

Conservation's Dark Side

Eugenics and the Adirondack Park

IF SCHOLARS, UNTIL RECENTLY, have failed to connect the dots between the eugenics and conservation movements, who can blame them? We like our heroes simple. Who wants to complicate the stunning legacy of Progressivism—the movement that set the stage for antitrust laws, women's suffrage, municipal reform, the Food and Drugs Act and the Adirondack Park—with crackpot notions about racial hierarchy that rationalized miscegenation laws, the sterilization of thousands, and the brutally stringent anti-immigration quotas of the first half of the last century?

But a long-expired star can still throw a toxic light. Fair or not, the North Country owns a reputation as a corner of New York where diversity—of race, of ethnicity, of sexual orientation—has a hard time getting much respect. Maybe this is finally changing (witness two well-attended conferences on North Country diversity last summer), but the age-old image of this region as elitist, white, unwelcoming is tenacious.

How'd this start? What went on back then? Bad raps don't grow on trees.

Then, maybe they do.

EUGENICS MEANS a range of things, but the definition your grandparents knew, and the one that suits this story, is “the science of improving stock.” That's how its inventor, Francis Galton, summed it up in 1883, and that's what it meant to most Americans from the Gilded Age until long after World War II, when geneticists repurposed and repackaged it, and the word itself went undercover. Galton's philosophy of eugenics called for improving human genes by getting people with desired traits to make more babies and discouraging the reproduction of people with traits deemed less than desirable.

Oh, please, that's Nazi stuff, you're thinking. But until toxic winds from Germany roused this country to the perils of this mission, it was American stuff too. And in the Adirondack region, the proving ground of the conservation movement, the over-



ILLUSTRATION BY MARK WILSON

lap between the conservationists and the promoters of eugenics was great.

It wasn't just that these two movements shared the same baseline objective, which was, as conservationist-turned-eugenicist Madison Grant put it, “to save as much as possible of the old America.” They were nurtured by the same milieu, a rarefied and self-regarding culture of privilege and private schooling, elite social clubs, shared church allegiances and values, one of which was the idea of efficiency. Not a new idea, but one with powerful charisma in a science-proud, forward-looking, progress-greedy era. Conservation was efficiency in action, and the conservation of our national resources—from farmland to wilderness to superior genetic stock—lit a patriotic fuse.

CONSERVATIONIST MADISON GRANT CHAMPIONED VANISHING MOOSE, DRAFTED THE ADIRONDACK DEER LAW AND HELPED DEVELOP NO-SALE-OF-GAME LAWS—HE WAS ALSO AN ADVOCATE OF ETHNIC CLEANSING.

In 1894, the same year the voters of New York approved a constitutional amendment to keep the Adirondack Forest Preserve “forever wild,” a young writer in New York City made the case for wildlife conservation in an article for *Century* magazine, “The Vanishing Moose, and Their Extermination in the Adirondacks.” Madison Grant showed how the lack of protective legislation had spelled the moose's demise. “The biggest and most interesting of our national quadrupeds ... the wariest and bravest animal in the woods” had been hunted to the vanishing point. Worse, the tragedy was not special to this region; it was happening all over. The vanished moose stood for native species in decline in Maine, the Rockies and the Great Plains. Minus strong legal



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protection, these animals were doomed.

Grant's eulogy found its mark. Teddy Roosevelt, who knew him from the Manhattan-based wildlife conservation club Boone & Crockett, urged the young reformer to stay on track. A Yale man, resolute and well-connected, Grant was TR's kind of Progressive. Grant went on to draft legislation for the Adirondack Deer Law, which regulated the hunting of New York game. He scripted the Progressive Alaskan Game Bill. Helped develop the no-sale-of-game laws and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Co-founded the Save the Redwoods League, helmed the Bronx Zoo, saved the bison from extinction and championed Glacier and Denali National Parks. When Grant died in 1937, he was fighting for a bear sanctuary in Alaska, protection for Sitka spruce at Yellowstone, the enlargement of Yosemite and a new park in Washington State. He was a founding father of the American conservation movement, a tireless, ubiquitous, unstopably effective champion of native American flora and fauna.

He was also an advocate of ethnic cleansing, a professed white supremacist and spokesman for a federal eugenics program aimed at numberless Americans whose very presence, Grant believed, threatened to "mongrelize" and defile the Anglo-Nordic "Master Race." The influence of his book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), which likened the imperiled native-born American to the large, noble, native mammals he so brilliantly defended, was, in its time, incalculable. "Old Stock" Americans ("Homo Europeus, the white man par excellence") were, Grant warned, on the brink of extinction. Jostling throngs of immigrants drawn from "the weak, the broken and the mentally crippled of all races" were invading North America no less avidly than lesser races had mobbed ancient Greece and Imperial Rome. The solution? Stop them, segregate them, sterilize them—or pay the price. Lesser races would assuredly prevail so long as sentimental America indulged a "misguided humanitarianism" and refused to acknowledge a hierarchy of race. The science, Grant declared, was irrefutable.



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Cross a purebred Nordic specimen with an African, Native American, Jew or any other "lower type," and the more primitive and brutish race will overwhelm the Nordic "germ plasm." The fix was in; the WASP was doomed.

Grant's book, judged American historian Carey McWilliams in the 1940s, offered "the frankest ... statement of the racist ideology ever published in this country." A terrific, lively read, it furnished a generation of American power brokers—public servants, scientists, legislators and educators—with a rationale for bigotry and xenophobia in the name of "racial science." And though nothing in it was original, and its science skated on thin ice, Grant's screed inspired and emboldened the strict anti-im-

IN THE ADIRONDACKS, THE PROVING GROUND OF THE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT, THE OVERLAP BETWEEN CONSERVATIONISTS AND THE PROMOTERS OF EUGENICS WAS GREAT.

migration legislation of the 1920s and rationalized the sterilization of tens of thousands. *The Passing of the Great Race* "did for scientific racism what *The Communist Manifesto* did for scientific socialism," says Grant's biographer, Jonathan Spiro. Teddy Roosevelt gave his friend's book an eager blurb. *The New York Times* loved it too. And a fan letter came from Germany. Adolf Hitler was powerfully impressed. "This is my Bible," Hitler said of Grant's first book.

The cold candor of Grant's gospel of eugenics was unusual; other advocates of the new race science struck a more careful, coded note. Adirondack people who shared Grant's notions may not have called themselves eugenicists at all. But their clubs and private hobbies and philanthropic works showed the thumbprint of this dogma. The railroad magnate William Seward Webb, famous in the Adirondacks for his private compound NeHaSane, was a

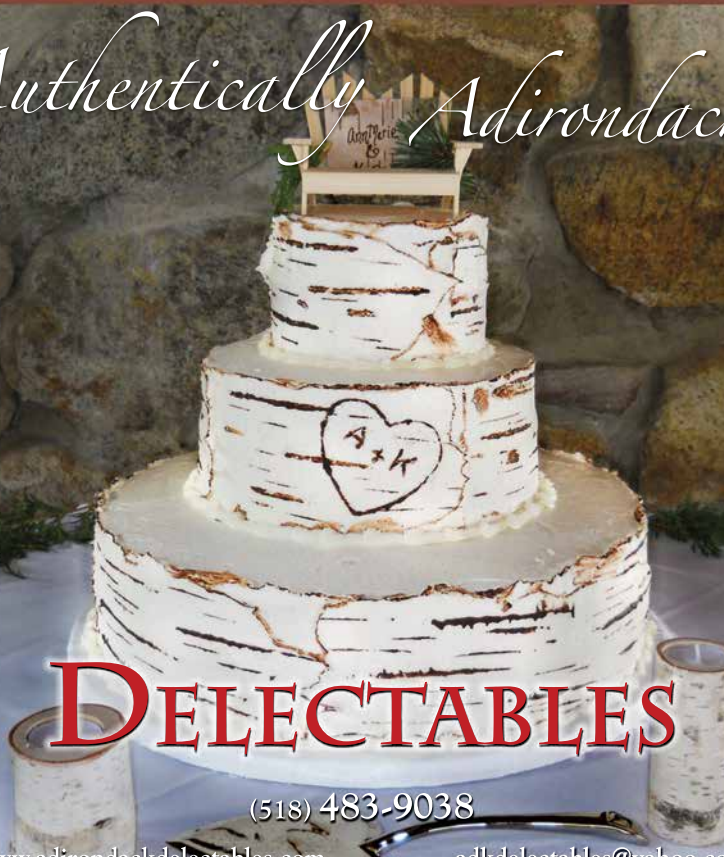
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co-founder of the Sons of the American Revolution, which early on flogged a eugenics-tinged, anti-immigrant agenda. Gifford Pinchot, the dean of American forestry who, early in his career, served as a forester on Webb's Lake Lila preserve, was a charter member of the Race Betterment Society. Teddy Roosevelt, whose Adirondack adventures are well known, also took the eugenics mission to heart, advocating for the sterilization of "degenerates" and the "feebleminded" and anguishing over a dropping birth rate that portended "race suicide" for native whites. The Yale economist Irving Fisher, who convalesced at Saranac Lake and vacationed in Lake Placid, wrote the portion of Roosevelt's National Conservation Commission report that called, "above all, [for] the conservation of the racial stock itself," and furnished the eugenics movement with the memorable battle cry, "Breed out the Unfit and Breed in the Fit!" The renowned biologist C. Hart Merriam, who wrote about Adirondack birds and mammals and worked with Madison Grant and Charles Davenport, embraced the principles of eugenics.

And for each, a sojourn in the Adirondacks either wakened or refined a consuming interest in conservation in all its diverse applications. Conservation of old-growth forests, of old-stock bloodlines, of the nation—surely, it was a seamless whole.

The efflorescence of the Adirondack Great Camps and vast private preserves—which, by the late 19th century, encompassed close to a million acres—also expressed the values of the time. Hunters, trappers and peddlers found no welcome on these closely managed spreads. Had they the culture or the breeding to recognize the native riches? There was a role for the immigrant laborers who cleared the camps and laid the track that brought guests to these retreats, but not permanent—not to stay! Long-term they would prove to be despoilers, another inferior invasive species, and could not be trusted with this patrimony. It would have to fall to high-minded landed gentry to save the wilderness from human predators and

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sustain the woods for the wildlife that belonged there.

So when oil magnate William Rockefeller, the brother and partner of John D. and the owner of the 100,000-acre Bay Pond Preserve in Franklin County, bought up the town of Brandon, he didn't tap the mostly French-Canadian locals for their input. Houses, hotel, mill and church were razed, defiant hold-outs brought to court. That's how you deal with an invasive—you don't let it stick around. This was science—reclamation! What belonged here was the forest, and by his lights Rockefeller was doing no more than returning it to its first glory. Did Great Camp foresters prune the grounds for weeds and trash trees? This was the same thing. Rockefeller did not need to call himself a eugenicist to enact a eugenical agenda.

Melvil Dewey, who gained renown for his invention of a decimal system of library classification and his years as head of the New York State Library, founded the Lake Placid Club on Mirror Lake in 1895. Initially, his target guests were educators and librarians, but this list broadened when the club expanded offerings and beds. With its conferences, concerts and festive pageants, its no-fuss dress code and hearty fare from local farms, Dewey's club turned Wordsworth's exalted vision of "plain living and high thinking" into a playful, spirited reality. A vast, elaborate villagelike development, it was the largest all-season resort in the nation and Lake Placid's biggest employer. And as a pioneering advocate for winter sports and a zealous champion of Lake Placid as a host city for the 1932 Winter Olympics, it put Lake Placid on the map. Little wonder its legacy in Adirondack history is fond. It did some real good.

So why harp on its exclusionary policies? Who wasn't a bigot then? Everything in the context of its time! Indeed—and this is why the club's conventions invite scrutiny. The context of the club's time would have meant a sign in a lobby advertising "Christian Library," "Church Services Nearby," or some coded flag that signaled the offhand social anti-Semitism of the era. But when club policy

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denied membership to a member's wife, a Christian, because her "blood" was one-fourth Jewish, another logic was at work. Here was racism hard-sunk in the pseudoscience of "Anglo-Saxonism," unyielding and sternly reflective of Dewey's core values, which he fully hoped his closest cohorts at the club would share. Hence his famously explicit anti-Semitic directive in the member's handbook—"No one can be admitted against whom there is any reasonable social, moral, race or fiscal objection"—and his recruitment early on of members and directors who shared his devotion to eugenicism, like Jeremiah Jenks

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(head of the nativist American Defense Society and chair of Roosevelt's 1907 Immigration Commission); John Harvey Kellogg, the founder of the Race Betterment Foundation; historian Herbert Baxter Adams, who opined that America's democratic traditions were rooted in medieval Saxony and that the Pilgrims were descended from the ancient Teutons; Prescott F. Hall, founder and general secretary of the Immigration Restriction League; or Reverend Charles Parkhurst, a member of the American Breeders Association, which favored criminalizing the marriage of "the unfit." A member of the Eugenics Committee of the United States and the American Social Hygiene Association, Dewey and his first wife, Annie, proudly flagged their participation in the first National Conference on Race Betterment at Battle Creek, Michigan, in the *Lake Placid News* (though Annie's greater love, it seems, was a program called euthenics, which preached improving human life through better home environments and living

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conditions. She lectured on this at Battle Creek and in Lake Placid too [see "Birth of a Vocation," October 2011]).

The Adirondacks won a key role in the eugenics narrative. Long cherished for the purity of its air, its water, wilderness and rippling views, it was the perfect backdrop for the conversation about racial purity and contamination. It imaged all the qualities—strength, longevity, endurance, antiquity—the eugenicists revered. It even bore a happy likeness to the Alps and, just as usefully, the snowy Norselands, spiritual home of the Master Race. With his love of all things Nordic, from skiing to storytelling

**A MEMBER OF THE
EUGENICS COMMITTEE
OF THE UNITED STATES,
MELVIL DEWEY AND HIS
WIFE, ANNIE, PROUDLY
FLAGGED THEIR PARTIC-
IPATION IN THE FIRST
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to arcane winter festivals with helmeted participants gowned in white, Melvil Dewey soaked this up. The Adirondack brand of purity was reinforced by the magical reputation of nearby Saranac Lake, whose antiseptic chill and healing calm owned the power, it was said, to rouse tuberculosis patients from near death to perfect health. And the wilderness's wonder-working reputation only showed up all the brighter when Adirondack country invited a comparison with the slummy, squalid, degenerate and un-American city.

Who were these people, anyway, with their jabber and their dark looks? How many bore "defective" root stock or the insidious virus of anarchism or socialism? At times the city seemed awash; by 1915, one downtown ward had the highest population density in the world—more crowded than Bombay! Meantime, the birth rates of native-born Americans were plunging, and headlines warned if "Old Stock" natives didn't make more babies, and make 'em fast, the old-time

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Anglo-American might disappear. In this context, it was inevitable that Old Stock Americans would find a symbol for their predicament in the tragedy of the moose and in the great defenseless forest imperiled by lumber interests and brutish labor.

Adirondack newspapers were quick to blazon the latest theories from race scientists (among eugenics-heavy headlines from 1894 to 1928, see "Human Defectives," "The Moron," "Our Mongrel Language," "The Science of Breeding," "Eugenics and Euthenics Must Become Dominant Matters of Concern," "Restricted Immigration"). Dispatches from abroad described how other cultures dealt with "inferior stock"—"a race of cretinous dwarfs" in Italy, for instance, who were corralled into their own village and forbidden to marry, which resulted in their dying out, or a rumored Zulu custom of taking "defective" newborns to the bush and dispatching them with clubs.

Next to stories like these, American sterilization policy may have looked benign—but never to its victims and their families. From 1907 to 1935, 60,000 American "defectives" were sterilized. New Yorkers got off comparatively easy; from 1912 to 1920, 42 were sterilized; next-door Vermont, in contrast, sterilized 253 people, and in California, sterilizations exceeded 20,000. Eugenics-driven initiatives got further in the Empire State when they were more oblique. The Country Life Commission, launched by Teddy Roosevelt in 1909, urged a range of rural conservation programs like road improvements, farm electrification, libraries and "aggie"-centric high-school courses—and the celebration of "high-grade" families of "good old stock." Better Babies Contests, which took off in New York in 1913, mobilized young mothers by the hundreds in Potsdam, Ticonderoga, Witherbee, Malone. And though mothers were told good looks didn't matter when they submitted children to white-smocked doctors for inspection—"under the same basic principles that are applied to live stock shows," according to the *Ticonderoga Sentinel*—a standardized aesthetic showed

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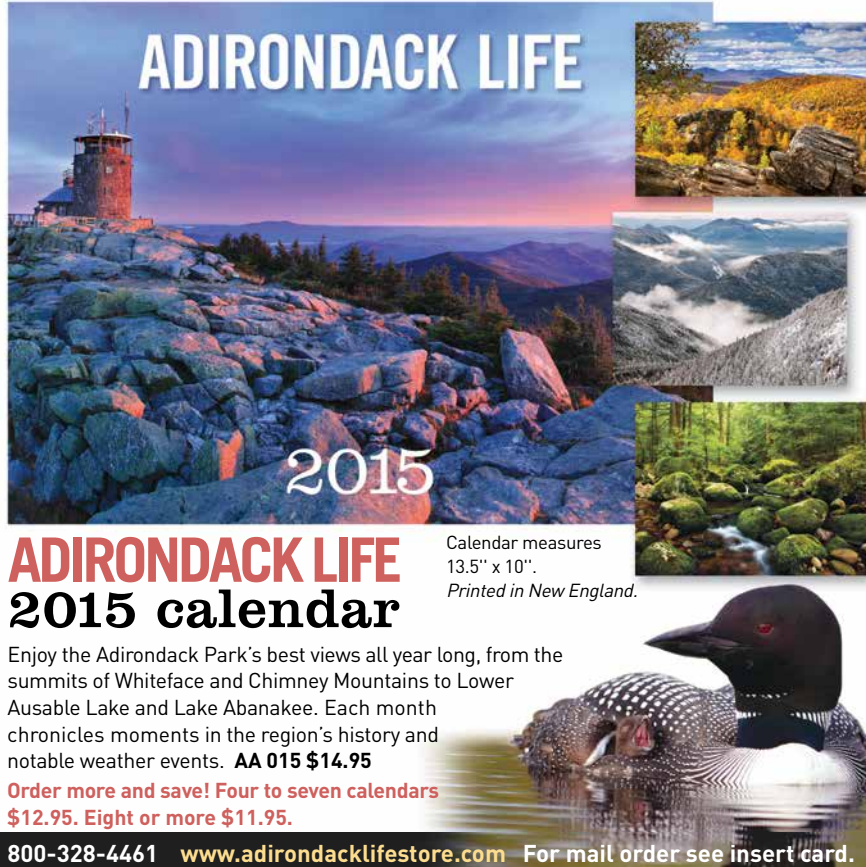
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the imprint of eugenics.

Still, there was nothing all that sinister about a campaign that mostly concerned itself with public outreach about good nutrition, open play spaces, personal hygiene and clean kitchens. Its potential for invasiveness would not show itself until the 1920s, when Better Babies spawned the Fitter Families for Future Firesides competitions. Judges at these events, armed with a questionnaire devised by eugenicist Charles Davenport, gathered "facts" not just on physical health but about so-called "hereditary" qualities like cruelty, jealousy and generosity.

How solid was this "data"? Plattsburghers got a good idea in 1921, when word got back to Clinton County that a clergyman and lecturer who summured at the Lake Placid Club (he was chaplain), had told people in Connecticut that the citizens of Clinton County, New York, were the most illiterate in the nation. It's true the new census evidenced a goodly number of nonreaders in Clinton, but Newton Dwight Hillis wasn't as interested in numbers as he was in public policy. Too-lax immigration laws had flooded Clinton County with "degenerate and defective" French-Canadians, he said. He knew because he'd toured about and found an 18-year-old farm girl who could not pronounce the word "Japan."

Hillis's blithe assessment hurt and outraged the good citizens of Plattsburgh (not least because they'd paid this same pundit to lecture in their city). And outrage turned to caution. From the late 1920s on, Adirondack news stories took more of a dim and distanced view of "immigration hysteria" and the "Nordic myth." In the *Essex County Republican*, anthropologist Franz Boas assailed "This Nordic Nonsense"; the great Progressive attorney Clarence Darrow told the readers of the *Plattsburgh Republican* that compulsory sterilization was "impractical, unscientific, and cruel"; in the *Plattsburgh Press*, the Villanova biology professor Father Joseph Dougherty, speaking at the Catholic Summer School on the shores of Lake Champlain, condemned the "influence of a very powerful minority in our legislative

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halls ... whose philosophy of eugenics has little or nothing in common with our Christian philosophy." The renowned jurist, conservationist and summer Adirondacker Louis Marshall waged a war against North Country bigotry on many fronts, forcing an uneasy Melvil Dewey to publicly explain the Lake Placid Club's explicit exclusionary policies ("Jew attacks," Dewey privately called these encounters), and castigating an Adirondack Mountain Club contingent that tried (and failed) to get all Jewish members ousted. Marshall appealed to President Coolidge not to sign the National Origins Act into law in 1924. "We have been a liberal nation, broad in our sympathy, lofty in our aspirations. Let us not become narrow, provincial and bigoted." But Coolidge (already narrow, provincial and bigoted) backed the act and it passed. This sad administrative legacy would hold until the overhaul of immigration legislation in 1952.

When the newsreels of Nazis tormenting old men, smashing storefronts and setting synagogues alight began to reveal the capacity of a "Master Race" for cruelty, Americans recoiled. Though some die-hard American eugenicists kept faith with their Nazi cohorts and swapped research findings even into the war, in mainstream America eugenics lost its popular fascination and its power to shape legislation.

A thin light from that dead star, eugenics, still brushes us sometimes. Ask the Sierra Club what happened when some board candidates ran on immigration reduction platforms in 2004; angry charges of white elitism beset the club for years. Only wonder why the phrase "invasive species" still has the power, reasonably or not, to make us wince. But there is no going back to the culture that made eugenics and the conservation movement bedfellows. The conservation movement in 2015 is diverse, inclusive and engaged with social and environmental justice. Madison Grant would hardly recognize it.

And something else that didn't pan out the way he guessed. *Alces americanus* is back. Long live the Adirondack moose. 🍄

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