SHORT CARRIES »

SMALLVILLE

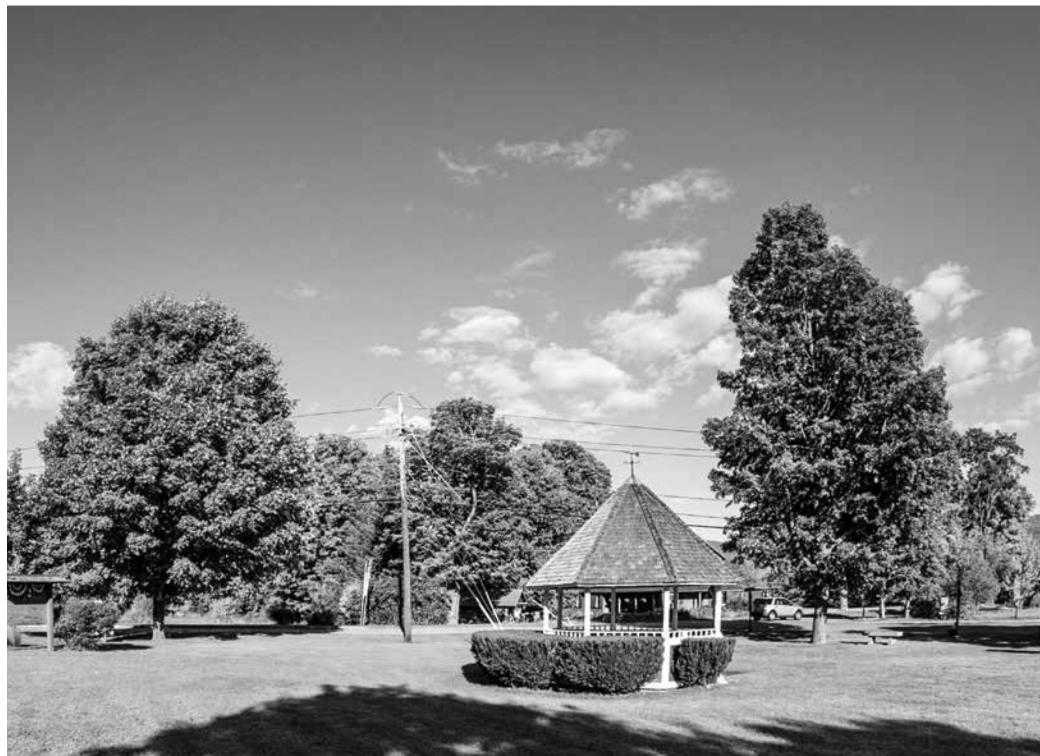
The rewards and responsibilities of hamlet living

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

LAST NIGHT A FRIEND CALLED to tell my husband and me that, earlier that day, a mutual friend had died of a heart attack. We'd heard the ambulance siren—strange and troubling when you live in a place like Jay, with some 1,000 permanent residents. You can't help wonder who that ambulance is steering toward.

The evening before, my husband and I had played a concert—me on violin, my husband on guitar—at our community theater on Jay's village green. The man who had just passed away had booked our gig, as he had other ones in the past. He had set us up that night, jumped on the mic a couple of times to welcome us while nudging the crowd to join the nonprofit that puts on these shows. He was kind, as outgoing a guy as they come, and even more so that night because he was on a date with his lovely wife, a local powerhouse in her own right.

Everyone in our hamlet and the surrounding ones knew him and his sweet family. And I know that as I write, they're wondering how that gaping space that he once occupied can ever be filled. A teensy community like ours is faces, after all, a collective of personalities that makes it what it is.



JAY VILLAGE GREEN PHOTOGRAPH BY SHAUN ONDAK

In Jay it's almost impossible to be anonymous—folks will likely know you, at least know who you are, whether you want them to or not. But hamlet living also allows you the choice of how you'll step forward: as a friendly neighbor or resident curmudgeon or as a doer, on this committee or as coach of that or the person who dresses up as Santa and makes the rounds to area kids on Christmas Eve just for fun, as our late friend did. You can shine as brightly as you'd like.

My son has a colorful area rug decorated with roads, houses, a school, store, library, river and what appears to be a park with a fountain. The idea is that kids zoom their Matchbox cars or whatever along the roads, pretend to stop here and there for groceries or to cross the bridges. The first thing my son did when he received the rug was to identify every place in our community: that one's our house; there's Devin's, where we get gas and sandwiches; this is the village green, where we play tag and hear concerts; over there is the farm with alpacas. My son was orienting himself, repeating the information the same way he relishes stories of his birth, of how his dad and I met—the stuff that helps kids grasp just who they are.

I was raised in a college town two hours west of Jay, not far from the park. There were about 15 times as many people there as here—enough that, I suppose, I had the illusion of a surrounding bigness. At age 14 I'd borrowed a friend's video membership card and rode my bike to the Blockbuster-type store with too many lights and aisles of tapes. When I presented my videos and then my friend's card, I recall the clerk telling me, "This isn't yours." Yes it is, I insisted. I'll never forget what she said. "No, I know who you are."

It was the first time I realized the smallness of that place.

I've lived in cities and traveled across the world. To walk among seas of people is exhilarating and freeing. You can be whoever you want to be, maybe even start from scratch. Gnawing away alongside it, though, is a basic yearning—ego, perhaps—to be acknowledged, to be known.

I struggle with that dichotomy, especially when I consider the responsibilities that come with being part of something so intimate and vulnerable as an Adirondack community: you're held accountable for being grumpy at the deli or not waving at the four corners or not raising your hand when it's your turn to volunteer or bring a dish to pass. There are obligations in a place like this.

But then I remember our lost friend and his dedication to the people within this mountain-cradled river valley. Adirondack living means more than waking up to pretty scenery: you're part of something fragile and vital—something fundamentally human.

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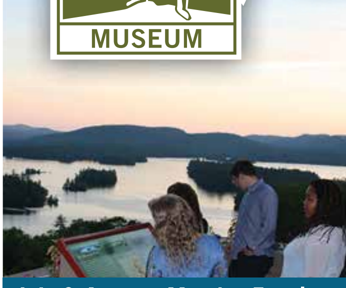

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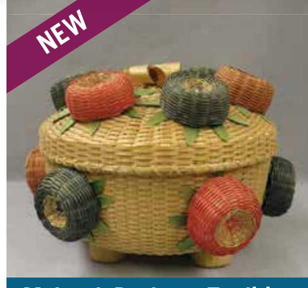

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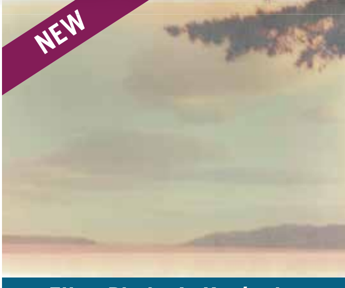

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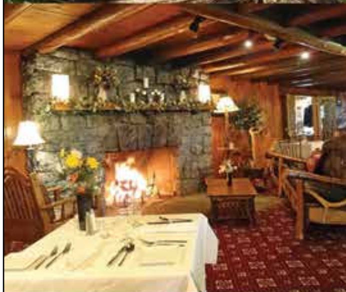

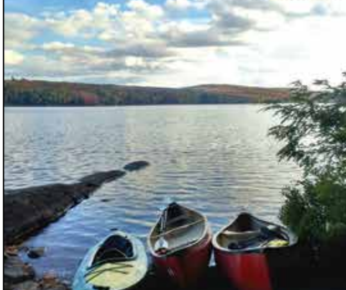

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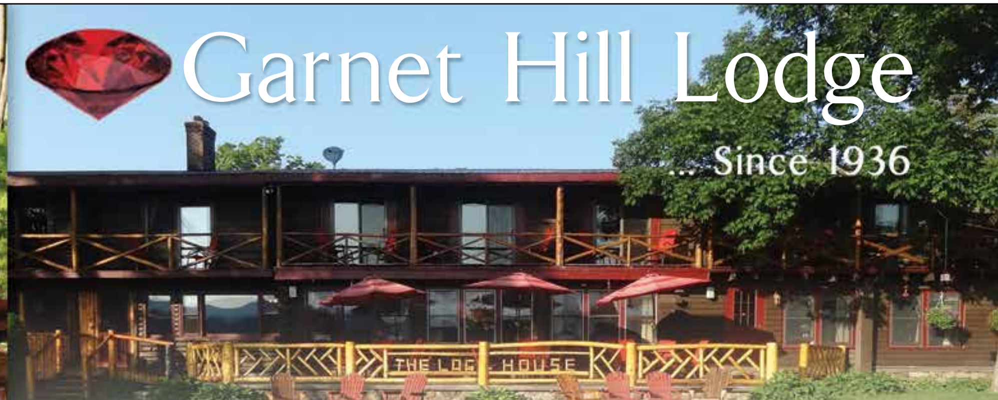

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LOVE MY NEIGHBORS

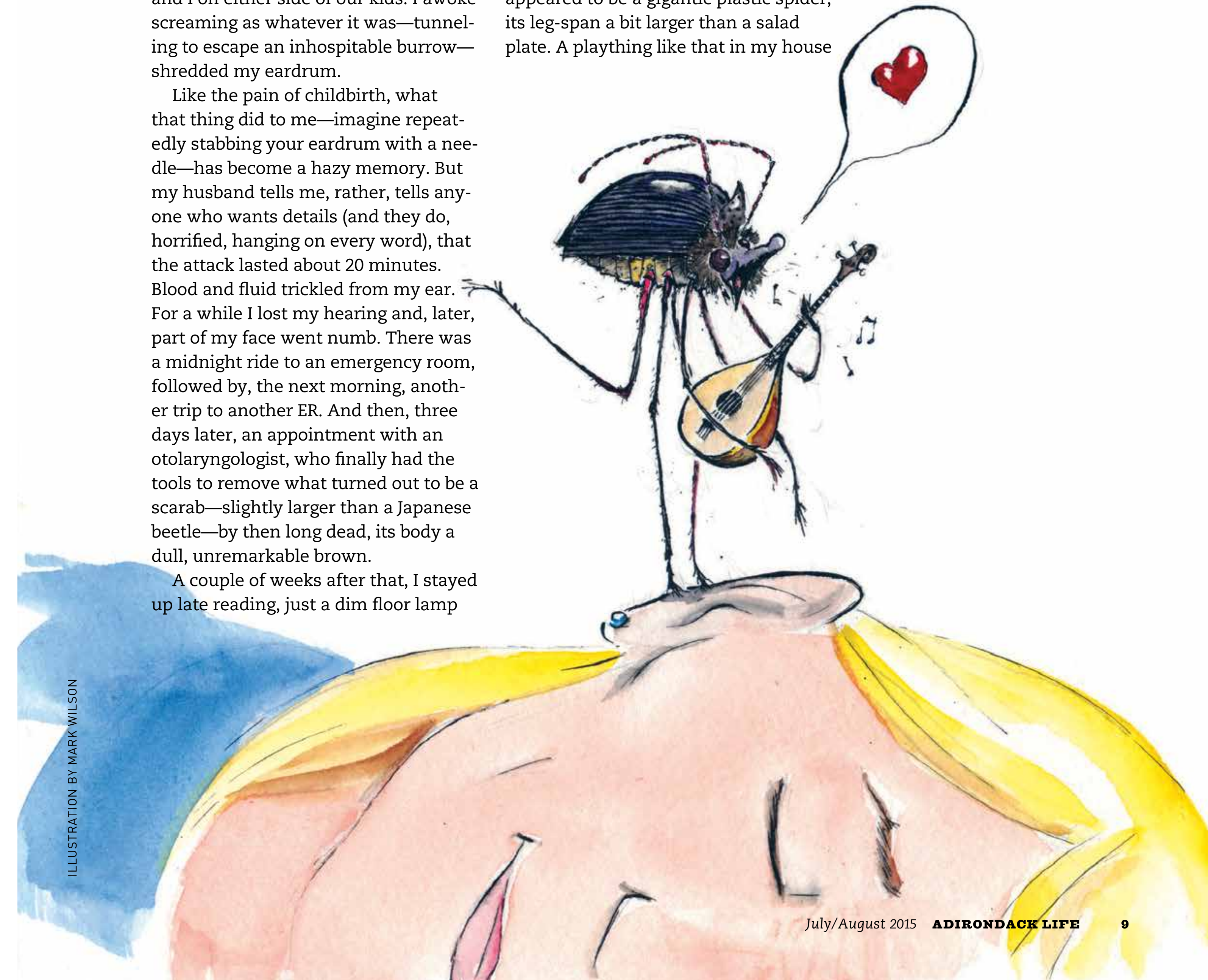
Even if they have three rows of eyes and eight legs

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

A BUG CRAWLED IN MY EAR during a High Peaks family camping trip last summer. I had been asleep an hour, snug in my sleeping bag, my husband and I on either side of our kids. I awoke screaming as whatever it was—tunneling to escape an inhospitable burrow—shredded my eardrum.

Like the pain of childbirth, what that thing did to me—imagine repeatedly stabbing your eardrum with a needle—has become a hazy memory. But my husband tells me, rather, tells anyone who wants details (and they do, horrified, hanging on every word), that the attack lasted about 20 minutes. Blood and fluid trickled from my ear. For a while I lost my hearing and, later, part of my face went numb. There was a midnight ride to an emergency room, followed by, the next morning, another trip to another ER. And then, three days later, an appointment with an otolaryngologist, who finally had the tools to remove what turned out to be a scarab—slightly larger than a Japanese beetle—by then long dead, its body a dull, unremarkable brown.

A couple of weeks after that, I stayed up late reading, just a dim floor lamp beside me. Something caught my eye. I put my book down, walked to the part of the room where the kids often leave their toys, and reached for what appeared to be a gigantic plastic spider, its leg-span a bit larger than a salad plate. A plaything like that in my house



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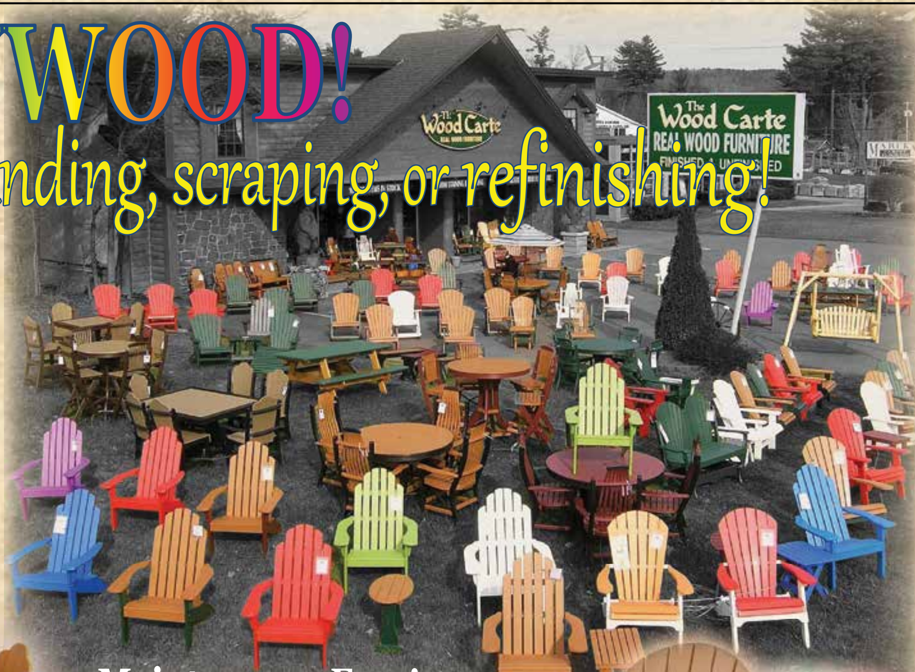

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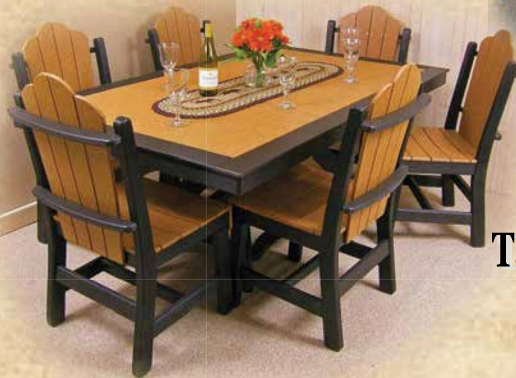
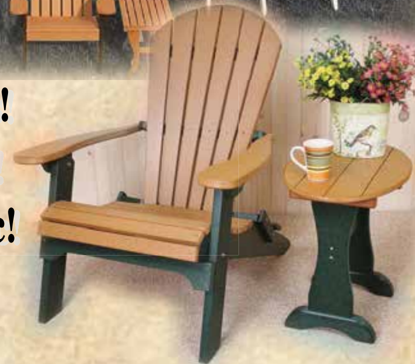
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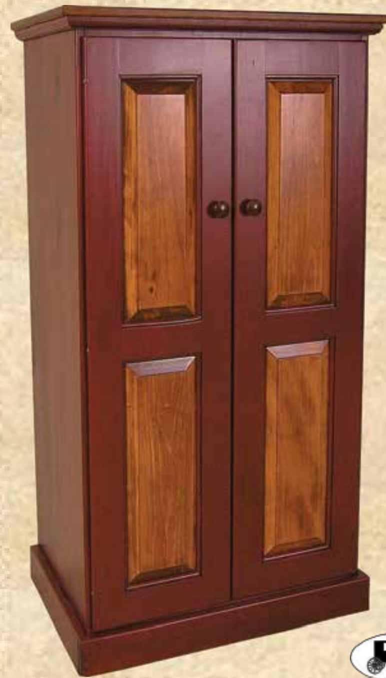
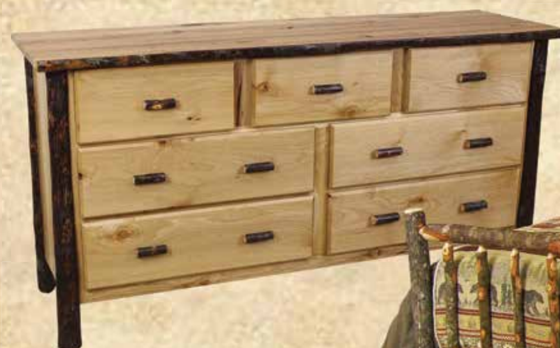
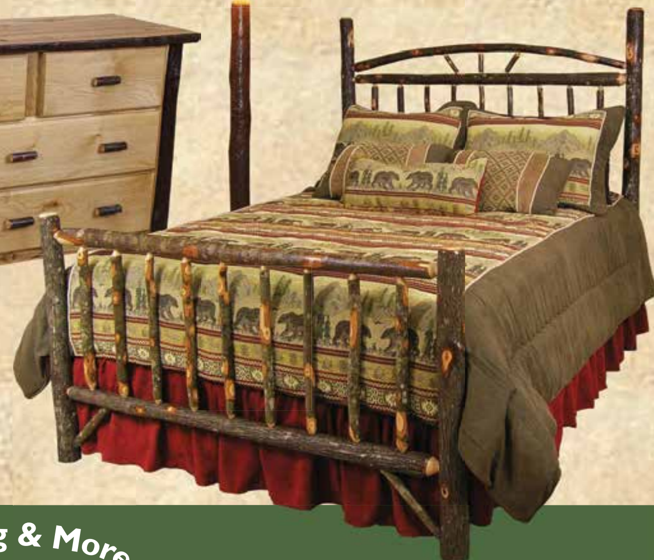
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isn't unusual—my daughter likes rubber snakes and I often find them in her bed. Still, just as I was about to scoop it up, I confirmed to myself that the kids did not, in fact, have a toy spider. I took a closer look: it was a fishing or dock spider, an impossibly expansive striped-legged *Dolomedes*, sprawled on the carpet where we play Monopoly or have tea parties.

On a sunny morning soon after that, I grabbed my backpack, threw on a straw hat and started walking to work. I got 20 feet from my front door when, for whatever reason, I looked down at the black tank top I was wearing. There, clinging to my front, was a wolf spider—its hairy body about the size of a quarter. I even saw its shiny eyes and those curved pincers by its mouth. I did a spazzy freak-out, flinging my backpack and hat across the yard, then raced into the house, slamming the door behind me. I stood there wild and panting as I told my husband there had been a scary spider on my chest. He stared at me, then whispered, "It's still there."

Like a cat that, in a crowd, picks the dog-lover to rub up against, crawly things seemed to be attracted to me. There was, obviously, discord in my relationship with them.

Had I been disrespectful of resident invertebrates? Had there been too much squishing?

I've thought a lot about this since last summer's "encounters." So I've done my best to release, free of harm, those that have found their way into my little Jay farmhouse: ladybugs, crickets, box-elder bugs, moths, daddy-longlegs and other spiders. I've helped my kids rescue slugs from the sidewalk after hard rains. I've gingerly replaced the rocks my daughter flips after she inspects the scurrying world beneath. I've even spared an earwig lounging by our bathtub drain.

Most important, though, I'm reminded of the invisible world all around us, only made visible when our worlds collide. We share this place. At least that's the message delivered right to my ear.

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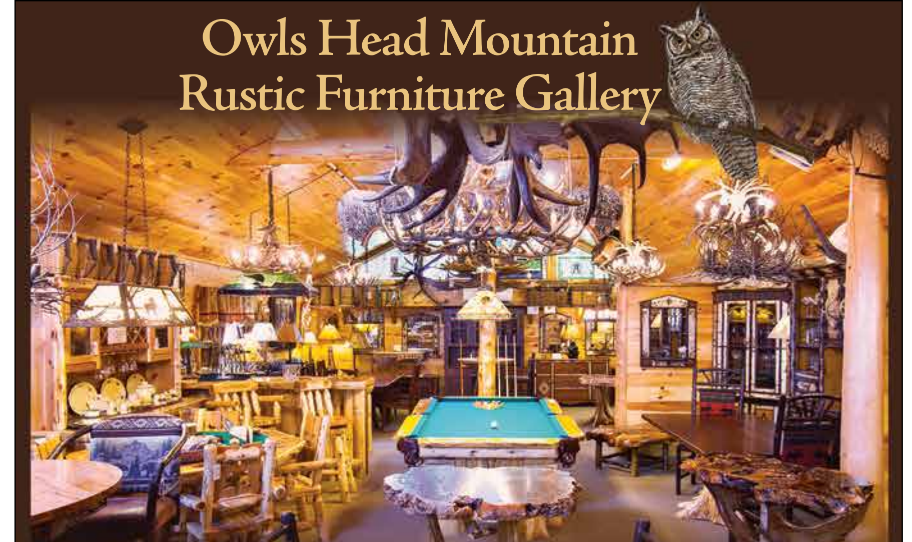
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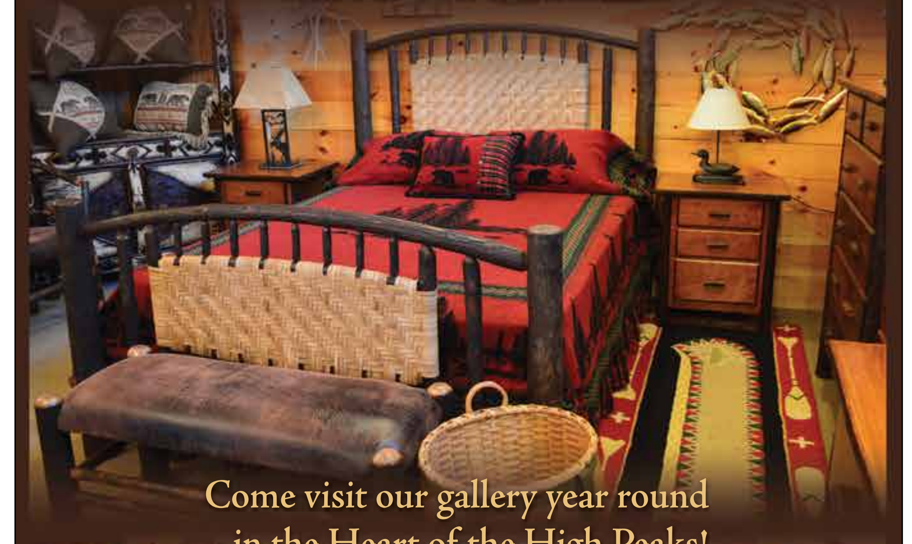
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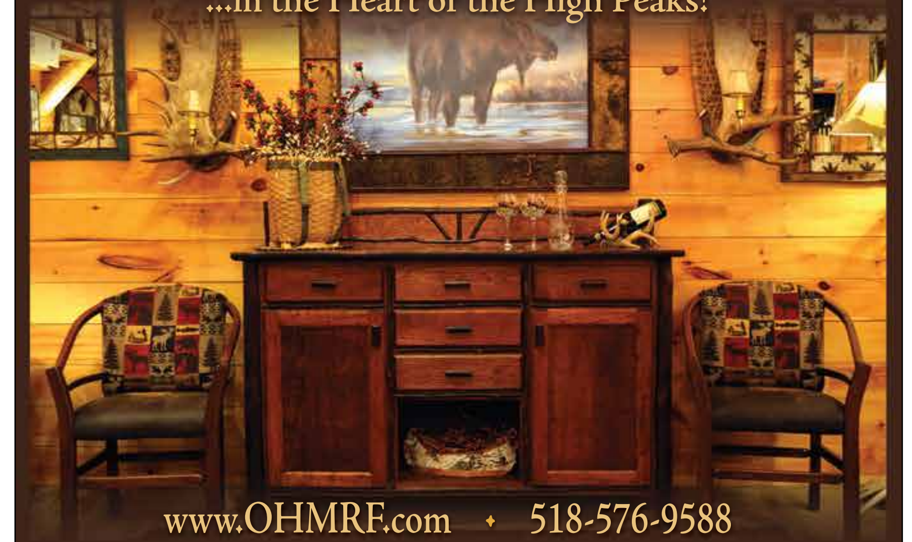
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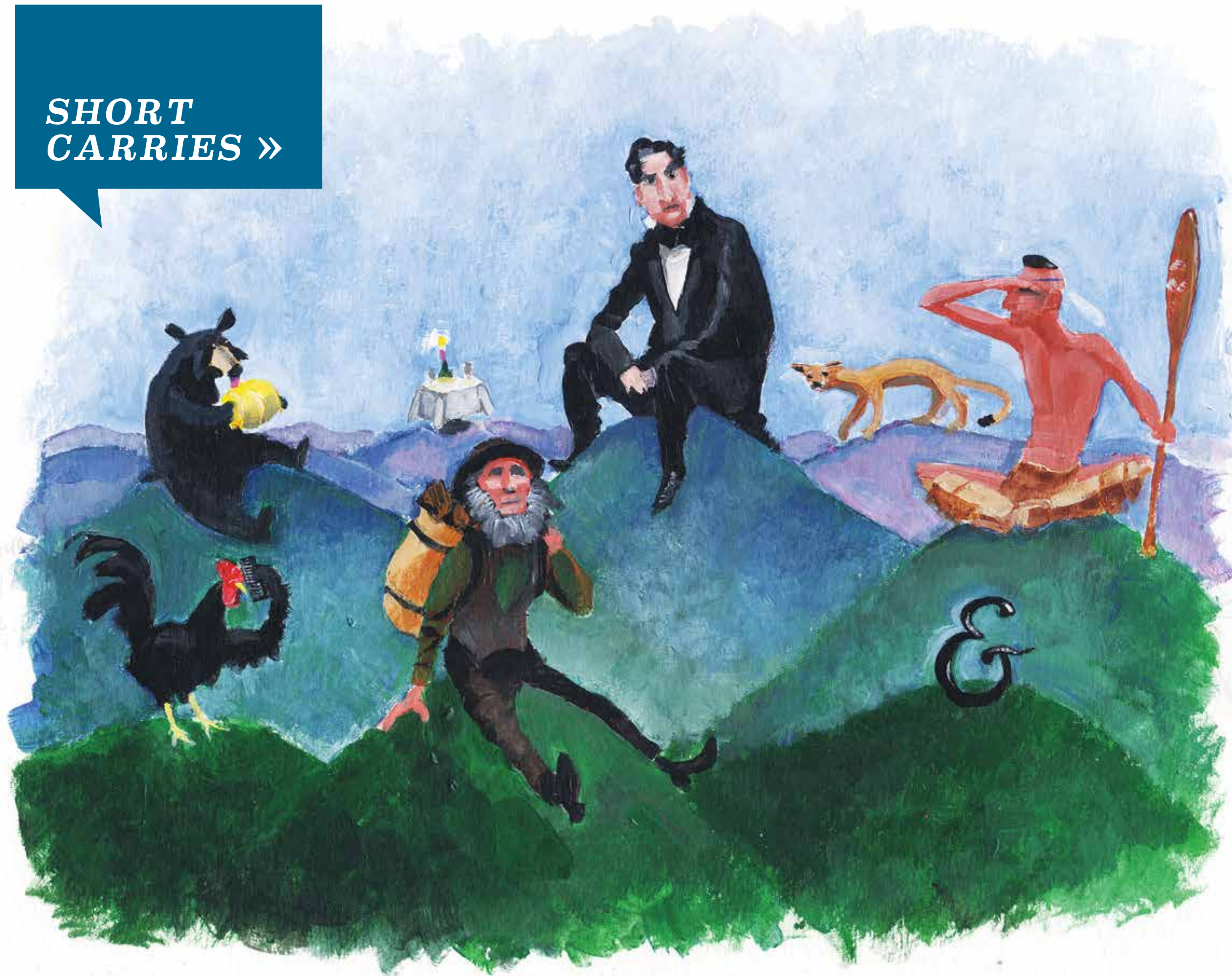

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK WILSON

LOFTY LABELS

What's in a name? BY ANNIE STOLTIE

Mount Matumbla, a couple of miles outside of Tupper Lake, is the highest peak in St. Lawrence County. It's only half the size of Mount Marcy, but its name implies exoticism and grandiosity. Same goes for Mount Arab, the second highest peak in that county. Truth is, Matumbla and Arab come from our North Country ancestors' mangled pronunciations of the French *montagne bleu*, or blue mountain, and *érable*, or maple.

And Gore Mountain? It rises in the town of Johnsburg, named for John Thurman, who settled there in the 1780s. Thurman was gored to death by a bull, but that's irrelevant. In surveyor-speak a gore is a spear of land; when Verplanck Colvin finally measured the mountain in the late 19th century, he kept its placeholder name.

At *Adirondack Life* we have stacks of maps that we use for reference when we write or fact-check magazine articles. I'm not alone in sometimes falling into a cartographical rabbit hole, fascinated by the names of our park's physical features, particularly the ones that point to the sky. There's usually a history lesson in these self-guided geography tours: consider the numerous Potash, Orebed and Iron mountains, tagged in a time when pioneers swung axes and dug deep, struggling to survive this wild country. Imagine enough mountain lions stalking this land to inspire so many Cat, Catamount and Panther peaks.

Roostercomb, Sawteeth and the Balds, Sugarloafs and Haystacks—and Nippletop, of course—have obvious names. Just as assumptions can be made about Dead Horse Mountain, in Arietta, and the Blueberries, Bucks, Bears, Beeches, Mooses, Spruces, Rattlesnakes and Easts and Wests.

Mount Defiance, overlooking Fort Ticonderoga, got its title when the American colonies declared independence from Britain. The naming of Esther Mountain, in Wilmington, also involved defiance—that of 15-year-old Esther McComb who, 176 years ago, ignored her parents' warnings, hiked the mountain alone and ended up lost.

Leaders John Jay, William Learned Marcy, Horatio Seymour and Alexander Macomb are honored with prominent Adirondack peaks, as are scientists Asa Gray, Franklin B. Hough and William C. Redfield. While other worthy men—yes, almost entirely men—were memorialized this way across the region, Russell M. L. Carson, in his 1927 *Peaks and People of the Adirondacks*, wrote, "Sins both of omission and commission occurred in naming the high Adirondack peaks." He believed it "a misfortune, amounting almost to an injustice" that legendary guide Orson "Old Mountain" Phelps—who named Skylight, Saddleback and Basin—was relegated to a trailless, unpopular hill far from his beloved Keene Valley base.

On an online hikers' forum, someone mentioned bushwhacking Hamilton County's Steve Bigle Mountain—whose namesake is a mystery—which led to an entertaining thread about renaming it. After all, landmarks' names aren't necessarily permanent.

Last year East Dix became Grace Peak, for Forty-Sixer Grace Hudowalski. And more recently, on the national stage, Mount McKinley—named for a president who never set foot in Alaska—reverted to its original, native Denali. Is it possible that our Mount Seward, dedicated to statesman William Henry Seward, could someday switch back to what Carson claimed was its previous, Mohawk name, *Ou-kor-lah*, or "great eye"? Beyond Couchsachraga and the generic Algonquin and Iroquois, few of our peaks pay respect to those who came first.

Names matter. More than tiny letters on a topo or labels painted on a trailhead sign, what we call our loftiest terrain—the parts of this place that *are* permanent—helps tell the story of the Adirondacks, of how it came to be.

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