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An Elegant Wilderness: Great Camps and Grand Lodges of the Adirondacks

It was so remote that it was accessible only to a few serious sportsmen, the Adirondack region was, by 1890, still remote enough to be fashionable. Here, "sylvan freedom was artfully blent with the most studied personal luxury," wrote Edith Wharton, who chronicled the Gilded



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Age in her novels about New York society.

The Adirondack great camps designed by William West Durant, William Distin, Robert Henderson Roberts, Ben Muncil and others, satisfied the taste for luxury.

And, as Gladys Montgomery points out in her gorgeous new book, “Elegant Wilderness: Great Camps and Grand Lodges of the Adirondacks,”

the camps also elicited and fostered the taste for freedom, especially among women.

“At Newport and Saratoga, female society remained corseted, but in the North Woods women and girls hiked, hunted, fished, and bowled; played billiards, croquet, shuttlecock, tennis, and golf; and quaffed deeply of the mountain air. A relaxed dress code prevailed out of common sense and because guides insisted that silk dresses and, later, high heels be left behind,” writes Montgomery.

According to Montgomery, social, economic and cultural forces shaped the great camps every bit as much as the architect’s eye and the builder’s hands.

And although the rustic style evolved and was adapted later by everyone from Franklin Roosevelt’s administration (which built hotels in the National Parks) to the builders of contemporary log homes and chalets, without its original Adirondack setting, the rustic style would never have become a distinctively American style, one with international appeal.

Proof, if proof were needed, of the style’s lasting appeal can be found in the fact that it’s been adopted by Ralph Lauren. Walk into the flagship store in New York and you’ll see rustic

Adirondack furniture and plaid fabrics with Adirondack names, all part of a collection of furniture and home furnishings called “Indian Cove Lodge,” after a mythical Adirondack great camp.

Making liberal use of the Adirondack Museum’s vast collection of historic photographs of rustic architecture and life at the great camps, Montgomery has written the most comprehensive book yet about Adirondack rustic architecture and its origins.

William West Durant was, of course, the first and foremost of the great camp architects and builders, but there were many others, and all of them contributed to the rustic style’s development.

Of equal, if not greater importance to the evolution of the style were the personal tastes and interests of the owners, Montgomery said in an interview from her home in the Berkshires.

“The camps were expressions of personalities,” said Montgomery. “Today, people whose wealth is of the magnitude of the great camp owners would hire decorators. We see less of the individual personality.”



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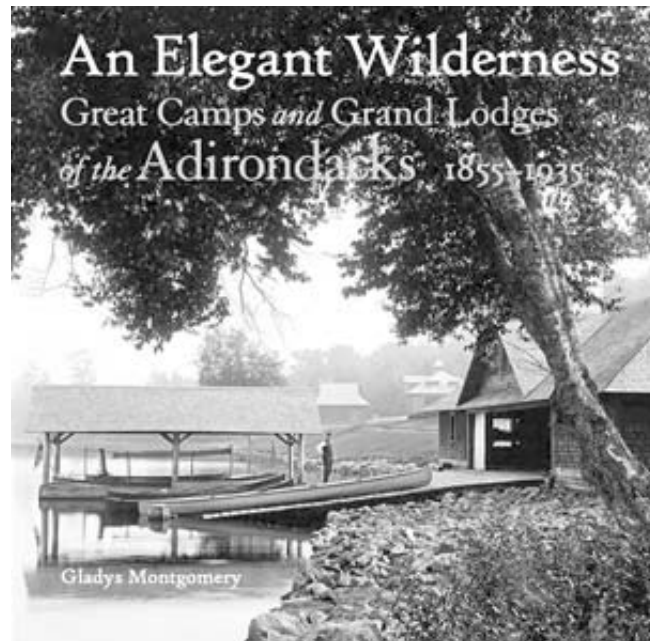
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In “Elegant Wilderness,” Montgomery devotes separate chapters to 25 different camps, each different in its own way but shaped by similar forces, among them, the explosion of new wealth, the embrace of the outdoors and trends in landscaping, architecture and interior decoration.

Included, for instance, are the camps on the Upper St. Regis Lakes and William Seward Webb’s 1891 Nehasane Camp, whose shingle style lodge was designed by Robert H. Robertson, who also designed Camp Santanoni for Robert Pruyn.

Of Putnam Camp in Keene Valley, Montgomery writes, “If the importance of the Adirondack

camps were gauged in purely architectural terms, Putnam Camp would be a minor footnote. But inasmuch as the Adirondacks was a place where Americans shed urban personas and took advantage of opportunities to relax and be more truly themselves, Putnam Camp is one of the most significant in the North Woods.”

Built in 1876, Putnam Camp was a summer gathering place for intellectuals like William James and distinguished visitors like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who first came to the Adirondacks as part of the “Philosophers’ Camp” at Follensby Pond in 1858.

Emerson, as Montgomery points out, was James’ godfather, and the Transcendentalists’ understanding of nature influenced the nascent movement to protect the Adirondacks. Able to protect vast tracts of Adirondack wilderness by creating private estates, the owners of the great camps were among those responsible for the American wilderness preservation movement and the Adirondack Park we know today.

With Topridge, Marjorie Merriweather Post’s camp, the rustic style reached its apogee, Montgomery writes. The camp, completed in the 1920s, is, she writes, “a masterpiece of rustic ornamentation, the most opulent of Adirondack camps.”

However different in style, every camp owes something to William West Durant.

According to Montgomery, it was Durant who established the great-camp prototype, reshaping his father’s camp Pine Knot in 1877 and creating Uncas in 1893, Sagamore in 1895, and Kill Kare in 1898.

“These exemplify the definition of the Adirondack great camp as a single-family residence, constructed of indigenous, natural, local materials in a style influenced by contemporary architectural design and



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