Across the open meadow at the marsh’s edge rose Whiteface itself, an impressive sight.

Skirting the eastern rim of the meadow, I came to the first of the two beaver dams whose ridges had been incorporated into the trail.

Moving cautiously around the edge of the marsh, the blue blazes led me to the bank of Whiteface Brook, running strong after nearly a week of steady rain. I’m
grateful for the eight-foot pole some previous hiker had left leaning against the tangle of tree trunks lying across the stream; without it, I wouldn’t have been able to make my way across the trunks to the other side, since there is no bridge and no other easy, nearby crossing.

Once on the other side of Whiteface Brook, I was momentarily at a loss as to which way to go. I couldn’t see any blazes, and everywhere I turned looked like it was just more marsh—but, after a minute, I picked a way and headed out, north by northwest. It was by sheer, dumb luck that, before another minute had passed, I saw a blue blaze where the trail picked back up.

I was glad I hadn’t lost the trail—but I was also glad that I had brought along my GPS receiver. Blue blazes or no, if I lost the path, I would have been able to find my way back to the “official” trail junction by simply turning around and retracing my steps as they appeared on the GPS screen.

And, if everything else failed, I always carried a good topographic map and compass so that I could triangulate my way out of the woods, if necessary.

That day, however, I didn’t need to track back or triangulate out of the forest. The way opened before me, and I moved ahead toward Eagle’sEyrie.

Once the Lake Trail escaped from the marsh, it firmed up and opened out. For the next half-mile or so, the trail followed the course of an old fire road, more or less. Where the fire road didn’t run too low, the path joined it; where the fire road got mushy, the Lake Trail rerouted itself uphill—but always with a white disc marker or blue blaze to signify the way.

I knew I was getting close to the spot where the Eagle’s Eyrie path would split off the Lake Trail when I
spotted the first pieces of rusty, household debris on either side of the path. I’d entered the open dump where the Pardee and Erdman families, owners of the lake camps that used to stand nearby, had disposed of their refuse so many years before. Though park authorities had torched their cabins and leveled their chimneys after the two families sold their camps to the state for addition to the Forest Preserve in the 1960s, these private landfills had been left untouched.

I had wondered if I would have any difficulty finding the spot where the Eagle’s Eyrie Trail broke off the main path, but I shouldn’t have. There, just short of the bank of Head Brook, was the red, wooden trail sign, clear as anything: Eagle’s Eyrie one way, Eyrie Landing the other.

I decided to head down to the landing first to scout out the remains of the old camps and eat my lunch before starting up the mountain.

About half way between the Lake Trail and Eyrie Landing—about 200 feet back from shoreline—I saw an open, level spot that would make a nice place to pitch a tent sometime in the future. No foundation remains were apparent. From the rectangular shape of the clearing, however, and the random remnants of petrified charcoal left over from the day Camp Eagle’s Eyrie had been torched, their texture like volcanic pumice, I wouldn’t be surprised if that spot wasn’t where a small outbuilding had once stood.

After taking a lunch break, seated upon the broken concrete slab that once was Eyrie Landing on Echo Bay, I put my pack back on and headed up the trail toward Eagle’s Eyrie.

From the description in Richard Hayes Phillips’ “Guide to the SOA Trails,” I knew that the path up
Eagles’ Eyrie was going to be short (0.7 miles from the trail junction) and steep. With a 737-foot increase in elevation between the Lake Trail junction and the summit, the average grade was almost 20 percent.

Despite the steepness, the trail up Eagle’s Eyrie was very pleasant. For one reason, its condition was probably the best of any of the SOA trails I hiked that day, although there were plenty of branches and trees blown down across the trail.

Then there was Head Brook, cheerily babbling its way down the hill a hundred feet or so to the side of the trail, making the upward climb a genuinely musical experience.

And then there was the added benefit of climbing a mountain trail after several days of steady, soaking rain. Everything was as green as it could possibly get—maybe greener!—from the moss-covered rocks to the leaf-covered trees.

The view from the summit of Eagle’s Eyrie was wonderful—not completely open, since the clearing made there by Undercliff’s Charles Alton in the late 19th century has filled in somewhat over the succeeding years, but spectacular nonetheless, similar to the view from Whiteface summit but closer, more intimate.

A more open view of Placid Lake is available from another clearing less than 60 feet downslope from the summit of Eagle’s Eyrie. Signs will point you to it if you’d like to check it out for yourself on your way down the little mountain.

My excursion had several high points: Whiteface Landing, Camp Eagle’s Eyrie and Echo Bay, the summit view of Placid Lake.
The most enduring “high point” of the day’s experience, however, was not any particular site or view—it was the SOA trails themselves.

Thanks to the work of our friend, Mr. Phillips, the trails were fairly open and fairly easy to follow, at least with reasonable care—but because they are travelled so much less frequently than those maintained and mapped by the state park people, they are just ... well ... more interesting.

On many state park trails, you can plow right along at two, three miles an hour, really making time, because the path is so well-maintained, so level and open.

On the re-opened SOA trails, however, you can’t move that quickly because of frequent blowdown, and you have to keep a much more vigilant eye upon the path to make sure that you’re still on it.

Slowing down the pace while amping up your level of alertness like that has a cumulative effect, I think. It makes you much more a part of the trail you are traversing, much more aware of all its little sights and sounds: the way the light falls through the surrounding woods, greenly illuminating your path; the way the wind carries the yellow pollen, everywhere, bearing with it the forest’s biological future; the way the calls of the different bird species play upon and against one another, like some kind of spare, alien, atonal exercise in counterpoint; the way the noise of the water in a steep, swiftly falling brook can seem so overwhelming at one moment—and then, the way its absence leaves the woods just that much more completely silent when it’s gone.

I like the SOA trails for the quiet places to which they take you, places only a few other people have visited in recent years.

I like them for their inherently interesting quality, where each moment is an adventure of its own.
But, truth be told, I also like the even, open state park trails, like the couple of miles I walked through the woods from Whiteface Landing to Connery Pond at the end of my afternoon. It was a good way to finish off a good day.
Essex County’s
Fire Tower Mountains
CHAPTER 7

Adams

Of the 110 steel fire towers built across New York state between 1909 and 1950, 57 were built in the Adirondacks. Of those 57 towers, only 31 are left:

- Eleven have been, or are in the process of being, restored;
- Eight are used as bases for radio relay equipment;
- Six are now on private land, and
- Six remain standing on state land.

The fire tower atop Mount Adams is, therefore, one of a rare, dying breed, and preservationists have been keen to save it for that reason alone.

There is, however, another equally compelling reason to appreciate the Mount Adams tower: the view.

Without the fire tower, there is no reason to climb 3,540-foot Mount Adams except the pure, abstract pleasure of conquering yet another peak. The top of Mount Adams is so thick with pine trees that one can see nothing from its summit, despite the fact that it is less than six miles from Mount Marcy, in the heart of the Adirondacks.

The 47-foot fire tower atop Mount Adams, however, is high enough to rise above the forest canopy. Step-by-step, tower visitors can climb into a 360-degree view of some of the most spectacular scenery the Adirondacks have to offer.
The hike to the fire tower on Mount Adams begins at the state park trailhead for the Hanging Spear Falls trail to the Flowed Lands, just outside the mining ghost town called Adirondac in Newcomb.

The hike up Adams is not a long one, but it sure ain’t easy, either. The distance from trailhead to summit is just 2.4 miles. What makes the hike so difficult is the 1,800-foot increase in elevation encountered in the last 1.4 miles on the way to Adams’ peak, a grade of about twenty-four percent. Still, short as the hike is, the hard part is more exhilarating than exhausting, especially if you give yourself plenty of time.

One thing that will make the hike more pleasant is to do it early in the season, when temperatures are moderate and the black flies have not yet hatched. The town of Newcomb does not apply Bti—Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis, a bacterial agent that kills black fly larvae—on its waterways; the result is that, by July, the air is so thick with the unofficial national bird of the Adirondacks that you’ll hardly be able to breathe without a mask.

Just a few steps from the trailhead is the first treat of this hike: a hanging bridge, suspended on steel cables, swaying over the Hudson River. It bounces with each step, but the bridge is so solidly built that you’ll get no fear from it—just fun.

A second foot bridge leads across a narrow inlet of beautiful little Lake Jimmy. Logs have been sunk on the bottom of the inlet, with planks nailed across them. The result is a sturdy, picturesque pathway over calm, shallow waters.

After crossing the Lake Jimmy foot bridge, you’ll find a couple of nice, large clearings suitable for pitching a tent and
building a campfire, complete with stone circles to contain the blaze.

Just a few steps farther and you’ll reach the first site associated with the Mount Adams fire tower: two cabins on the edge of a clearing. One, a storage shed constructed of primitive materials, stands empty. The other is a very small house—and when we say small, we’re talking Henry-David-Thoreau-on-Walden-Pond small—containing two steel cots, a small chest of drawers, a table, a sink, and a built-in cabinet.

The asphalt shingles covering the cabin’s roof and outside walls are ragged and torn; the chimney outside has fallen down; the front porch has collapsed, and a ten-foot-long addition built onto the back has been destroyed by a fallen tree—but this little house itself is remarkably intact inside, and it appears to be structurally sound.

“If you put your back to it and push it as hard as you can, it still doesn’t budge,” says Joanna Donk, remarking on the cabin’s surprisingly sound condition. Donk is a member of the Friends of Mount Adams, a local volunteer group that has pledged to restore and maintain the fire-observer’s cabin as well as the fire tower itself.

The two buildings at the base of the mountain were the home of the fire observers who staffed the Mount Adams tower. According to a National Register of Historic Places nomination prepared by fire-tower historian and former fire observer Bill Starr, this small house is the sole surviving example of New York’s first mass-produced observers’ cabins, designed and built for the state forest service in 1922.

“Prior to 1922, just about any type of structure served as living quarters for the forest-fire observers,” Starr wrote. “Two other cabin designs, which were introduced at later
dates, were also utilized—but of the style of cabin introduced in 1922, the Mount Adams cabin is the only surviving structure within New York state.”

(By the way, both the cabin and the fire tower made it onto the National Register in 2005, thanks to the efforts of Mr. Starr.)

The cabin’s inhabitants were supplied with fresh water from a small, concrete reservoir built about a quarter mile up the brook that runs past the house. A surface pipe brought fresh water all the way from the reservoir down to the cabin. The reservoir was breached when the fire tower was abandoned in 1972, allowing the brook to flow freely again.

Just beyond the cabin clearing, at the top of a sharp rise, is the cutoff from the main trail to the path up Mount Adams. Most of the 1,800-foot elevation gain on this hike is acquired in the last 1.4 miles of this 2.4-mile trail—which starts at the trail sign here.

Until 2004, the remainder of the Adams trail was in very rugged condition, having been abandoned by the state. A grant given to the state forest rangers, however, covered the costs of basic improvements to both the trail and the fire tower atop the mountain. The trail improvements have made what once was an ordeal into an ordinary—albeit strenuous—hike.

The first indication of the trail’s improvements is the wooden sign pointing up the mountain, just a hundred yards or so past the cabins. Before, there were only stone cairns here, left by previous hikers to mark that turn. You couldn’t count on the cairns always being there, and without them, it was difficult—if not impossible—to make this crucial turn.
I found my second indication of the Adams trail’s improvement quickly as I started climbing upward: circular state “Foot Trail” markers, their paint still bright and new, nailed to trees every so often along the way, marking the path.

Before, you could have found old trail markers still nailed to trees, here and there, but their paint would have been faded and chipped, and they would have been rare and difficult to see.

My third indication of how much improved the trail up Adams had become was more subtle than the presence of fresh markers, and it took me a quarter-mile or so before I picked up on it.

On my first climb, I had found the old, abandoned trail very difficult to follow. Adams hikers had to keep their eyes wide open every second, watching for whatever indications they could find of the old trail still lingering beneath the thick cover of scrub brush.

The Adams trail was a real mess, one of the reasons the Adirondack Mountain Club rated this trail one of the three most difficult (along with Gore and Hunter) among New York’s fire tower trails. The state had abandoned the trail because they assumed that the Adams fire tower would eventually be dismantled—and, without the fire tower, there was very little reason to climb Adams.

During the summer of 2004, after a private land conservancy had decided to save the tower on Mount Adams, the state rounded up a young AmeriCorps crew to brush out the trail and cut away the tons of blowdown deposited by years of mountain storms on the upper slopes.

Now, thanks to those volunteers, there is no mistaking the trail up Mount Adams—but it hasn’t yet become one of those heavily engineered wilderness
sidewalks through tamed woodland parks that you find on many of our mountains. This trail, despite the red trail markers, still has the feel of a real wilderland path.

When you get to about 2,500 feet, the trail briefly becomes indistinguishable from a mountain brook. Water gently flows over the steep, bare rock, its music serenading you as you carefully, steadily mount upward.

According to Donk, who first climbed Adams some years ago, a wooden ladder once assisted climbers up this portion of the trail. Today, that ladder is gone, but you'll still come across a few of the nails that used to hold it in place, sticking out in odd places along the trail.

At this point, you'll be especially grateful for equipping yourself with two essential items. One is a pair of good, solid, lug-soled hiking boots—and, by that, I definitely do not mean a pair of cheap Chinese shoes from Wal-Mart, designed to look like hiking boots.

The other essential piece of equipment is a good, stout walking stick. You’ll need the stick to balance your way up the rocky creek bed the trail becomes for a short while.

Without the fire tower atop Mount Adams, the only way you’d know you had reached the mountain’s top was when there wasn’t any more “up” to climb. The pine thicket is so dense, hikers can’t catch even a glimpse of the fire tower until they’re almost upon it.

But then, suddenly, there it is, rising 47 feet from the small patch of bare rock that constitutes this mountain’s summit: this huge metal thing, with this ruin of a cabin stuck on top.

High winds ripping across the summit of Mount Adams have torn most of the metal roof off the observer’s
“cab.” Scattered around the foot of the steel-girdered tower are flat shards of glass and pieces of wooden frame from the broken windows above. Coiled at the foot of one of the tower’s four legs is the severed cord that once, long ago, linked the fire observer’s telephone to the outside world.

The tower itself, however, is in surprisingly good shape, considering both its age (built in 1917) and the many years it has been abandoned (since 1972). Only one of the four cables helping to secure it is still in place, yet it stands firm atop Mount Adams—at least for now.

Upon first examination, it was difficult for me to see much difference in the tower in October 2005 from the condition in which I first found it in May 2004. The steel framework of the tower itself was still as sturdy as ever—and the cab, once painted bright red, still looked as raggedy on its perch as it did the year before, half its roof blown off and most of its windows busted out by rain, wind and vandals.

The big improvement on the tower is in the steps and platforms of the wooden staircase that climbs to the cab. The AmeriCorps crew started replacing the old, rotting wood in 2004; state rangers and volunteers completed the project in 2005.

No sooner was the work finished, evidently, than visitors began marking their presence with fresh graffiti on the underside of the tower’s lowest platform; the earliest is dated August 2005.

Though a sign attached to the first flight of stairs warns, “Tower Not Open to the Public,” this is no longer the hazardous climb it was when I first summited Adams early in 2004. In fact, as if to reassure potential climbers, someone has written on the back of the “Not Open” sign their own humorous re-rendering:
“Tower open to the public Monday through Friday, 8 to 6; weekends by appointment.”

After ascending two or three flights of stairs and mounting above the surrounding forest canopy, you see why so many have advocated so powerfully to let this tower stand. The impact of the view that opens around you is simply stupefying: 360 degrees of stunning, astonishing beauty.

The fire tower now standing on top of Mount Adams is not the first one built there.

In 1912, just after the second wave of forest fires in less than a decade swept across the Adirondacks, the state built the first fire tower on Adams’ summit, a simple affair made by tying blowdown logs together.

Five years later, in 1917, the state decided to build more-enduring structures for their fire spotters across New York. The pieces for the Mount Adams 47-foot AerMotor LS-40 tower were shipped in by train, then transported by truck to the foot of the mountain. From there, the pieces were hauled to the summit by horse team.

Once all the pieces had been toted to the top, holes were drilled in the rock where the tower’s feet would be secured. After that was finished, “the actual job of putting that steel into the air was pleasant relaxation,” wrote Kinne Williams, one of the engineers who had constructed fire towers for the state at the time. His account appeared in the very first issue of The Conservationist, the official publication of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, in 1946.

“But it [the relaxed mood] didn’t last. As our baby grew, it became painfully apparent that the pieces were too long to fit, thanks to incorrectly placed anchor holes. Still, knowing that it was far easier to make the materials at
hand into a tower than to get new parts atop our mountain,” Williams wrote, “our ingenious rangers decided on a new stunt.

“By loosening all bolts and prizing with bars and distorting with block and tackle, each piece and each hole was eventually fitted into a complete tower.

“When it was finished, however, we found to our amazement that we had constructed not a tower whose legs went straight into the air, to be surmounted by a seven-by-seven enclosure—but a tower whose legs actually spiraled!

“It was literally screwy!”

By the early 1970s, fire spotters in airplanes and helicopters were protecting the Adirondacks from forest fires more effectively and less expensively than had the resident fire observers watching from their mountaintops, according to park authorities. That’s when the state abandoned towers like the one on Mount Adams.
I made it!

It took me three tries—two in wintertime, one the following summer—to summit Hurricane Mountain, between Keene and Elizabethtown, but I finally reached the top one Monday afternoon.

And, boy, was it ever worth it!

The stunning view from the rocky summit gave me perspective, not only on the beauty of the surrounding Adirondack Mountains but on the question of whether the old fire tower standing there should survive or not.

That question was what led me to try climbing the mountain in the first place.

In December 2004, the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks had issued a “report”—really just a statement of opinion—on the future of fire towers in the Adirondacks. The group supported leaving towers on those peaks that would otherwise have no view, but advocated the removal of towers on two summits whose scenic values needed no such enhancement: those atop St. Regis and Hurricane mountains.

The following month, 73-year-old Elizabethtown native Gretna Longware initiated a petition campaign seeking to persuade the state to save the tower on Hurricane. The campaign proved enormously popular,
winning the support of the Essex County Board of Supervisors and garnering hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of signatures.

That’s when I decided to climb Hurricane Mountain. Initially, all I wanted was to see the fire tower for myself, thinking that I might get a better perspective on the controversy if I got a look at the tower with my own two eyes.

I had another motive, though, for trying to climb Hurricane: My wife had given me a pair of snowshoes for Christmas, and I wanted to try them out.

The Adirondack Mountain Club trail book describes several possible routes up Hurricane Mountain. The shortest (2.6 miles one way) and most popular of these starts at a trailhead on Route 9N between Elizabethtown and Route 73, but ADK calls this “a strenuous climb with steep sections for a fairly long distance.”

The route I picked for my first attempt to climb Hurricane, the North Trail, was actually the longest (three miles), but its grades are considered “moderate throughout,” according to ADK.

Let me tell you something: If the grades on the North Trail up Hurricane Mountain are “moderate throughout,” then the trail starting on Route 9N must be nearly vertical.

I picked a late January day to start my first climb toward Hurricane’s summit, beginning at around 1 p.m. The day was overcast, and the woods seemed grim without the winter sun, but the first mile passed quickly and with relative ease on a nearly level path leading from the Crow Clearing trailhead to a lean-to at a fork in the path.

The second mile was a little more tough, partly because of the increasing grade, but mostly because of the challenge of climbing a mountain with a pair of webbed
clown shoes strapped to my boots. Rather than risk climbing down in the dark, I called it quits and turned around at 3:30 p.m.

It was about two weeks later, in mid-February, when I made my second attempt to climb Hurricane. Unlike the conditions on my first climb, that day was an extraordinarily beautiful one. Deep white snow was piled high on the green pine boughs lining the trail, with an utterly clear, blue sky overhead.

Much of the trail ran alongside brooks covered in ice and snow. I could hear them babbling away beneath their sheltering layers, almost like a subconscious undercurrent of the forest.

The woods that day were utterly still. Besides the occasional muffled gurgling of the iced-over stream, the only sound I heard for quite a ways was that of a woodpecker digging into a tree, hunting out its lunch.

At one point, the voices of a couple of female hikers walking with their dog sounded very loudly through the woods, overwhelming the silence. It was a relief to part from them at the lean-to and take the road less traveled—nay, the road un-traveled—toward Hurricane, where the only noise on the path was the drag of my snowshoes trailing behind my boots.

I got a little bit of a scare, there, crossing Willow Brook by the lean-to at the spot where I knew the upward trail picked up, and finding nothing but deep, virgin snow and no ready indication at all of where the trail actually lay beneath it. The idea of breaking trail through the drifts up that mountain, of being the only climber to pass that way for many a day, was exciting, but a little puzzling, too. I wondered, why had no one else come that way for so long?
What did more experienced winter hikers know about that trail that I did not?

Climbing through the untouched, unpacked snow at times felt a little like climbing through a four- or five-inch blanket of molasses. The snow was so fine and powdery and light, and my snowshoes so big, that the shoes sank in maybe half a foot with each step—and that half foot of snow closed in again atop that boot, making it necessary to pull my snowshoe up through the heavy, almost viscous powder before taking my next step.

Hidden branches lying under the surface of the snow sometimes caught at my snowshoes, too, making it feel like the earth itself was reaching up to keep me from moving forward, like in a zombie movie when the undead reach up from the ground in a cemetery to catch hold of their next victim.

Despite the challenges, I slogged forward, more pleased than not with the lonely trail I was breaking through the snow.

In the past, when I’ve walked some of the more heavily traveled trails through the Adirondacks, I have sometimes whined to myself about how tame a “wilderness” this is, with its well-marked, heavily engineered paths.

But there on the Hurricane trail, with the only visible sign of human passage being the path packed down behind me by my own snowshoes, I got a distinct sense of what it’s like to travel where the road is decidedly not tame.

‘There’s a trail underneath here,’ I thought to myself. ‘The underbrush has been cleared out, and the snow lies down in contours that can be seen and interpreted as those of a trail—but there hasn’t been anyone else up here in a couple of weeks. I am the only one who has thought to come this way for many days—and I like that.’
By the time the clock struck 4, however, the last quarter-mile I’d been traveling had become very steep and difficult to climb. The most treacherous spots had been just barely covered with snow; the steel teeth on the undersides of my snowshoes had only just caught on the thick ice beneath the snow in the nick of time to keep me from sliding feet-first down the mountain, face down.

I knew from my GPS receiver that I was getting close to the summit, but I couldn’t be sure just how close the summit actually was by trail. The only thing I knew for sure was that the sun sets early in mid-February, and that I needed to turn myself around if I was going to make it down the steepest part of the descent before completely losing the light.

Just as I began climbing down, I heard voices coming toward me, up the trail. In a minute, I saw three college-aged guys come strolling up the mountain in the path made by my snowshoes, dressed in light winter coats, blue jeans and sneakers. No caps. No gloves. No snowshoes of their own. No water. No map or compass. No nothing. They continued past me up the hill while I went down.

By the time I reached the lean-to, at 5:20, I still hadn’t seen them come back. I started to worry, thinking that the trail I had broken might have led those stupid, ill-prepared kids to a frigid doom somewhere farther up the mountain than I had dared go. I was mighty glad when I heard them approaching from the rear as I started onto the final leg of the trek back to my truck.

There is no such thing as an “unsuccessful” science experiment, only one that does not prove the hypothesis you’ve set out to test—and that, in itself, is a valuable result.

Similarly, there is no such thing as an unsuccessful hike, even one that doesn’t bring you to the summit you’ve
chosen as your target, as long as you have enjoyed the path you’ve taken and you have learned something along the way.

My second attempt on Hurricane Mountain was like that. It was a beautiful day; I saw some amazing things; and I learned more about the trail and how to better approach it the next time.

After my mid-February attempt to climb Hurricane, there were several times when I considered trying another winter ascent. Each time, however, I thought about how the trail had become progressively more difficult the farther up I’d climbed. If I was likely to encounter even more ice higher up on the trail, which seemed probable, I just wasn’t willing to risk it again that winter.

Instead, I waited until the snows had melted, the ice sloughed off the mountain rocks and the steep trails drained. Even so, I ran into many marshy stretches of trail on my third attempt at summiting Hurricane, making me grateful for good, waterproof boots. Higher up, I even encountered a large sheet of fossil snow draped across a north-facing granite outcropping, and several ribbons of ice running up the middle of some shaded bits of trail.

Like so many places in the Adirondacks, the North Trail up Hurricane Mountain seems like an altogether different place after the snow is gone. When the path really starts climbing, it climbs—and not up a soft-soiled trail, either, but hopping from rock to boulder to protruding root of tree. Though the snow brought its own challenges to the task of climbing Hurricane, it was certainly a great leveler of the path’s surface. Looking down after topping some particularly difficult stretches during my third outing on Hurricane, I wondered more than once how I had ever climbed that in clown shoes!
Finally, I reached a trail marker indicating that the summit was just a few hundred feet farther up the path. I was going to make it!

Then, after scrambling up one last rocky channel, I was there, out in the open, on the bare stone peak of Hurricane Mountain.

Hurricane stands almost 3,700 feet above sea level. Nothing nearby comes even close, and so it rises in relative solitude, a kind of tower in its own right, Lake Champlain lying to the east with the Green Mountains beyond, the High Peaks shouldering up against one another to the southwest, Whiteface to the northwest, and various nameless ridges ringing it round in a deep, wide, mountainous bowl.

Below, one sees the ribbons of the many modern roads traversing Essex County and the several settlements dotting the forestscape, some of them dating back more than two centuries. Folks might call this “wilderness,” but it’s pretty clear from the perspective of Hurricane’s summit that it is a peopled wilderness—and isn’t that an oxymoron?

Everyone who climbs Hurricane remarks on the strong winds that blow across its summit. One of the earliest accounts of that wind can be found in “The Indian Pass,” a book published in 1869 by Adirondack essayist Alfred Billings Street:

“It put me in mind of the Scripture question, ‘What went ye out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken in the wind?’ No, but a crest shaken (nearly) with a whirlwind,” Street wrote.

“Most appropriately named is that peak. The wind fairly poured a torrent over it. I have an indistinct recollection of dim shapes and fluttering garments
huddling together for mutual protection from the wolfish blasts, while I clutched the rim of my hat with the clutch of desperation.

“But the view was superb.”

So superb is the view from atop Hurricane, in fact, that storied Adirondack surveyor Verplanck Colvin used the summit as a key observation point in the late 1800s.

“If one looks down at the surface of the rock summit on the north side of the tower,” writes Paul Laskey in his book, “Fire Observation Towers of New York State,” “they will see several old wrought-iron, hand-forged eye anchors Colvin used to anchor his wood-pole survey tower so strong winds would not blow it over.”

Walking up the last few hundred feet across the open rock to Hurricane’s summit, it’s impossible to see the old fire tower until you’re nearly upon it. At one point, the cab appears to be playing peek-a-boo, the roof just barely rising above the next ridge of granite—but then, there it is, all 35 feet of it, lifting bravely toward the sky.

Despite remarks made in the December 2005 report from the RCPA about the fire tower’s dire need of repairs, it stands quite solidly; the only things it appears to need are a new set of wooden stairs to replace the old, gray, spongy planks first set there in 1919, and a fresh coat of paint on its sheet-metal cab.

The tower does not keep anyone from drinking in the extraordinary scenery surrounding it, unhindered by its steel legs. All one must do is take a few steps’ walk around the tower’s perimeter—there’s plenty of room—rather than standing in one place and complaining about how the tower block’s one’s view.

Before my ascent on Monday, I had been of two minds about saving the Hurricane tower—or, rather, of no
mind. I could see the cases on both sides and thought they both made good points, though one did not seem to outweigh the other.

As I had hoped in January, climbing Hurricane Mountain and seeing the summit and tower for myself let me come to a conclusion of my own, which is this: I can’t see any good reason to take the tower down, but I know of several good reasons to leave it standing.

To hikers, the Hurricane tower is a solitary sentinel, an emblem, a memorial to the continuing human presence in these vast, beautiful, lonely woods.

And to locals, the tower is a landmark of their mountain heritage, visible from most nearby communities, as it has been for nearly a century. One of Gretna Longware’s neighbors, an 80-plus-year-old Elizabethtown resident, summed that point up nicely during one debate over the tower’s future.

“That is my Statue of Liberty,” she said. “When I see it, I know I am home.”
CHAPTER 9

Poke-O-Moonshine

Rock climbers come to Poke-O-Moonshine, outside Keeseville, for the challenge of the mountain’s high, broad, sheer granite face.

But the two dozens visitors gathered at the mountain’s base on Saturday, June 11, 2005 were there for a different reason: They had come to mark the end of their long restoration job on the fire tower atop Poke-O-Moonshine.

The tower on Poke-O-Moonshine was “deactivated” in 1988 when the state decided that aerial spotting was more effective than fire towers at controlling forest fires.

Following a 1993 report from the Governor’s Commission on the Adirondacks in the 21st Century, the state put the Poke-O-Moonshine fire tower on “The List”—a schedule of fire towers to be taken down and removed from the Forest Preserve.

It was “The List” that prompted preservationists to create Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine, a group that coordinates restoration activities on the fire tower. Among the founding Friends were participants from the state Department of Environmental Conservation, Adirondack Architectural Heritage and the Adirondack Mountain Club.
One of those founding Friends was Gary Friedrich. Until his recent promotion to lieutenant, Friedrich was the state forest ranger for the Poke-O-Moonshine area.

“In 1994, I started my career as a ranger right here in Keeseville,” Friedrich reminisced, “and right from the start, I was under pressure to start the process of removing the tower.

“I didn’t want to do that—and I had a lot of support from my lieutenant at the time.

“When we found out that the tower was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, that gave us a little more leverage in protecting it,” he said.

Friedrich took a hike up Poke-O with state historic preservationist Chuck Vandrei and Adirondack Mountain Club associate conservation director Jack Freeman. (Freeman later authored “Views from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills,” the benchmark guide to fire towers in the Empire State.)

“We all agreed that it should be saved,” Friedrich recalled.

A flurry of letters passed between the various parties interested in preserving the mountaintop fire tower, ultimately resulting in the 1997 meeting in Keeseville that created the Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine.

“There have been eleven fire towers restored so far,” Friends leader David Thomas-Train said at the 2005 dedication ceremony, “and I think Poke-O has the distinction of being the one that’s taken the longest.

“Azure Mountain took just one or two years, but we’ve been plugging along since 1997, and we only finished last summer.”
Friedrich walked the audience through a few of the extraordinary steps the Poke-O tower’s restoration had required.

“One of the major things that needed to be restored on the tower were all the diagonals,” said the ranger, referring to the three pairs of “X” bars on each side of the tower, which link and stabilize the 35-foot structure’s four legs. “They had twisted over the years.

“That was what made this project take the longest among all the fire tower restorations—this was the first one that had to have those diagonals replaced.”

The tower’s manufacturer had gone out of business long before, so the diagonals—the shortest one was ten feet, the longest sixteen feet—had to be custom fabricated. Once they were ready, the diagonals were shipped up to Keeseville, where state park authorities arranged for the loan of a state police helicopter to fly them to the summit of Poke-O-Moonshine.

“As he lifted off,” Friedrich recalled, “he started getting a ‘pendulum’ on the load. By the time he got to the other end of Augur [Lake], he was in fear of the diagonals swinging up and hitting the rotor blades—so he punched the load.”

Using the GPS coordinates taken by the pilot when he dumped the diagonals on the edge of Augur Lake, Friedrich went exploring the following fall.

“It was a swampy area, and I had poked around for two or three hours with no luck,” Friedrich said. “Finally, I see one of the straps from the sling load draped over a tree, and there in the swamp beneath it are my diagonals. The top part was about one foot down in the muck; the other end was three feet deep.”

Friedrich arranged to come in the next day with a canoe and a “come along.”
“That night, we had the first hard frost of the fall,” the ranger said.

Friedrich had to dig through the fresh Augur Lake ice in order to winch the diagonals out, stow them on his canoe and haul them away. They were installed on the fire tower the following spring.

As vivid as his memory of the diagonals was, the episode Friedrich remembered most fondly was his final restoration job on the Poke-O tower, which he completed the summer before the tower’s rededication.

“I probably had the most fun of my career last year when a ranger from Lewis and myself painted the fire tower roof,” Friedrich said. “There was no better feeling than standing out on that little ten-inch plank, tied into a rope, painting that tower and just feeling the completion of the project.

“Driving past Poke-O-Moonshine the next morning, the sun was coming up and hitting that new, silver roof just right. It looked like a lighthouse up on top of the mountain.”

Another speaker at the Poke-O dedication get-together, state Regional Forester Tom Martin, told the group that he had worked over the summer of 1983 as a fire observer on the tower at Pharaoh Mountain, outside Schroon Lake. Because of that summertime employment experience, Martin said, “I have a near and dear place in my heart for fire towers.”

Pharaoh Mountain is notorious among fire tower enthusiasts. The fire observer’s station there was decommissioned in 1987. Five years later, one night in 1992, vandals cut the tower’s support cables; it wasn’t long before a stiff wind knocked it right over. “Ecoterrorists,”
afraid that the tower might win a reprieve from Governor Mario Cuomo, were suspected in the incident.

At the 2005 dedication ceremony, Martin said that, to his way of thinking, the most important aspect today of the Adirondack fire tower is the man or woman staffing it.

“When I worked on Pharaoh, I found it was incredibly easy to educate visitors about the Forest Preserve once you got people in the tower,” he said. “You close the trap door, you stand on it, and you have a captive audience. They are going to listen to you until you are done.”

Brendan Wiltse staffed the Poke-O summit for the Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine at the time of the tower’s rededication. A graduate of Hudson Valley Community College, it was Wiltse’s second summer on the mountaintop. That fall, he enrolled in the ecology and field biology program at Paul Smith’s College.

We climbed the fire tower’s 45-step staircase to talk with Wiltse in his “office” about being the Poke-O-Moonshine intern, a position he characterized as “a summer job with a great view.”

“The first thing I tell people who come up here is the basic history of the tower,” he said. “This tower was built in 1917. The original tower was wooden, and it was built in 1912.

“Then I tell them a little about the daily routine of the fire observer. They would spend the day up here in the tower the whole time, watching for fires.”

A closed-circuit telephone system linked the fire towers together, Wiltse said.

“They would spot a fire, get a compass bearing, and call another tower. The fire warden would have a master map for the whole area, with little strings on it. Where
they bisected was where the fire was,” said Wiltse. “You could do it with two reports, but three was better.”

Those attending Poke-O’s dedication ceremonies were clearly united in their support of the Adirondacks’ historic fire towers in general, and of the Poke-O-Moonshine tower in particular.

“Some communities lose sight of the value of their historic and natural wonders,” said Gerald Morrow, supervisor of Poke-O-Moonshine’s home township of Chesterfield. “I’ve never lost sight of this.”

Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward sounded off on the importance of “preserving historic reminders like this of how, in a different time, we protected this great wilderness area from forest fire.”

Sayward also spoke up for the preservation of another Essex County fire tower: the one on Hurricane Mountain, between Keene and Elizabethtown. That tower is still on “The List,” but supporters have gathered thousands of signatures on a petition asking the state to let it be.

“I’m going to take a tip from Tom [Martin],” Sayward said, tongue in cheek. “We’re going to try to get the governor up on Hurricane and into that little box. We’re going to close that trap door, and we’re not going to let him out until he decides that’s another one that needs to be preserved.”

How good are her chances of success? Not bad, according to Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

“Things look very good for fire towers all across the region,” Engelhart said in closing the dedication ceremony. “The state has realized the level of public interest and has recommitted itself to the preservation of most of the fire towers in the region.”

80 Poke-O-Moonshine
“They have been great partners all the way along through this.”

The Poke-O-Moonshine trailhead starts at the state campground on Route 9, about three miles south of Exit 32 on the Northway (I-87). There is a small fee for parking at the campground, and parking on Route 9 is prohibited.

It’s not far—just 1.2 miles—from the base of Poke-O-Moonshine to the rocky, barren summit, 2,180 feet above sea level, where the fire tower stands.

But the first eight-tenths of a mile are pretty steep for some pretty long stretches. Until the trail levels off at the summit ridge, the average grade is 30 percent.

If it’s hot and/or humid, or if you’re not in the best of shape, take it slowly and drink plenty of water; the hike might take you longer than you would have thought, but you will make it.

Take along one of the pamphlets available at the trailhead. The pamphlet describes the Poke-O-Moonshine naturalists’ trail, with eleven stops featuring different aspects of the mountain’s flora, fauna and geology. Take heart when you reach Stop #11: You’ve made it to the summit ridge.

The trail levels off in front of the stone remains of the fire observer’s cabin, built in 1932 and torched by vandals several years ago. A branch to the left leads to an old lean-to, about 65 yards away. The main trail, ending in 0.4 miles at the fire tower, turns to the right at the cabin remains.

The elevation change from the base to the summit is 1,280 feet.
CHAPTER 10

Vanderwhacker

One of the truly great hikes of the Adirondacks starts at the end of a 2.6-mile dirt road that meanders through the woods of Minerva township in southern Essex County.

The destination of this 2.7-mile hike (one way) is the beautifully restored fire tower atop Vanderwhacker Mountain, one of the three best southern vantage points from which to view the famous High Peaks. (The other two are the fire towers on Goodnow Mountain and Mount Adams, both in neighboring Newcomb township.)

Until recently, the Vanderwhacker fire tower was in rough shape—so rough, in fact, that it was closed to the public.

The trail needed work, too. One of its 2.7 miles is quite steep, gaining about 1,000 feet in elevation. Combined with the wet conditions in the area, erosion was a real problem.

Thanks to a $10,000 Environmental Protection Fund grant for fire tower restoration to the state Department of Environmental Conservation—and the ongoing efforts of the Friends of Vanderwhacker Fire Tower—a major trail and tower restoration project was undertaken in 2004.

The steel framework of the fire tower, built in 1918, was completely repainted. “Iffy” steps on the wooden staircase climbing to the cab were replaced.
The cab’s floor was also replaced with new timbers; in the process, the old pipe-mounted, circular map table was removed, giving visitors much more space for moving around the tiny tower-top cabin.

The disintegrating wooden frames of the cab’s casement windows, long since deprived of their glass panes by stone-throwing hooligans, were removed altogether, thus sidestepping the question of how to keep the replacements from likewise being broken out by vandals.

Today a clean, sturdy fire tower arises from the woods that surround the bare rock summit of Vanderwhacker Mountain, just as Verplanck Colvin’s wooden Adirondack survey tower rose from the same spot in 1880.

You get to the Vanderwhacker trailhead on the Moose Pond Club Road, which cuts off to the west from Route 28N between Newcomb and Minerva. Once you make the turn off 28N, take it easy—you’ve got about 2.6 miles to travel on a sometimes rocky, always narrow, but mostly well-maintained dirt road before you reach the marked trailhead parking area, on your right.

(Note: Those who know say that this is not a road for winter travel, though they do recommend skiing in, cross country, and switching to snowshoes for the toughest part of the ascent.)

The first half of your 2.7-mile hike is nearly level, skirting three beaver meadows before gently rising into the wooded hills.

Right at the foot of Vanderwhacker Mountain, about 1.4 miles along on the trail, you’ll find the clearing where the state fire service built the cabins that housed the men (and sometimes women) who staffed the fire tower from late spring to early autumn each year.

Fire Towers ● 83
The cabin where the fire observers lived appears to be in very good shape, in major part because the door is locked and the windows are shuttered tight, just as they were at the end of each fire season.

A second building in the clearing, apparently used for storage, was not so soundly built and is in poor shape; the front porch has collapsed, and its roof is falling in.

Just above the two cabins stands what may have been the most important building on the site: a three-by-three one-seater, its door fallen off its hinges and leaning against the frame.

Every morning during fire season, the observer would leave this clearing and climb the 1.4 miles to the summit of Vanderwhacker, where he (or she) would stand guard over the Adirondack forest until night approached—and then he (or she) would climb back down.

Jack Freeman wrote the book on fire-tower trails, “Views from on High,” published in 2001 by the Adirondack Mountain Club. One section at the back of the book grades the trails into four categories: easy (1), moderate (2), strenuous (3) and difficult (4).

For the most part, I agree with Jack’s evaluations.

Mount Adams, in Newcomb township, deserves a 4. Adams is, indeed, one of the toughest trails I’ve ever climbed: mostly vertical, and mostly up a rocky stream bed.

Hurricane Mountain, in Keene township, gets a 3 from Freeman. Again, I think he’s pegged that right—as long as you’re not talking about a winter climb that takes you through a few miles of deep, fresh snowdrifts and up extended stretches of iced-over rock before you reach the summit.

Poke-O-Moonshine also gets a 3 from Freeman. “Not enough!” most exhausted climbers would say—until they
take into account that the Poke-O trail is a mere 1.2 miles long. Yes, that’s a mostly vertical 1.2 miles, and every bit as wet and rocky as the Mount Adams trail—but it is, after all, just 1.2 measly miles, for crying out loud.

When it comes to Vanderwhacker, however, I’m going to have to differ from Mr. Freeman. Jack grades this trail at Level 3, along with Hurricane and Poke-O-Moonshine—which may have been appropriate to the trail’s condition before the 2004 renovation, but probably isn’t now.

Today, the climb up Vanderwhacker Mountain—even the steepest part, from the observer’s cabins to the fire tower—warrants no more than a 2.5. It’s still a steep climb, but the trail engineering is so good—especially the numerous log staircases—that one’s footing is assured for virtually every step of the way.

It’s a pretty climb, too, much more akin to a vigorous, extended walk through a wild garden than a deep forest bushwhack.

And then, there’s the destination: the restored Vanderwhacker fire tower, its tiny cabin sitting atop its 35-foot, steel-girded framework, looking out over the forest canopy, all the way around, at some of the most glorious wilderland the eastern U.S. has to offer.

This may be one of the best hikes in the Adirondacks—in part, because the trailhead is so remote that it cuts down on the number of hikers. The trail up Vanderwhacker has all the ingredients—pretty country, well-maintained trail, the serenity afforded by isolation, the romance of Adirondack history, and a fabulous summit view—to make for a really nice day in the mountains.
CHAPTER 11

Goodnow

The SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry has turned a mountain into a museum: Goodnow Mountain, on the western end of Newcomb township.

The mountain stands in the Huntington Wildlife Forest, which is owned by the college.

The trail to Goodnow’s summit is cleverly engineered to control erosion without detracting from the mountain’s backwoods experience. Two interpretive pamphlets—one for summer, the other for winter—have been developed by the college to help visitors understand certain features of the natural environment through which they are hiking. At the top of the trail stands an Adirondack fire tower and observer’s cabin, restored and open to the public.

The clearly marked trailhead parking lot for Goodnow Mountain is just off Route 28N on the west end of Newcomb township, near the Adirondack Park Agency Visitors Interpretive Center.

The trail up Goodnow Mountain is 1.9 miles each way, with a steady gain in elevation of 1,040 feet from trailhead to summit, producing an average slope of ten percent.

Several features built into the trail make it one of the easiest hikes of any real length in Essex County.
First, thanks to the town of Newcomb, lots of rustic benches have been built alongside the trail for those who need frequent rest stops.

The trail designers have also built boardwalks over potentially marshy spots, and lots of simple but sturdy log or stone staircases climb the steepest stretches.

The rest of the trail is graded and maintained so that almost anyone with the use of both legs can navigate it with very little difficulty.

How easy is the hike up Goodnow? Adirondack guide Lynn Malerba has used it for her introductory snowshoe hike, if that gives you any indication.

It’s a popular trail, though not overwhelmingly so. According to the log book at the trailhead, Goodnow gets between one and two dozen visitors almost every day of the week in the fall.

One aspect of the trail environment not covered in the interpretive pamphlet that’s available at the Goodnow trailhead kiosk is the dampness we experienced in the Adirondacks over the summer of 2005, one of the hottest and most humid on record.

All that moisture created an environment where several life forms not usually found in great abundance in the Adirondacks became very, very common here—specifically, wood frogs and toads, fungi, and mushrooms.

Huge colonies of at least a dozen different varieties of mushrooms could be found on the path up Goodnow Mountain, at places nearly covering the trail.

Goodnow’s most abundant “wildlife” species, at least on the ground, was the forest toad.

You’ll know you’re nearing the summit of Goodnow Mountain when you pass the first of three abandoned
structures on your right: the concrete pad of an old building of uncertain utility.

A few hundred feet farther is the horse barn once used by Archer and Anna Huntington, who donated their mountain land to ESF.

A little bit past the little barn is a side trail leading to the ruins of a covered well that once provided drinking water to the fire observers who stood guard on Goodnow tower.

As is the case with every tower summit I have climbed, not a trace of the Goodnow fire tower can be seen until you’re almost upon it.

The tower is impressive, standing 60 feet above the bare rock of Goodnow’s summit, half of that extending above the forest canopy. While not the tallest in the state—several towers stand as high as 80 feet—it does hold the record for Essex County. The 360-degree view from the top of the tower is superb, said to be one of the best in the area.

Just as impressive as the tower’s height is its condition. The entire tower, including the cab, has been restored—not a mean feat, especially considering the winds that wail over Goodnow’s 2,690-foot summit all the year round.

At the foot of the tower stands a cabin where a fire observer (and, often, his wife) lived for six months out of the year.

Like the tower itself, the observer’s cabin has been restored and rudimentarily equipped so that it gives visitors a sense of what it must have been like to live for half the year on that lonely summit.

The open, intact observer’s cabin on Goodnow is a real rarity. Among the other Essex County fire towers:
• At this writing, the observer’s cabins at the foot of Mount Adams are disintegrating, awaiting restoration.
  • Of the two cabins for the Vanderwhacker tower, one is intact and locked up tight, while the other is rapidly falling apart.
  • The two observer’s cabins that used to stand on the summit ridge of Poke-O-Moonshine fell victim to a firebug sometime after the tower was closed in 1988.
  • The Hurricane tower’s cabin is long gone, circumstances unknown.
  • The Mount Belfry observer’s cabin, built in 1934, has mysteriously disappeared.
  • As for the tower on Palmer Hill, the state removed its cabin in the mid-1970s to prevent its further vandalization.
Essex County has an extraordinarily wide range of fire towers that enthusiasts can visit.

Several provide the best views you can get from the south of the central High Peaks: Vanderwhacker in Minerva township, and Newcomb’s Goodnow and Adams.

In central Essex County, two towers offer hikers a hard bargain: tough climbs in exchange for great views. One of those towers is on Poke-O-Moonshine, south of Keeseville, in Chesterfield township. The other is the embattled Hurricane Mountain tower, standing on the town border between Keene and Elizabethtown.

But Essex County also has two more of these old Adirondack sentinels still standing. Neither of them attract anything like the attention brought by the others. They rise from relatively low prominences. The “hikes” to visit them—they should really be called “strolls”—run up graded dirt maintenance roads.

One of them is the tower atop Belfry Mountain, outside the hamlet of Witherbee, in Moriah township.

The other is the Palmer Hill fire tower, outside Au Sable Forks.

The Palmer Hill fire tower (elevation 1,146 feet) is not really in Essex County at all, but its Essex ties are strong.
For one, its host community is Au Sable Forks, which straddles the Au Sable River and the Clinton-Essex county line, equally a part of both counties.

For another, the Palmer Hill fire tower was built as a backup for the tower on Whiteface Mountain, in Essex County.

The area to the north and east of Whiteface is very dry, getting less rainfall each year than anywhere else in New York state. Fire observers needed to keep a lookout there in the early spring and late autumn, but the snows on Whiteface summit prevented the manning of that station between October and March. That’s why the tower on Palmer Hill, opened in 1930, was first manned by Whiteface observers.

The tower was closed in 1974, when aerial fire spotters first began displacing observers on the ground, but was re-opened in 1978 and continued operating through 1988.

Today, the Palmer Hill fire tower is in private hands. The owner leases space on its supports to National Grid, the successor company to Niagara Mohawk, for radio antennae.

To visit Palmer Hill, head north from unincorporated Au Sable Forks’ Main Street bridge and continue straight through the caution light at the Stewart’s Shops store. At the next corner, turn left toward Black Brook and Union Falls.

Go past a cemetery on the left to a fork in the road, where you will bear right toward Palmer Hill and Harkness. After half a mile you will see the street sign for Tower Road, where you’ll turn left.

At 0.9 miles, Tower Road itself curves left—but to the right, you will see a metal gate. Park your car there and
head up the maintenance road to the top, a jaunt of about an eighth of a mile.

At the summit you’ll find a clearing. Off to one side is the old fire tower, a metal sheath screening the lower three flights of stairs and preventing anyone from climbing to the top.

If you look to the left, just before entering the clearing, you will see two “No Trespassing” signs nailed to a tree—and for good reason.

In the Seventies, when the Palmer Hill fire tower was closed for four years, this site was heavily vandalized. The observer’s cabin, which once stood at the foot of the tower, had to be carted off by the state forest service in the mid-1970s to prevent it from being completely destroyed.

And since the fire tower’s final closure in 1988, the somewhat remote clearing has served as the site of many an underaged drinking party, complete with dangerous bonfires.

If you visit Palmer Hill, please abide by the owner’s wishes: Observe, but stay away from the tower itself.

The view from the top of Palmer Hill—particularly without access to the cab atop the tower—is not that great. The tall pines that have grown up around the summit impair what might otherwise be a great vista looking west-southwest toward Whiteface and Esther mountains.

For many, however, even without being able to climb the tower, the trip up Palmer Hill is worth the short walk, just to pay homage to another one of the old, surviving guardians of the Adirondack forest.

The view from Belfry, on the other hand, is truly amazing—perhaps more so because the effort required to summit this little mountain (elevation 1,863 feet) is so minimal.
Because the walk up the Belfry Mountain access road is so short and so easy, this is a great spot from which to get a panoramic winter view of the High Peaks, especially for those who are not prepared to hike deep into the Great Range in the depth of winter.

The state first stationed a fire observer atop Belfry in 1912. The summit, which had been clear cut, was a pasture; no tower was needed to scan 360 degrees around the mountain. The 47-foot steel tower and cab found there today were not built until 1917, and then mostly to give the fire observer protection from the elements.

The Belfry Mountain fire observation station was closed in 1988. Essex County now uses the tower as a platform for radio antennae.

An early cabin for the Belfry fire observers was built at the mountain’s foot in 1934. Later, another one was built higher up, at the base of the tower. According to one account, that cabin was still there in 1992, sans door and windows; another story says that it was taken down sometime in the mid-1980s to ensure that it didn’t fall down on someone. In any case, all you’ll find today on the summit near the tower are the cabin’s foundations.

When you climb Belfry’s small tower, the first thing you’ll see to the east is the hamlet of Witherbee and, nearby, several huge cones of debris. These are tailings piles, left over from the days when the Witherbee Sherman Mining Company (and, later, Republic Steel) operated a huge network of iron mines in (and under) Moriah township. The mines were still being worked as late as the 1970s.

(On your way back to the Northway, notice the tenements on either side of Witherbee Road. Built by Witherbee Sherman as housing for its workers, they were
constructed with concrete blocks made using Moriah iron tailings, incredibly dense and very durable.)

Beyond Witherbee, the view from the Belfry tower reaches eastward to the Green Mountains of Vermont. To the northwest, you’ll see Hurricane Mountain and, farther off, Whiteface. To the west is Rocky Ridge and Giant; to the southwest, Dix and the Great Range; and to the south-southwest, Pharaoh Mountain in Schroon township.

To reach Belfry Mountain, take Exit 30 off Interstate 87, the Northway. Go west for a short distance, then take the first left onto Tracy Road (Route 6). After driving 7.7 miles, you will reach the stop sign at Witherbee Road (Route 70) on the edge of Witherbee hamlet. Turn left and go just one more mile, where you will see a state trail marker on the left for the Hammond Pond Wild Forest; parking is on the right (opposite) side of the road.

As the trail marker indicates, the climb to the Belfry Mountain fire tower is just 0.4 miles. Except for the last hundred feet or so, the path goes entirely up a graded, plowed maintenance road.

The tower is the property of the town of Moriah, so don’t worry about trespassing. The tower’s structure is sound, the stairs are solid, and the cab is open—so climb away!

If you would like to learn more about Moriah’s historic iron works, try visiting the Iron Center museum in Port Henry, open from mid-June through mid-October, or take a walking tour of Port Henry, which serves as the “capital” of Moriah township. You’ll find more information about Port Henry, Moriah’s mines and the Iron Center at www.porthenry.com.
There are three books that serve as good resources for information on New York’s fire towers:

- The best fire-tower trail guide is the Adirondack Mountain Club’s “Views from on High: Fire Tower Trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills,” by John P. Freeman (2001).
- A good survey of all the standing fire towers throughout the state is Paul Laskey’s “The Fire Observation Towers of New York State” (2003).
- The most comprehensive collection of oral histories from fire observers and rangers is Marty Podskoch’s three-volume series, the final installment of which is “Adirondack Fire Towers, Their History and Lore: The Northern Districts” (2005).

The Adirondack Architectural Heritage Web site (aarch.org) has information on fire towers from a preservationist point of view.

One more resource worth mentioning is a report titled “The Future of Adirondack Fire Towers,” issued at the end of 2004 by the environmentalist Residents’ Committee to Protect the Adirondacks. The report is available on the Web as a PDF download from www.rcpa.org—and it’s free!
The Woods in Winter
CHAPTER 13

Frozen Placid Lake

If you’re looking for a winter hike that will expand your consciousness and expose you to classic regional architecture, I heartily recommend a nordic ski circuit of frozen Placid Lake.

Part of the experience is a free tour of one of the largest—and best—collections of Adirondack camp architecture to be found anywhere inside the Blue Line, taken at a time of year when these beautiful structures are more visible and more accessible than during any other season.

Another aspect of this tour is the vastness of the trackless, unbroken Antarctic plain that Placid Lake becomes in the depths of winter, overseen everywhere and at all times by Whiteface Mountain, arising from the lake’s northern head.

I took this tour one February. My point of departure was the end of the dock at the municipal marina off Mirror Lake Drive. In summertime, this is a very busy place indeed, with almost every slip taken by a small motorboat. In wintertime, however, the marina is empty, like the lake.

I was a little concerned about the safety of the ice, especially with the repeated freezes and thaws we’d had that winter. I delayed my excursion until after a series of
nights with temperatures at or below zero degrees Fahrenheit.

When I got to the lake, I had the added assurance of seeing numerous snowmobile tracks running across the snow around the lake’s edge—and if those thousand-pound rocket sleds could safely skiddoo across the ice, then surely so could I.

Placid Lake looks like something a realty broker would have laid out. Running about 3.5 miles from head to foot and 1.5 miles from east shore to west, the potential for shoreline real estate is maximized by the presence of three islands in the lake’s midst. Buck and Moose islands, the southern two of the trio, are quite large. Hawk Island, near the northern head of the lake, is petite by comparison.

The marina, my starting point, is on the southeast bay of Placid Lake. I chose a route that would take me due north to Sunset Strait, west between Buck Island and Brewster Peninsula, northeast up the West Lake, east to Whiteface Bay, then south-southwest around Hawk Island and back to the marina.

Total trip distance: about 7.5 miles, as near as I could figure it.

There was no track for me to follow across the snow, which meant that I was hiking with cross country skis more than I was gliding along a hardened nordic trail around the lake.

Still, the experience was stupendous.

A big part of the day’s special beauty came, I’m sure, from the very clear, very blue sky. The temperature was quite frigid, ranging from about six degrees Fahrenheit, when I started, to about eleven degrees, when I returned. With the proper attire, however, the cold posed no

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problem—and on that bright, sunny day, the chill didn’t stand a chance of freezing my enthusiasm.

The first notable camp I came to was Camp Sunshine, on the southern shore of Buck Island. It’s the last in a series of camps extending westward from the island’s southeast tip, called Picnic Point.

Originally called Camp Sunset, like the strait upon which it was built, the small compound was renamed Sunshine by the indomitably optimistic Kate Smith, the singer who made “God Bless America” one of our unofficial national anthems.

Kate loved Placid Lake, by all accounts, spending as much of every summer as possible at Camp Sunshine. She even built a radio studio inside one of the camp’s boathouses so that she could keep up her regular broadcast schedule without having to leave her second—and favorite—home.

Passing out of Sunset Strait and onto the West Lake, on the far shore you will see the Whiteface Club, a resort colony built on the site of the old Whiteface Inn. Originally called the Westside, built in 1882, it was the third hotel to appear on Placid Lake.

Going up the West Lake, you will notice that the western lake shore is nearly covered with camps, while the shores of Buck and Moose islands to the east stand up like pockets of woodland wilderness from the snowy lake. The ownership of much of those two islands rests with the state, which holds them as parts of New York’s “forever wild” Forest Preserve.

Across from the western tip of Moose Island, between the points where Little Brook and Minnow Brook pour themselves into the lake, begins one of the most
interesting series of camps on the lake, both architecturally and historically.

In 1872, just below the mouth of Minnow Brook, a well-known 19th century Shakespearean actor, William Fox Leggett, built a log cabin for himself and his wife. They soon enlarged it into a three-story building of unpeeled logs, said to have been one of the largest log structures in the world—at least half a decade before Henry van Hoevenberg began construction of his famous Adirondack Lodge on Heart Lake.

The Leggetts called their creation Castle Rustico, and until about 1888 they operated their log palace as a resort hotel. After Leggett’s death in 1910, the structure went into a long, slow decline. It was demolished in the 1950s.

Several of the camps now standing around Minnow Brook were carved from the Leggetts’ original tract, including camps Minnow Brook, Idilio and Rock Ledge.

Camp Idilio is probably the best known of these camps today, although by another name: Camp Solitude. Built in 1898 for W.G. Leland, owner of the Grand Hotel in New York City, it went through several changes of ownership and several names—Beechward, then Grenwolde—before taking on its present name in 1952, when it was purchased by Joseph and Elva Kelsall of Princeton, N.J.

The Kelsalls ran Solitude as a music camp until 1976, possibly in conjunction with The Music Trail, a summer camp that operated next door at Camp Minnow Brook beginning in 1951.

Today, Camp Solitude is run by the Kelsalls’ son Jay as a B&B/camp resort/restaurant on the upper West Lake. The architecture of the place, as seen from the boathouse and main house close to the shore, has stayed
true to its origins, as have the interiors of both these buildings.

If the place looks interesting to you as you ski by, consider spending a weekend there this summer—or, if you have a cool $3.6 million lying around, you can just buy it! Like many camps, it’s listed for sale with a local realtor.

On a point a little farther up the West Lake is the site of Camp Undercliff. By virtue of its location, Undercliff has nearly unobstructed views of both Whiteface Mountain to the northeast and the High Peaks to the southeast.

Built in 1879 by Charles Alton, Undercliff was one of the earliest camps on the lake. It has gone through several transitions in its long history.

Ten years after building Undercliff, Alton expanded it with rental cottages and tent platforms sufficient to accommodate one hundred paying guests.

In 1924, Undercliff was turned into a vacation home for New York Central Railroad retirees.

In 1939, it became a music camp. The new operation hosted campers through the summer of 1962, after which the property was broken up into eight separate parcels and sold.

The house on the point at Undercliff today is not the original camp, built in 1879, but a replacement called Skandario, built in 1902. That house, however, is not what will catch your eye as you near Undercliff point.

Next door, to the south, you will see what looks like an architectural candy cane. The camp is called, simply, The Lodge. Both the boathouse below and the curiously leaning two-story cottage above, painted red with white trim, look like they could be Santa’s summer place—if it weren’t for the fact that everyone already knows his
summer abode is located on the other side of Whiteface Mountain, at Santa’s Workshop, in Wilmington.

Beyond Undercliff is Echo Bay, the northernmost extremity of Placid Lake. On the west side of the bay stands Camp Woodsmoke, a children’s summer camp that started out in 1880 as Echo Lodge, a summer hotel with tent accommodations. Though the original hotel building was torn down and replaced in 1896, an artist’s studio that was built on the grounds in 1881 is the oldest surviving structure on Placid Lake today.

On the northern end of Echo Bay once stood Camp Eagle’s Eyrie, built in 1908 beneath the hill for which it is named. Another camp next door, Camp Erdman, was built around the same time by a relative of the owner of Eagle’s Eyrie. Both, however, are gone today; the land upon which they stood was bought by the state for addition to what is now the McKenzie Mountain Wilderness Area, and the camps were torn down.

The same fate was met by Camp Birchwood, which stood to the east around the point below Eagle’s Eyrie hill, on the west side of Whiteface Bay.

A friend of mine, knowing that I like to poke around in ghost towns and old ruins and the like, told me before I left that I might be able to see the remnants of an old Great Camp as I passed by the Birchwood site. Lo and behold, as I rounded the point, I did indeed see the stonework of an old boathouse foundation on the shoreline.

Skiing closer and looking up at the hillside above, I caught a glimpse of some kind of stone structure. Releasing the bindings on my skis, I climbed the remains of the boathouse steps and scrambled up the snow-covered hill. There, standing by its lonesome, was a two-room
stone cottage, one wall fallen in, the roof supported by makeshift birch-log pillars. A little farther up the hillside stood Birchwood’s former stone foundations, apparently rock-solid though no longer supporting the main camp house.

Built by Harrie Hull in 1910 and later owned by the Uihleins, in 1948 Birchwood was bought by Irving Platnik, a technical arts teacher from Queens, who converted the property into—you guessed it—a children’s summer camp. Irv and Pauline Platnik and their daughter LouAnn operated Birchwood until 1963, after which it was bought by the state, added to the Forest Preserve, and torched.

Strapping my skis back on, I started heading south, down the East Lake. After rounding tiny Hawk Island with its private camp, the expanse of the three-mile-long Antarctic plain ahead hit me squarely between the frontal lobes. Pushing off, skiing into the weak winter sun, the whole world seemed to glow around me, and—I kid you not—my mind really seemed to expand upon the trackless, pristine waste that was the frozen surface of Placid Lake.

‘This,’ I thought, ‘is the kind of lonely, desolate place where people go when they tire of the things of man. This is the kind of absolute wilderness where holy folks run, head first, into God.’

Skiing past Camp Carolina, the northernmost camp on the East Lake, then past Pulpit Rock below the old Ruisseau Mont Hotel site, and rounding Buck Island, I started scanning the distance for the marina. It had been a wonderful day, but a long one, and I had pushed my endurance level close to the max. I was anxious to find the dock, take off my skis, get in my car and head on home.

But the lake, after giving me glimpses of so many beautiful structures with so much history, and giving my
imagination so much emptiness into which to expand, had one more gift to give me.

As I reached the dock and released my ski bindings for the last time that day, I looked up for a final glance at the crown of Whiteface, the geological king of Placid Lake—and there, shining sideways through the atmosphere, the last rays of sunlight painted the summit in bright scarlet alpenglow, glowing like a royal red ruby over the lake. The flash of alpenglow lasted for just a moment before the sun disappeared below the horizon.
CHAPTER 14

Moonlight on Snowfield:
An Adirondack Valentine

For my wife, Jody Leavens

Skiing on a well-worn, wooded path, the forest ’round me luminescent, snow laying heavy on pine boughs like thick, glowing blankets of light that capture and consume the silvery, reflected brilliance of the full moon vibrating overhead, so bright it seems it will explode across the sky in a glorious, fiery death if its candlepower grows by even a teeny, tiny fraction.

Skiing ’round a bend in the path, the forest opens onto a large, snowy meadow sloping down to a frozen river bed, a stream rushing fluid and strong through a channel it has cut in the crystalline, icy river, black, bubbling water stark against the cold, still, perfect whiteness of the snow-covered ice.

The snowy meadow slopes gently upward to a stone cottage standing silently atop the ridge, ancient windows dull silver in the moonlight, steep-pitched snow-covered roof shining like a lighthouse beacon across the bright, clear night, a column of smoke arising from its chimney like the fog of a ghost that climbs into the heavens on the rising warmth surrendered by the body of a fresh-killed deer lying in the snow, relinquishing its heat, its spirit slowly ebbing like a tide away, away, until it is washed out
onto the silver, snowy sea beneath the moon, undifferentiated once again from the holy current of God, God, God that makes our world.

I ski the trail that cuts diagonally across the meadow, climbing gently, slowly, stilly, moonlight on snowfield wrapping me in itself, something dense, almost solid, almost alive, pulsing with light like tissue pulsing with nourishing, oxygenated blood, pushing me forward on a wave of soft, gentle energy until I reach our cottage door, release my bindings, lean my skis and poles against the house and enter, removing boots and cap and gloves and coat and climb the stairs to find you in our bed, skin sweet and warm with sleep, glowing like milk in the light of the moon that pours through our bedroom window—and I stand there, quiet, drinking you in before I climb into bed and nestle like a spoon into your back, wrapping my arms around you as we fall together into sleep, dreaming as one of skiing on a well-worn wooded path, the forest ’round us luminescent, snow laying heavy on pine boughs like thick, glowing blankets of light ...
My final winter outing of 2006 was just about as good as it gets: a nordic ski trek on a gentle carriage path through the woods, leading to a historic Great Camp on Newcomb Lake.

I knew my destination, Camp Santanoni, fairly well. I had visited the historic district three times before: once with a tour group on a rainy October day, once on a summer bike ride with my family, and once with a historic-preservation expert to discuss the future of the site.

I had never, however, visited Santanoni alone—and I had never skied in, either, though I’ve long known that the trail is quite popular among nordic enthusiasts.

The previous November, I had drawn up a list of winter outings I wanted to write about. Unfortunately, our winter weather that season had been spotty, at best. By the time March arrived, I still had a dozen ideas to pursue, but not much ice-and-snow time left.

One of my top two choices was a ski or snowshoe hike across the narrow strait separating Valcour Island from the Adirondack coast. Champlain ice, however, was late to form that year, at least on the New York side, making an island journey too risky.

That left Santanoni, a final option that ultimately made me very happy indeed.
First, a little history.

In 1862, a young boy from Albany traveled with his father to live for a year in Tokyo.

Thirty years later that boy, Albany banker Robert C. Pruyn, began designing a wilderness retreat in rural Newcomb township for his family. Working with his college roommate, Manhattan architect Robert H. Robertson, Pruyn laid out plans for something really extraordinary: a rustic Japanese palace in the middle of the woods, an Adirondack ho-o-den.

The classical Japanese ho-o-den is an architectural form made up of numerous buildings linked together by covered walkways.

Pruyn’s Newcomb ho-o-den is a group of six log buildings made into one by a broad, open porch surrounding and containing them. The porch is as much a part of Santanoni’s Main Lodge as are the separate buildings it draws together. The combined area of the porch and all six buildings measures nearly 11,000 square feet—about 5,000 square feet of which is just the porch.

This is a house that was designed to serve as a base for the enjoyment of the outdoors.

The classical ho-o-den’s ground plan is laid out in such a way that, were one to see the ho-o-den from the air, it would look like a bird whose wings are extended in flight. The name itself means “villa (den) of the phoenix (ho-o).”

From the ground, it’s difficult to envision the phoenix’s form in Camp Santanoni. Architect Paul Malo, however, painted a watercolor of the Great Camp based on architectural drawings. Malo’s painting, “Phoenix Ascending,” shows the Main Lodge stretched out like a
great bird on the shore, wings and tail feathers extended, poised to take flight over Newcomb Lake.

If you keep that image in mind when you visit Santanoni, you will better appreciate, I think, what a remarkable structure it is.

Pruyn and his family continued visiting Camp Santanoni through the 1940s. In 1953, it was sold to brothers Myron and Crandall Melvin, of Syracuse, who methodically restored many of the camp’s historic buildings.

After a young Melvin relative was lost on the estate in 1972, however, the family abandoned the property. In cooperation with the Nature Conservancy, the Melvins conveyed the property into the hands of the people of New York.

For the next two decades, historic preservationists and wilderness advocates battled over the fate of Santanoni.

Finally, in 1991, the state decided that, rather than tear down Santanoni so that the land could return to wilderness, it would preserve the Great Camp’s unique structures in the state Forest Preserve’s first historic district.

Today, that district is administered by a partnership of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the town of Newcomb, and Adirondack Architectural Heritage, a nonprofit preservation organization based in Keeseville.

The trail to Robert Pruyn’s ho-o-den on Newcomb Lake starts at the Santanoni gatehouse complex, on Lake Harris. The gatehouse, with its beautiful stone-arched carriage entrance, was built in 1905.
On a tour several years ago, Adirondack Architectural Heritage Executive Director Steven Engelhart described the significance of the gatehouse arch:

“When this was built, visitors to Santanoni would have taken the railroad from Albany to North Creek, where they were picked up by a horse-drawn coach for an eleven- or twelve-hour ride over the rough Carthage Road.

“This arch was meant to say to them, ‘You have arrived’—even though they still had a ride ahead of them of nearly five miles to the main camp.”

Starting at the gatehouse, the 4.9-mile carriage-road trail to Newcomb Lake ascends at a very gentle pace. Combined with the graded roadbed and the daily trail grooming by DEC staff, that makes the Santanoni trail one of the most pleasant cross country ski experiences in the Adirondacks—and it’s free!

The journey from the gatehouse to Santanoni’s experimental farm complex, a mile into the woods, was a surprisingly quick one; I was actually a little startled when the woods opened out into the clearing containing the farm’s remaining structures: three modest wooden frame houses and a single-story stone building.

The stone creamery stands opposite the place where a beautiful, shingle-sided barn once stood. The barn burned on July 13, 2004; all that’s left are the stone foundation walls and the twisted remnants of the dairy’s cattle pens.

Engelhart tells a story about Rowena Ross, the daughter of Santanoni herdsman George Ross, who lived on the farm complex long ago.

“As a girl, it had been lonely for Rowena, living way out here in the forest,” Engelhart said. “Many years later, when Rowena came here to visit, she told one of our interns about how she would strap on a pair of roller skates on a rainy day and skate on the concrete around
and around the cattle stalls, making up a song as she skated that included the names of all the cows, touching each one of them as she named them.”

If you use your imagination, you can almost hear that little girl’s ghostly song echoing through the years as you stand by the empty pit where Santanoni’s barn once stood, Rowena Ross naming the cows that once lived there.

Leaving the farm complex, the trail continues its gentle climb through the silent woods, barren trees rising from the deep snow covering the hills.

About 2.3 miles from the gatehouse, you reach a fork in the trail. To the left is an old road leading to Moose Pond, about 4.5 miles away; to the right, the path to Newcomb Lake and the Main Lodge.

The path keeps climbing for another mile, though not so steeply as to be problem—in fact, with the even grade and the excellent grooming, I found myself almost gliding up the carriage road.

When the trail finally begins to descend, about 3.3 miles from the trailhead, it is a very gradual descent—enough to allow you to push off and coast for long stretches, but not so steep as to be dangerous.

It was on this long stretch between the farm complex and Newcomb Lake, going out and coming back, where I really started getting into my nordic hike.

I found that there is a “zen” to skiing Santanoni. Rhythmically you push, like a skater, first with one boot, then the other.

You also push, in counter-rhythm, with your poles.

Your breathing falls into sync with the rhythm of your arms and legs.
I wouldn’t be surprised if your heartbeat, even your metabolic rate, don’t somehow develop sympathetic, complementary rhythms, too.

Taken all together, these various rhythms make of the Santanoni skiing experience a complex, sophisticated, organic harmony.

It is long, smooth, unbroken stretches like the Santanoni carriage trail that give you the cumulative time for that experience to build up and break over you, like a long, slow wave built up over many miles of open sea that finally breaks just off shore.

There are no two ways about it: This is a great trail. Keep it in mind and, when the first good snow falls next winter, hit the road to Newcomb and get yourself some Santanoni.

You won’t regret it.

Santanoni trail mileage

0.0 miles—Gatehouse trailhead;
  trail gently ascends, 3.2 miles
1.0 miles—Farm complex
2.3 miles—Fork in the road: left to Moose Pond (4.5 miles),
  right to Santanoni Main Camp and Newcomb Lake
3.3 miles—Trail begins gentle descent
3.9 miles—Junction, loop trail around Newcomb Lake
4.6 miles—Bridge across Newcomb Lake
4.9 miles—Main Camp
Winter’s End

Winter is different here—and so is winter’s end.

When I first moved to the North Country, in 2000, I arrived on April 15, just as the winter was finally ending.

I had driven cross country from Los Angeles, rolling through the desert for more than a thousand miles within a cactus pear’s toss of the Mexican border, cutting around the southernmost tip of the Rocky Mountain chain as it petered out in the West Texas hill country, then heading northeastward across the central plains.

That trip was like a small journey backward through seasonal time. In the desert, spring had long ago sprung, its brief flowery blush already dried to dust by the time I passed through.

In the southern plains, spring was in full bloom, flowers opening and leaves unfurling and crops busting through the fields in an intoxicating abundance.

In Ohio and the southern tier of the Empire State, spring was only starting, the first buds piercing the woody branches, the grass just stirring from its long winter’s dormancy.

But the North Country hovered right between the seasons, where winter’s end could still not be clearly distinguished from the beginning of spring, remnant ice and mud and grass and patchy snow all mixed up together.
As my first Adirondack year grew warmer, and as the trails and hillsides thawed and drained, I began to venture out into the mountains. The wealth of vegetation—from pines and maples to shrubs and grass—and the abundance of water flowing along the earth’s surface seemed almost obscenely plentiful to a guy who’d spent many a weekend over the previous 18 years hiking through the sweet, stark serenity of the southwestern desert.

It was winter—my first winter—that sealed all that away for a time, wiping clean the slate and giving me back my desert starkness, all in white, at least for a season.

And what a winter it was, the winter of 2001. We got belted with back-to-back-to-back blizzards, the drifts so thick that you’d strap on your cross country skis, hop off your porch and sink hip-deep into the snow. As I recall, we were digging our way out of the last snowstorm around mid-April.

And then, all of a sudden, the world that we had known for months and months melted away, revealing another planet beneath it, one with meadows and growing trees and rivers freed from winter’s ice. It felt as good then to breathe the warmer air without it freezing in your nasal passages as it did to hear the sound of water flowing over rocks and rapids again, where once it had been frozen in silence.

Two winters later, in 2003, I found out how bitterly cold a winter could truly become. We were not buried in snow that winter because, the locals told me, it was just too cold to snow. We went for weeks at a time without the temperature breaking zero on the Fahrenheit thermometer, and river water was locked up deep and tight in winter ice.
That spring, I got to experience for myself the booming and tearing and grinding and rushing noise of the ice in the rivers breaking, and jamming, and rising, and opening and flowing again, down to Lake Champlain.

One night late that March, when a jam let loose, we drove down to the Stickney Bridge in Jay and parked the truck next to the river, headlights pointed out across the Au Sable.

We saw there a monstrous creature lying with a mouth wide open, full of teeth, full, the teeth not just planted in the upper and lower jaws but in every open space of its mouth—and the beast was hungry, starving, its teeth circling, crushing, grinding, the noise violent and deafening and unending, like the sound of a dental apocalypse.

The winter of 2005, like all North Country winters, was different.

A thaw in late December and early January raised the level of the rivers. Then, suddenly, the night of the 7th, the mercury kissed zero again. For nine of the next ten nights, it mucked around in negative territory, locking up the rivers’ surface at a level nearly a foot higher than their norm. When the river waters receded to their usual levels, they left a thick crust of ice curving over them like an igloo, many miles long.

When the temperatures started rising again in early March, and the snows started melting from the hillsides into the rivers, those ice caps did not burst and jam; instead, they started collapsing up the middle, opening narrow rivers within rivers, bounded by banks of ice suspended several inches over the flowing waters beneath them.
By late March, most of the East Branch of the Au Sable River had already opened up, flowing freely from Keene through Upper Jay to Au Sable Forks where it meets the West Branch’s waters. Only the steeper stretches below Hull’s Falls and above St. Huberts still sported marginal ice.

But on the higher, steeper West Branch—dropping 1,500 feet from Algonquin and Indian passes, flowing past Lake Placid and through the Wilmington Notch on its way to Au Sable Forks—the icy crust held firm much longer. It was only at the very end of March, when temperatures hit the 50s Fahrenheit and sunlight poured through cloudless skies, that the remaining ice broke up on the West Branch, washing down past the Forks.

The high waters carried the broken, rushing ice easily over the normally shallow stretch at the Grove, which has flooded so many times before. And though the ice finally jammed below Clintonville, only the jeezum crows stood witness to it, watching from the empty fields near the Pray farm.

Winter’s end had come at last to the Adirondacks—spring, also known as Mud Season, had finally arrived.

When school lets out for a couple of weeks at winter’s end, Lake Placid briefly becomes a ghost town. Its shopkeepers and hoteliers flee to Myrtle Beach and points farther south, recuperating from the long months of ice and snow.

Shortly thereafter, when the trails through the High Peaks have drained, the hikers return—but for a few weeks, at winter’s end, us locals get the mountains all to ourselves.
Epilogue
There’s something about islands that gets me—always has.

When I try to think of the kind of place where I would be most likely to find a little peace, it’s always an island that comes to mind: a little green place arising from the water, empty, all on its own.

Maybe that’s why the island in the Notch has always caught my eye, both coming and going.

Maybe you’ve seen it, too: a little rise of land in the midst of the rushing waters of the West Branch of the Au Sable River, at the bottom of the Wilmington Notch, right on the boundary line between North Elba and Wilmington townships.

Half a dozen spindly trees rise upward from the thick brush covering this rocky, disconnected spit of land in the Au Sable.

So deep in the Notch is this little island that it only sees direct sunlight for an hour or two each day, late in the afternoon, when the sun shines up from the south between the gray, rocky walls of the opposing mountain ranges that define the Wilmington Notch.

I live in Jay, New York, but for six years I worked in Lake Placid. Every day of the week—and sometimes two or three times a day, depending upon how busy things got—I would drive past this island twice: once going into the
narrow Notch from the north as I headed from my home in Jay to my Lake Placid office; and again, coming home, as I finished driving up the narrow shelf that was cut so long ago directly into the mountain wall to carry Route 86 between the mountains from Lake Placid to Wilmington.

I’ve never ventured into the Au Sable itself to walk upon “my island,” so I don’t know what the Notch looks like from that perspective, but I’ve watched this island pass through all the Adirondack seasons every year—and every year differently.

At the start of one winter, we had a December thaw, followed by several days of hard, steady rain and rapidly dropping temperatures.

The result was that the river rose to nearly cover the island, something it rarely does, just as the water was starting to freeze. As the waters receded behind the rains, it left a dome of ice above the Au Sable, beneath which the river quietly, secretly flowed all winter long.

Come March, when winter had grown long in the tooth, the ice and snow covering the river started to rot around the island. Great chunks of the Au Sable’s sheltering dome collapsed, revealing the river alive beneath it, flowing strong and steady.

It took a few weeks for the ice to go out on the river—but when it did, it went quickly, grinding and roaring, leaving thick, blue blocks of ice piled high along the steep banks around the island, and leaving the island looking like a white ship afloat in the Au Sable whitewater, the bare branches of its trees like masts upraised with torn, tattered sails trying futilely to catch the fresh spring winds whooshing coldly up through the Notch.

And then, came the summer.
The waters rose; the waters fell; but mostly, the island just sat there and grew, greener that year than I’d seen it in quite a while, blending into the forest on the river’s west bank so that it could hardly be distinguished anymore as an island—except at the very end of the day, when the light came in low from the south, shooting straight up its spine, demarking island grasses and rocky, narrow shoreline from the blue waters surrounding it.

My island that summer reminded me of Pablo Neruda and William James.

One of my very favorite movies of all time is “Il Postino.” In one scene the main character, a simple Italian postman, sits on the rocky shore of his home island, looking out onto the Mediterranean Sea with Pablo Neruda, an exiled Chilean poet, discussing the new world of literature that Neruda has opened to him. They are talking about the concept of the metaphor—or, to sound it out in phonetic Italian like the postman does, “me-ta-for-os.”

The postman’s gaze grazes across the gently lapping waves of the sea as he asks Neruda, “So is this world, then, a metaphor of something else, too?”

My Au Sable island, I think, is a metaphor for something William James wrote about more than a hundred years ago.

James, the famous philosopher, intellectual founder of American pragmatism, summered for many years at the end of the 19th century at Putnam’s Camp in Keene Valley. Many readers believe that James’s masterpiece was his “Varieties of Religious Experience,” where he examines the difference between “the religion of healthy-mindedness” and the spiritual struggles of “the sick soul.”
James concludes that, of the two, it is the sick soul’s struggle for reconciliation and wholeness that is the richer, more subtly nuanced of the two spiritual experiences.

My island speaks to me with the same message, as if it were an organic metaphor of the soul’s quest.

The little Au Sable River island at the foot of the Wilmington Notch is not its most beautiful, its most interesting, when it is at its greenest, when its waters are calm, when its skies are blue and all is well.

The isle in the Notch best demonstrates its character—at least to me—at times of change and challenge, when it finds itself smack dab in the middle of some fundamental shift taking place in the world around it: when wintry ice decays into spring floods, for instance, or when the sweet, green summer cools and contracts into autumn, waiting for winter’s return.

The most famous reference in English literature to islands as metaphors of some larger concept, no doubt, is John Donne’s “Meditation No. 17” from his “Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions”:

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

I understand what Donne meant; his voice speaks clearly across the centuries, from the early 17th to the early 21st.

But I could not disagree with him more.
In my experience, all men are islands; each one of us is separate, distinct, alone. What joins us is the ocean—or, in the case of my Notch island, the river—that flows around us all. Within this watery blue medium, we are all having a common experience, together—but separately, uniquely, alone.

Until we are consumed.

My island in the Au Sable stream will one day wash away, its boulders broken down, its grasses torn from the earth—all to become a part of something else built up by the river in some future age downstream, or on the Sable Delta in Lake Champlain, or even farther along as it all, all flows away on the St. Lawrence Seaway toward the cold Atlantic Ocean.

The death knell does not toll for me. It tolls for no one, in fact, for nothing ever really dies. No island’s passing—no individual’s extinction—is truly a death; it is only a change in form, a shedding of one identity that allows another to be cast in its place.

World without end.
Amen.
Appendix:
‘Old Iron Road’
Trail Map,
GPS Waypoints
‘Old Iron Road’ trail map, between Monument Falls and the state park campground between High Falls Gorge and the entrance to the Whiteface Mountain Ski Center
### ‘Old Iron Road’
#### GPS Waypoints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Latitude</th>
<th>Longitude</th>
<th>Altitude (meters)</th>
<th>Distance (miles)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The southern trailhead is opposite the Monument Falls parking area.</td>
<td>N44°18.672'</td>
<td>W73°54.899'</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>FYI: The first part of our trail coincides with a &quot;back trail&quot; to the Owen-Copperas-Winch ponds area.</td>
<td>N44°18.659'</td>
<td>W73°54.872'</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.676'</td>
<td>W73°54.840'</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.675'</td>
<td>W73°54.698'</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.685'</td>
<td>W73°54.648'</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.717'</td>
<td>W73°54.626'</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.749'</td>
<td>W73°54.577'</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>0.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.779'</td>
<td>W73°54.474'</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>0.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.798'</td>
<td>W73°54.426'</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>0.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.844'</td>
<td>W73°54.346'</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.889'</td>
<td>W73°54.265'</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.937'</td>
<td>W73°54.179'</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Off the trail, to the north, you'll find a relatively recent (unmapped) beaver marsh, picturesque, with Whiteface rising in background.</td>
<td>N44°18.955'</td>
<td>W73°54.189'</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>N44°18.982'</td>
<td>W73°54.101'</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>At this point, you'll have to jog slightly upslope to go around slide debris.</td>
<td>N44°19.013'</td>
<td>W73°54.059'</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>0.85</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 This is the top of the slide obstruction, probably created in October 1995. Cross the brook below the falls, then go down slope to pick the trail back up.</td>
<td>N44°19.012'</td>
<td>W73°54.026'</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 This is where you'll pick up the trail again.</td>
<td>N44°19.035'</td>
<td>W73°54.028'</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Watch out here! The more established trail turns north toward the ponds — but you want to continue heading ENE.</td>
<td>N44°19.144'</td>
<td>W73°53.914'</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 This clearing is slightly off the trail. It was a J.&amp;J. Rogers Co. logging camp about 100 years ago.</td>
<td>N44°19.340'</td>
<td>W73°53.470'</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

30 N44°19.364' W73°53.382' 609  1.57
31 N44°19.376' W73°53.353' 608  1.60
32 N44°19.386' W73°53.310' 611  1.64
33 N44°19.443' W73°53.219' 626  1.73
34 N44°19.478' W73°53.133' 613  1.82
35 N44°19.488' W73°53.089' 617  1.85
36 N44°19.526' W73°53.007' 612  1.93
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<tr>
<td>Right in the middle of this hike, I lost the trail. I continued</td>
<td>N44°19.540'</td>
<td>W73°52.971'</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>1.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>bushwhacking, using the GPS map, until I located another identifiable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>portion of the old road.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This point, on the northern side of a little brook, is about where</td>
<td>N44°19.572'</td>
<td>W73°52.906'</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the trail should pick up, though I couldn't see it there.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This was the point where I was once again able to identify the trail</td>
<td>N44°19.632'</td>
<td>W73°52.847'</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as such.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This was the point where the lateness of the day forced me to turn</td>
<td>N44°19.690'</td>
<td>W73°52.759'</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>around on my second-to-the-last excursion, when I attempted this</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hike from the northern end.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A brook crossing. <strong>Beware!</strong> These are the places where it's easiest</td>
<td>N44°19.738'</td>
<td>W73°52.687'</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to lose the trail, crossing from one side of a stream to the next.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A huge glacial erratic can be seen here to the east of the trail.</td>
<td>N44°19.820'</td>
<td>W73°52.537'</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another brook crossing.</td>
<td>N44°19.836'</td>
<td>W73°52.501'</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>2.48</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°19.894'</td>
<td>W73°52.467'</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>15.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Here was one of the many places where a cleanly cut log, showing where the trail had been cleared, indicated that I was on the right path.</td>
<td>N44°19.951'</td>
<td>W73°52.429'</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another brook crossing.</td>
<td>N44°20.009'</td>
<td>W73°52.389'</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A handsaw handle was left here, hanging in the crotch of some brush, where someone clearing the trail had probably broken the saw’s blade.</td>
<td>N44°20.091'</td>
<td>W73°52.413'</td>
<td>638</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the steep stretch between the height of land where the handsaw handle was left and this point, historian James Bailey in August 1996 found chunks of iron ore that had evidently fallen off McIntyre’s sledges 180 years before.</td>
<td>N44°20.146'</td>
<td>W73°52.390'</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.182'</td>
<td>W73°52.383'</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>2.91</td>
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<td>N44°20.235'</td>
<td>W73°52.368'</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>2.97</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.278'</td>
<td>W73°52.360'</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.323'</td>
<td>W73°52.355'</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.397'</td>
<td>W73°52.341'</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>3.16</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.444'</td>
<td>W73°52.304'</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>3.22</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.523'</td>
<td>W73°52.235'</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.556'</td>
<td>W73°52.193'</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.599'</td>
<td>W73°52.161'</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>3.44</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.624'</td>
<td>W73°52.133'</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.653'</td>
<td>W73°52.087'</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N44°20.656'</td>
<td>W73°52.071'</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>3.54</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 This is the beginning of the final stretch of the old McIntyre winter sled road — a chute ending at the old road's intersection with Route 86.</td>
<td>N44°20.696'</td>
<td>W73°52.047'</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>N44°20.746'</td>
<td>W73°52.003'</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>N44°20.789'</td>
<td>W73°51.953'</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68 The northern end of the old McIntyre road, just south of a culvert allowing a brook to flow underneath Route 86.</td>
<td>N44°20.832'</td>
<td>W73°51.914'</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69 This is one end of a curve of the original Route 86, built in 1854 by Bill Nye, Bob Scott and Peter Comstock. It was cut off during re-engineering of the highway, possibly in the 1920s. You can walk this short curve through to the other end, which is immediately opposite the parking area for the northern end of this hike.</td>
<td>N44°20.817'</td>
<td>W73°52.021'</td>
<td>434</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 The other end of the abandoned curve of the original Route 86.</td>
<td>N44°20.841'</td>
<td>W73°52.172'</td>
<td>430</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
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<td>Altitude (meters)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>N44°20.876'</td>
<td>W73°52.203'</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>About 0.25 miles from the point where the trail crosses Route 86.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adventures in the New Wilderness
LEE MANCHESTER

Plenty of books have been written about hiking the heavily traveled trails of New York’s Adirondack Park. This is not one of them.

“Adventures in the New Wilderness” contains essays on the exploration of some little-known paths in the High Peaks region of Essex County — the ancient, abandoned road between Wilmington and Lake Placid; the old trails around Placid Lake, rarely used by anyone anymore; the tracks up Essex County’s lonely fire-tower mountains, where you’ll find some of the most spectacular (but least known) views of the High Peaks; and journeys into the cold, pristine world of the Adirondack woods in winter.