

HISTORY OF THE ADIRONDACK GUIDES

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The 18th century was a period of rapid growth for the Adirondacks, especially between 1840 and 1880. Word had spread of the beautiful wilderness mountains and lakes and people became aware of the untapped potential of the area as a vacationland. The idea of spending one's vacation on a hunting or fishing trip also became more popular.

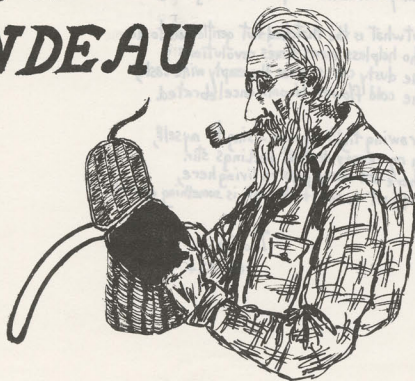
This new procession of soft palmed, fair-skinned gentlemen was considered an intrusion by many woodsmen, even by those who eventually accepted the offers to render their services. To the true Adirondack woodsman, the wilderness possessed its own unique tranquil beauty that was best left undisturbed by those from the outside. The luxury of remaining isolated from civilization rapidly became difficult to maintain.

The guides were not well paid for their time and labor in the early days, but for many it was just getting paid for what they did naturally anyway - hunt and fish. Some even had the process down to an exact system, whereby they would follow a planned course with a patron and check their traps for captured game along the way. And, of course, they would get their own hunting done at the same time.

But the influx of larger numbers of people led to changes. Beginning around 1840, there were traces of private camps on Long, Blue Mountain, Schroon, Saranac, Placid and Tupper Lakes, just to name a few. The construction of summer hotels also followed. Now even more vacationers could enjoy the warm days and cool, dry summer nights of the legendary Adirondack climate. As one would expect, with the development of summer residences came the building of a network of roads that carved their way through the virgin mountain passes and valleys. The emergence of logging operations around the mid-1800's also sped road building. There was trade developing in the Adirondacks, and thus, small towns began to spring up whose residents lasted through the long winters of chilling wind and deep snow. The summer tourist trade became a business for these towns and the spiraling cycle of growth seemed unstoppable at this point.

The profession of guiding played a notable role in this expansion process, a reality undoubtedly regretted by the early guides. For they brought the savage world to the tamed civilization by unfolding the mysteries of this land.

NOAH JOHN RONDEAU



1900-1967

The vast and rapid growth of the Adirondack region was paying its toll on the old-fashioned guiding traditions by the mid-1900's. The woods were overpopulated with private camps and state park areas so that the profession of guiding became commercialized. Noah John Rondeau was one man who upheld the traditional lifestyles of guides who lived a century before him. But Rondeau was more than just a guide for eager hunters and fishermen; he was a hermit who lived eighteen miles deep in the wilderness along the Cold River Valley.

Rondeau has been one of the better publicized characters of Adirondack history since he held out as a hermit as the rest of the world rapidly closed in on him. Maitland De Sormo, an Adirondack historian from Saranac Lake has researched Rondeau extensively. He describes a hermit as "someone who, by preference lives as far back in the sticks or as far away from his fellow human beings as he possibly can". A hermit was usually driven to this way of life as a result of an ill-fated family life or a run-in with the law. Basically, he didn't care for being around many other people and, thus, preferred his own company. He was also generally disappointed with society and felt that he couldn't fit in on his own ideological terms. Rondeau fit this stereotype quite nicely.

Growing up as the oldest of nine children, he became the maverick of the family who didn't respect the authority of his parents. He also didn't care much for traditional schooling, making his attendance record quite irregular. He would have much rather spent his days out in the wilderness learning the trades of a woodsman. His stubborn will and determination caused him to leave home at the young age of fifteen. He floated around from Jay to Lake Placid to Saranac Lake and became quite proficient working as a barber. But this way of town life wasn't destined to last long as the wilderness called him back to its heart. He hired himself out as a guide around Upper Saranac Lake which was still a very remote area in the early 1900's. He eventually settled on Cold River, just south of Lower Saranac Lake, and built his hermitage employing his expertise in woodsmanship. It was at this settlement that he remained for most of his life, out of touch with civilization and modern man.

The means for survival in the backwoods required Rondeau to be an expert hunter, trapper and fisherman. He was notorious for breaking the conservation laws and therefore, was not on the best terms with the State Conservation Department and Game Protectors. He contended that there was plenty of game to be had, so there was no reason for the restrictions. Naturally, the word got around that there was a hermit who knew the woods like a chessboard. He was well sought after to be hired as a guide, but not usually interested. He considered the city-folk to be a nuisance and not worth the money they offered to pay in return for his services. There were some men, though, who accepted Rondeau on his own terms and respected his privacy. To these people, Rondeau extended every courtesy.

Typical of growth all over the Adirondacks, Rondeau found himself on constant display as the years progressed. He could not maintain his secluded peace on Cold River. In 1946, he was asked to appear at the National Sportsmen's Show to represent New York State. He was definitely an attraction as the 'Adirondack Woodsman' and he eventually accepted to appear. Much to everyone's surprise he enjoyed the attention drawn and money that he made. For the next two years he made appearances on TV and radio shows all over the country, while still visiting the sportsmen's shows. But in time his fame and novelty faded, so he retreated back to the hermitage to rekindle his love for the wilderness.

Rondeau eventually left the woods for Saranac Lake as his health deteriorated in the 1960's. He lived with some relatives but still continued to tell the tall tales of the wilderness. He was a character loved by all, not so much for his ability to guide, but rather for his persistence to remain a hermit. Actually, it's quite ironic that he himself sold out to commercialism. Perhaps he was finally getting a bit lonely at age forty-six and needed the attention and softer way of life.

MITCHELL 1800- SABATTIS 1906

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Adirondack region was still largely populated with Iroquois and Mohawk Indians. One of the offshoots of the Iroquois nation was called the Abenaki tribe, and it was from these people that the guiding profession was graced with Mitchell Sabattis. Birth records are incomplete, or at best inconsistent, but it is commonly believed that he was born around 1800 and lived to be one hundred and six years of age. In fact, he was the last descendent of his tribe to remain living in the Adirondacks, as the rest of them were driven out by the onslaught of the white population.

Sabattis was built small and slight in stature but was strong and agile in the woods as any hard working guide. His exceptional talent for woodcraft led to his design and production of the first Adirondack guide boats as we know of them today.

Sabattis settled in Long Lake and married a woman of Dutch descent with whom he had eight children. Unlike Rondeau, Sabattis became a town based man who loved family life. He encountered a bout with alcoholism for a few years, but eventually gave it up when challenged by an old friend. At this point in his life he became very religious and immersed himself into the activities of a local church in Long Lake. He became well respected and was often referred to as "the Reverend Sabattis", as he frequently preached on Sundays. One of his most noteworthy efforts was raising money to build a new home for the Wesleyan Methodists in 1865. He was naturally quite proud of this new church and thus, even more dedicated to a community spirit and home life.

The profession of guiding was handed down through the family as Sabattis' sons assumed the role and built guide boats in the winter. This family trend of guiding is of great importance in understanding the motivation behind guiding. It represented much more than a job to the Adirondack woodsmen; it was a rich tradition of talents and storytelling proudly handed down through the generations. Mitchell Sabattis was best known for his true integrity as well as for his craftsmanship and incomparable abilities as a guide for hunters and fishermen.

ORSON PHELPS 1817- 1905

Commonly known as "Old Mountain Phelps", this Adirondack character became a legend in his own time as an expert mountain climber and naturalist. He was born May 6, 1817 and as a teenager worked for the Adirondack Iron Works. His true love and eventual vocation, however, was climbing mountains and expressing his love for nature through poetry.



"The broad rapid rivers that flow
down from your valleys,
And brooks without number coming
down from your heights,
And long dancing cascades that
glitter like lilies,
And waterfalls singing their sweet
songs in the night.
Through the deep rock-bound chasms
the waters are flowing
O'er crystals and opals that glitter
down through the trees dancing
And washed by pure water that came
down from highlands."

Perhaps the most noteworthy trait that Phelps possessed was his love for the intellectual side of man. He most enjoyed guiding men who could challenge him with philosophical and scholarly dialogue. Otherwise he was considered to be a rather poor guide when it came to hunting and fishing or setting up camp for the night. He loathed hard labor. The motives of the farmers in the Keene Valley area (where he settled for life) were to prosper materially through hard labor. Phelps, on the other hand, sought to gain an understanding of nature and how he was to fit into the master plan. This obsession

was perhaps the reason for his unorthodox methods of guiding. He enjoyed leading his patrons off on a "random scoot", which meant leaving the regular trail to follow a maze of undirected turns through the wilderness. A "reg'lar walk", as he referred to it, was boring because one missed so much of what nature had to offer. Those who accepted Phelps' occasional craziness were well-thought of and gladly guided. Most patrons sought his company and storytelling talents as opposed to his questionable abilities to guide.

The following excerpt from Phelps' "Mountain Song" portrays his talent for keen observation and oneness with nature, for which I salute him as a truly unique Adirondack guide.

THE-GUIDE-BOATS

In a book published by the Adirondack Museum entitled Guide-Boat Days and Ways, Kenneth Durant asks the reader to "imagine a region and a time without roads where all travel went by water". This thought struck me as being a difficult one to imagine, for my life experience has always been so dependent upon the automobile and mass transit systems. Even a horse was a very uncommon possession for an Adirondack guide. His profession, and thus, livelihood, depended on his ability to endure long hikes through the woods and arduous miles rowing in his guideboat. For most guides, the guideboat was as much a way of life as his pack basket and gun.

The guideboat that became most common developed from the need for a swift durable craft that was light enough to be carried across land (by the guide himself), from one waterway to the next. These trails came to be known as "carrie" and the work involved was labeled "portage". The white man discovered the native Indian canoes made of birch bark but needed a boat that could stand up to more weight and heavy use. The boat that evolved incorporated the light weight of a canoe and the same

design but was built from spruce and pine (or cedar), and held together by thousands of tiny screws and tacks. These native woods proved to be far more durable and almost as light in weight. The appearance closely resembled the bark canoe with the exception of a broader mid-section to the other, with which the guide ported the boat upside down upon his shoulders. The eventual refinement of guideboat construction made it possible to have a sixteen foot boat weigh only seventy-five pounds without gear!

The construction of guideboats became a true Adirondack craft unique to this region. This trade was passed down through the generations within families as the art was taught with great pride and rightly so. In the 1900's, a man named Theodore Hammer of Saranac Lake, was reputed to be one of the best guideboat builders in the Adirondacks, as there was a great demand for his products. His son, Willard, took over the business and continued to produce boats with the very same techniques and skills of his father. Willard died in 1963 with no one to assume his role. Hammer boats immediately became collector's items and the price of fifteen hundred dollars was considered a good deal for one of their boats.

It is most important to realize not only the value of the guideboat to the guide himself, but of the value of the tradition established in their production as an Adirondack artifact. This notion is probably best exemplified by the fact that the Adirondack Museum has an entire building devoted to the guideboat and its role in exploring the once uncharted wilderness. It made mobility possible and enabled the guides to further pursue their profession by extending the wilderness to the novice hunters and fishermen from the city. From this frame of reference, the guideboat was most influential in the rapid growth of the Adirondack region as a sportsman's paradise.

