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A GUIDE TO ALL THINGS LEAN-TO

Illustrations by Michael Carina

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July + August 2019 ADIRONDACK LIFE 43



D

EEP woods in the Adirondacks, where nature rules, the experience is immersive, authentic and out of our ordinary realm. We crave this solitude, the trees and peaks that surround us, the elements—rain, sunshine, snow—that dictate just how our adventure will unfold. Still, an overnight or even a brief respite, maybe a snack or a nap, in one of our park’s signature three-sided log structures somehow completes the experience. Call it lean-to love.

And there are lots to love: New York State Department of Environmental Conservation maintains nearly 250 lean-tos in the Adirondack Park.

So-called open camps date back to the first Native American hunters and gatherers responding to the challenging Adirondack climate. Shelters made of branches and bark could be erected quickly or made well enough to stand for several seasons. Key to comfort was an open front, where the campfire gave heat and light; by the 1800s, guides and woodsmen were crafting more permanent slanted-roof shanties from hemlock, spruce, fir and cedar logs. Tents and tarps, though portable, were less desirable for camping; they were claustrophobic, often dark, frequently damp. Beyond the backcountry, posh lean-tos became fixtures at Great Camps, where thick beds of balsam boughs and bespoke hearths lulled the roughing-it gentry into gentle slumber.

The first few public lean-tos were built in the 1920s on what is now the Northville-Placid Trail. In the 1930s, as part of its mission to encourage outdoor recreation, the state Conservation Department went on a building spree, creating lean-tos along more hiking trails and waterways, with Civilian Conservation Corps members wielding the axes and swinging the hammers. Many lean-to sites were chosen then, with generations of replacements arising from the same stone corners. In the 1970s, dictated by the State Land Master Plan, high-elevation lean-tos were removed as well as some too close to water’s edge.

Lean-to love lives on. You can help support these iconic structures through Adirondack Mountain Club’s Adopt-a-Lean-to program (www.adk.org), where volunteers visit their shelters for cleaning and repairs, or the Adirondack 46ers’ Lean2Rescue (on Facebook), which raises money and finds help to rehab lean-tos.

Lean-to pots and journal photographs by Nancie Battaglia. Copperas Pond lean-to photograph by Jamie West. McGiven. Facing page: Uiovana Lake lean-to photograph by Jeff Nadler.





SHELTERED PAST

DID THE CIVIL WAR POPULARIZE THE ADIRONDACK LEAN-TO?

by James H. S. McGregor



Winslow Homer, *In Front of Yorktown*, ca. 1863-66. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery. Gift of Samuel Rossiter Betts, B.A., 1875. *Out of doors in Adirondack Mountains, New York: Game in the Adirondacks!*, ca. 1888, by Seneca Ray Stoddard, from The Library of Congress

In 1869,

four years after the end of the Civil War, hundreds of men and women from Boston and New York headed to the Adirondacks. A book called *Adventures in the Wilderness; or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks* by William Henry Harrison Murray, a prominent Boston preacher, inspired them and the thousands who followed in successive years. Murray's tales of camping out, hunting and fishing in the Adirondacks make exciting reading even today. Murray's book helped convince hordes of urban men and women to give up the comforts of home abruptly and begin roughing it in the woods.

Luck seems to have played its part in Murray's success. Soldiers' letters and diaries, official reports and many thousands of images preserved in the Library of Congress show surprising similarities between Civil War encamp-

ments and camping out in the Adirondacks. Wartime experiences, both direct and vicarious, may have prepared the ground, creating an appetite for campground camaraderie, for sleeping under the stars and cooking over open fires. As memories of the harshness of war began to fade and nostalgia took their place, what came to be called "the Murray Rush" exploded.

Winslow Homer, one of the greatest 19th-century American artists, chronicled both the Civil War and the Adirondack experience. On assignment with *Harper's Weekly*, Homer followed the 61st New York Volunteers during the spring of 1862 as the unit participated in the Peninsula Campaign to capture Richmond, the Confederate capital. Facing stubborn resistance at Yorktown, the campaign stalled for two months, then collapsed. In his time with the 61st, Homer witnessed few battles; his notebooks and paintings from the period almost exclusively depict troops in camp.

In Front of Yorktown, a painting in the Yale University Art Gallery, shows four soldiers of the 61st Volunteers sitting on logs around a campfire, while two of their fellows lie inside what appears to be an Adirondack-style lean-to. If the regiment had been recruited from Essex or Franklin Counties, we could assume that the men had simply brought their campcraft with them, but the 61st enlistment rolls (available online) reveal that the unit was made up of volunteers from New York City with a single company recruited in Albany and another made up of undergrads from what is now Colgate University. When Homer visited, this lean-to was undoubtedly sheltering city men with no prior wilderness experience.

With a simple change of costume, Winslow Homer's painting could be transformed into a typical 19th-century Adirondack scene. The improvised lean-tos are much the same in each picture—the fire in the foreground, even the rifles leaning against the shelter.

Historians rightly portray the Civil War as a brutal national bloodbath noble in its outcomes and precociously modern in its conduct. But | *Continued on page 105*



LEAN-TO ETIQUETTE

Forest ranger Megan McCone monitors 50,000 acres of state land, including parts of Saranac Lake Wild Forest and all of the St. Regis Canoe Area. Her work vehicle of choice is a canoe, and she enjoys her encounters educating paddlers and campers about backcountry behavior, including lean-to etiquette.

The vast majority of lean-tos managed by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) are free, available on a first-come, first-served basis. If you want to reserve a lean-to, check out Adirondack Loj, on Heart Lake; a few state campgrounds, such as Tioga Point, on Raquette Lake, include lean-to sites.

Often, says Ranger McCone, "Lean-tos that are harder to reach are treated with the most respect." But all of these places need our courtesy and care.

THE 10 LEAN-TO COMMANDMENTS

THOU SHALT

- 1 Keep it clean, even pristine. This includes the land around the lean-to.
- 2 Share the structure. Most hold about six adults. McCone says, "You can't lay claim to a lean-to for your own private use." If a lean-to is at capacity, deploy your Plan B for another campsite.
- 3 Use the outhouse if your lean-to has one. If not, McCone advises, "Choose a spot at least 150 feet from the lean-to and any waterway. Bury waste six to eight inches deep and cover it well."
- 4 Make your campfire in the pit provided.
- 5 Carry it in, carry it out.

THOU SHALT NOT

- 6 Carve the wood, write graffiti or deface the structure in any way. "Lean-tos are hard to maintain, harder to build and deserve our respect," she says.
- 7 Pitch a tent inside the lean-to. "This is about the open-air camping experience," according to McCone. And the DEC prohibits pitching a tent next to a lean-to in order to increase capacity.
- 8 Burn garbage, cans, plastic or treated wood.
- 9 Leave food and beverages in the lean-tos. "Leaving food in the lean-to is the worst idea, and animals learn from our habits," she says. It may be a chipmunk this time and a bear the next.
- 10 Destroy the lean-to journal.

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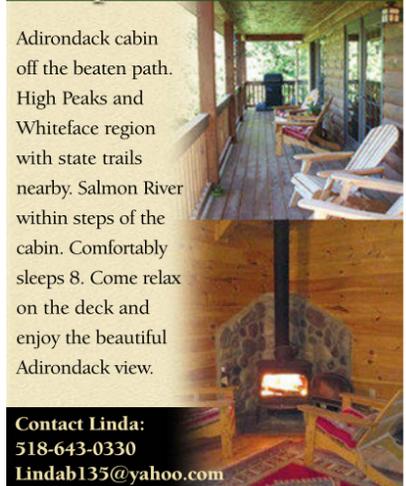
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INSIDE & OUT

Westport. Check for times. (518) 962-4449. www.depottheatre.org

JULY 31-AUGUST 3: The Manchurian Candidate. Opera based on the 1959 political thriller with pre-show lecture. Seagle Music Colony, Schroon Lake. Check for times. (518) 532-7875. www.seaglecolony.org

AUGUST 9-11: Love, Linda. One-woman musical about the wife of Cole Porter set to his tunes. Masonic Lodge, Essex. Friday and Saturday, 7 p.m.; Sunday, 5 p.m. (518) 526-4520. www.essextheatre.org

LECTURES & WORKSHOPS

JULY 9: Loon Lake Architecture Tour. Adirondack Architectural Heritage explores the late-19th-century resort community that hosted three presidents. Register in advance. (518) 834-9328. www.aarch.org

JULY 13: Map & Compass Fundamentals. Register in advance. Adirondack Mountain Club's Education Yurt Village, Lake Placid. 9 a.m. (518) 523-3480. www.adk.org

JULY 14: The Tick Crisis. Part of the Lyceum Lecture Series. Whallonsburg Grange Hall. 3 p.m. (518) 963-7777. www.thegrangehall.info

EXHIBITIONS

THROUGH OCTOBER 13: Bootleggers and the Law in the Adirondacks. Exploring the impact of Prohibition on the region. Running concurrently with Adirondack Suffragists: The Temperance Movement. Adirondack History Museum, Elizabethtown. (518) 873-6466. www.adkhistorycenter.org

THROUGH OCTOBER 14: Private Views: Collecting the Adirondacks. Dozens of 19th-century landscapes from private collections as well as a selection of the museum's works. Adirondack Experience, Blue Mountain Lake. (518) 352-7311. www.theadkx.org

Editors' Note: Because Inside & Out must be prepared so far in advance of publication, telephone numbers and websites are included for the confirmation of dates and times of events. Email events to calendar@adirondacklife.com.

SHELTERED PAST

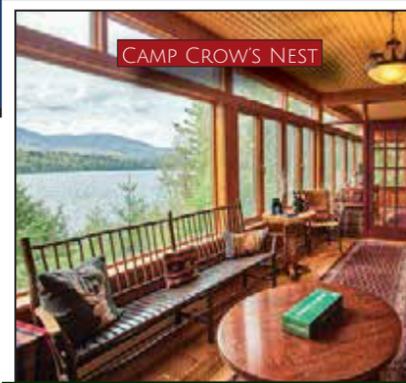
Continued from page 47

despite its national significance and its many modern characteristics, the Civil War unfolded at a slow pace and with a regular winter suspension of fighting that George Washington or even Julius Caesar would have found familiar. Most Civil War soldiers had only fleeting contact with the enemy. Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes, more often in action than most, recalled late in life how he had shocked his friends back home in 1862 when he described the war as "an organized bore."

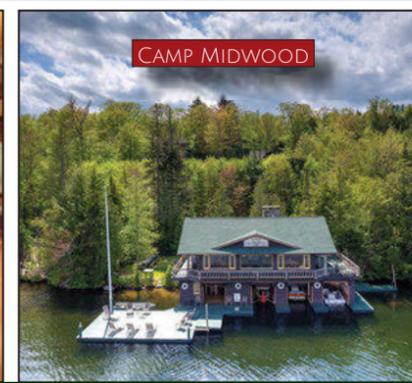
Experts calculate that Civil War soldiers spent well over 90 percent of their two- or three-year enlistments waiting around in camps. Camp was where most of the boredom happened; where it was confronted, and where with luck and imagination it might be overcome. There were daily duties and frequent drills intended, as the Army manual shows, to counteract inactivity. There were games of skill and chance, clever or stupid pranks, frequent band concerts, impromptu theatricals, choral sings and constant camaraderie. This pattern of life undoubtedly produced in many soldiers what writer A. J. Leibling, speaking of his World War II experience, called "a deplorable nostalgia." In his diary, Rice C. Bull, a sergeant in the 123rd New York Volunteer Infantry, described a confused rush of feeling as camp broke for the last time in the spring of 1865:

"Surely we all rejoiced that the end had come, that victory was ours and that home was near. But there was after all a sadness deep down in our hearts in this parting hour. We boys had been together for three years; we had formed close friendships; we had slept under the same blanket; we had faced the enemy shoulder to shoulder ... thus a comradeship had grown that only such conditions could form."

Given the strong feelings many soldiers harbored for their shared wartime experience, it is little wonder that Murray's celebration of camping out in the Adirondacks struck such a chord. Murray himself had not served in the war; his passion for camping, hunting and fishing grew from his rural childhood. He may never have realized that in his lectures and books he was marketing a recreational version of something that many



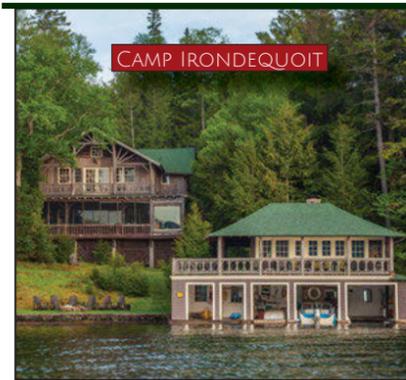
CAMP CROW'S NEST



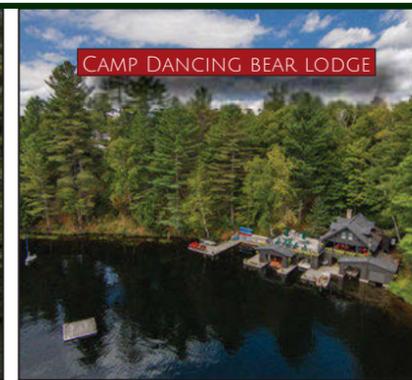
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- 2019 TENT SALE: Aug. 15-17, 10AM-7PM
- 2019 OCTO-BEAR-FEST: CANCER BENEFIT Oct. 5, 10AM-4PM

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in his audience had come to know during their Civil War service.

Much of the adventure Murray celebrated centered around the lean-tos and other temporary shelters that guides erected for their parties. According to regulations, Union Army camps were to be laid out to cookie-cutter standards. Units were equipped with three types of tents: round tipi-like canvas structures called Sibley tents, rectangular tents with sloping roofs and low side walls, and pup tents. The layout of camps was also prescribed in the manuals. Parallel lines of tents were fronted by a perpendicular row of officer housing. Wagon lots and

With a simple change of costume, Winslow Homer's painting could be transformed into a typical 19th-century Adirondack scene. The improvised lean-tos are much the same in each picture—the fire in the foreground, even the rifles leaning against the shelter.

picket lines for horses and mules were set to the side; cook-tents, hospital and sanitary structures stood in the distance.

But tent cities of this standard type were far from universal. Overnight camps, called bivouacs, were considerably less organized. On hilly, wooded or broken terrain, even long-term camps became irregular in outline. And wherever soldiers spent months instead of days in camp, especially in winter, shelters were enhanced with all kinds of improvements. This gave to many shelters, in the words of a Connecticut volunteer, "an amount of comfort wholly inconceivable to those who know nothing of the numerous contrivances a soldier's ingenuity can suggest." The many sketches and photographs of encampments in the Library of Congress collections show that even in well-ordered tent camps, there were recurrent innovations that added to soldiers' comforts and gave each camp an individual character.

In the early days of his enlistment, then—Private Bull was assigned to sentry duty at an outpost near Aquia Creek, in

SHELTERED PAST

Virginia.

"At the post quite a large shed had been built, using fence rails. On top of the roof were pine boughs, which kept out some of the wind and rain in bad weather. The front of the shed was open so a large fire built outside made the shed warm and comfortable. The officer in charge ... told me to go to the shed, spread out my blanket and lie down where it was warm. I was weak and sick, but the fire made it warm and comfortable. I had a real rest. I was surprised to find that ten inches of snow had fallen."

Not every soldier would have known the comfort and security this makeshift structure offered Private Bull. Still, for many veterans, Adirondack shelters may have captured the physical sensation of being in wartime camps. For women and those who had missed out on Civil War camp life, Murray's Adirondacks offered a chance to share in some of what the veterans in their family had known firsthand.

Murray was indeed lucky that the wartime experiences his audience shared predisposed them to embrace the outdoor life that he cherished himself for very different reasons. Today we continue to share in Murray's luck and so does the Adirondacks. In 1864, *Man and Nature*, a groundbreaking book by Vermonter George Perkins Marsh, argued that deforestation had caused the decline of the Roman Empire, and that unchecked destruction of America's great forests threatened its nascent empire as well. The Murray Rush made the Adirondacks known and loved by ordinary men and women whose will to preserve the forest gave substance and political clout to Marsh's erudite theory. Through a peculiar chain of circumstances, one deep and strong root of American environmentalism began in the pine-bough shelters and roaring campfires of our tragic Civil War. ▲

James H. S. McGregor is professor of comparative literature emeritus at the University of Georgia. He is the author of *Back to the Garden* (Yale University Press), *Venice from the Ground Up* and *Rome from the Ground Up* (Harvard University Press).

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