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The Women Who Ran Sporting Camps

The making of a tradition in Maine

William Geller



IN THE 1860S, THE LAND THAT BECAME KNOWN AS THE 100-MILE Wilderness in Maine was home to some trappers and hunters who liked to talk. Soon enough, a few hardy city men heard of their exploits and asked the tellers to guide them into the depths of those remote woods to hunt. As the number of visitors, which they called “sports,” increased, the guides opened camps where they could stay. By 1910, their camps could not survive on just men. The owners turned to their wives for their cooking, ingenuity, and organizational skills. Their love of the wilderness and their work matched that of their husbands.

Women were either leading or had the predominant managing role in the seven sporting camps that operated in the southern 100-Mile Wilderness in 1934, the year the Appalachian Trail was completed. This was a notable contrast to the rugged-male omnipresence at the birth of the sporting camp era.

Crude Lodging and Bear Meat Diets

The stories from the birth of sporting camps in the 1860s were amazing. On a Greenville, Maine, hotel porch at the foot of Moosehead Lake in June 1867, 73-year old “Uncle [James] Lyford” regaled a group of vacationers, including a reporter from the *Lowell Daily Citizen and News*, with bear stories. Lyford, a hunter for the previous 58 years, had killed 340 bears, but wanted to reach 365 before he could no longer hunt. He attributed his excellent health to eating bear meat. On his hunting trips he always carried a Bible and he kept a daily journal. But he died a year later, in 1868.

Uncle Lyford, who lived in Sebec, and other guides were nearly all summer farmers and winter loggers who had grown up in the townships at the edge of this wilderness. Before the Civil War, family members also hunted and foraged to put food on the family table. On their trap lines they built tiny shelters. The game was meat for the family table, and the furs provided some family income. After the war, guiding became another way to help sustain the farm. Each guide took one or two sports; their trappers’ camps were too small for more. These hunting trips could last many weeks.

A guide’s greatest challenge was in bringing carcasses out of the wilderness. In March 1869, Henry Clapp, of Brownville and Lyford’s friend and successor as the region’s finest hunter, guided two sports for three weeks

Minnie Perham, who ran camps near Chairback Mountain from 1936 to the mid-1950s, taking a break. COURTESY OF THE NANCY MAE PERHAM FAMILY

into this wilderness, sliced by a couple of logging tote roads suitable for only winter sled traffic. The sports packed their gear on their backs. Clapp made sure sports shot each animal where they could make a sled for the carcass and they could easily clear a path over which his horse could pull the sled back to their camp. They shot five moose and three caribou and trapped a number of small animals—a combined weight of over one ton. With aid of his horse, Clapp moved the mass to the Chamberlain Lake Tote Road, where he flagged an empty tote sled returning to Bangor, 80 miles away.

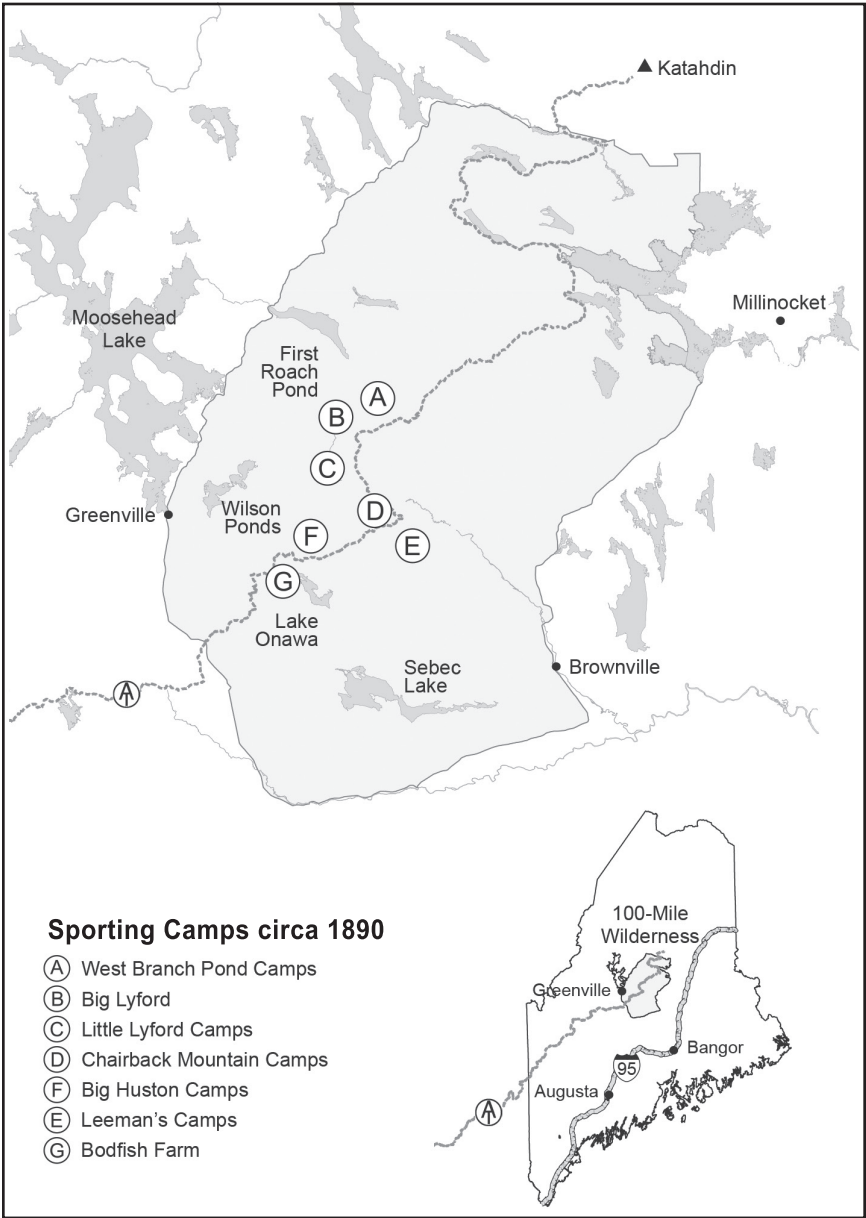
The lodging these men had was as crude as that of Thomas Waldo Billings, a friend of Clapp and successor to his mantle. Billings's shelter on Long Pond had cedar-splits for three walls, a large boulder for the fourth wall, no windows, and a bark-covered pole roof with a smoke hole above the open fire at the base of the rock. They slept on spruce or balsam boughs placed on the ground. The cooking utensils were a fry pan and a pot. They stocked tea, sugar, flour, and slabs of bacon. What they shot or caught in the waterways was the primary source of food. The guide cooked.

In 1873, Phillip Randall and his son Charles, farmers in Atkinson, came north to hunt along the West Branch of the Pleasant River, a few miles south of Clapp's camp, and found an abandoned logging camp near Little Lyford Ponds. The Randalls fixed up the log structure and hunted and trapped from it for a few years before using it as a sporting camp. Here, in a windowless chimneyless floorless log building, roofed with bark, heated by an open fire hearth in its middle, and vented by a hole in the roof, they ate at a rough log table and slept on platforms made of slim poles covered with boughs.

Upriver at the southwest corner of First West Branch Pond in 1879, the Randalls found another abandoned lumber camp. They turned this structure into a hunting camp that Charles opened as a sporting camp two years later. Over the ensuing years, the Randalls outgrew the old logging camp building at each site and began to build small sleeping camps with various capacities. By 1890, Charles had three sleeping cabins. The two old logging camps still had bunks and continued as the center of cooking and eating. Soon, however, such a structure was too rustic, and the Randalls replaced them with a new log building complete with floor and windows, a proper cooking hearth, and a chimney.

Horse teams and wagons became necessities for these camps. Philip Randall met his sports with his team at the Milo train depot 33 miles away. In 1883, the railroad reached Katahdin Iron Works (KIW), 12 miles from

his camp. For the next 70 years some sections of the roads to these camps remained so rough that guests preferred to walk and let the horse and cart haul the dunnage.



The opening of the railroad to KIW and Greenville (in 1883) eased travel to this wilderness, and that brought more sports, including those less rugged. The sports' interests broadened to include fishing, which lengthened the sporting camp season to May through November. By the mid-1890s, Charles Randall, who had the most remote camp in this wilderness, maintained six sleeping cabins that could accommodate 35. Running a sporting camp of multiple buildings and multiple parties of sports now took the combined efforts of a whole family or considerable hired help and eventually both.

Women Expand Camp Diets

Women were helping run the camps by the early 1890s. The cook, now most often the owner's wife, used a cook stove. Each meal of the day was no longer the same. The basic staples matched those of the logging camps: bread, donuts, cookies, pies, tea, beans, hot cereal, salt pork, potatoes, and local meat and fish. The women took charge of sleeping cabins that required regular cleaning and laundering of linens. The privacy afforded by the sleeping cabins encouraged a few sports to bring their wives.

By 1894 the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad (B&A) began publishing a yearly advertising book that focused on sporting camps. The pictures of long strings of trout and of game carcasses hung in the camp yard suggested everyone succeeded in their goals. And by the early 1900s, the B&A publication focused on attracting women. The Maine booth at the B&A's yearly Boston and New York sportsman shows included Maine's Cornelia Thurza "Fly Rod" Crosby, the event's organizer and Maine's first registered guide. Crosby was also a well-known prolific writer for the numerous sports magazines at the turn of the century.

A couple miles west of Charles Randall's place, L. M. Gordon opened a sporting camp at the head of Big Lyford Pond, on the nearly continuously used site of Lyford's and Clapp's trapping camp. Four miles south of Phillip Randall's sporting camp at Little Lyford Pond, over a low rise into the Long Pond drainage, Canadian photographer William P. Dean built a camp as a personal refuge, learned to trap, and was soon guiding from there. He called it Chairback Mountain Camp. Dean's stereoscopic views and other pictures of Gulf Hags, Long Pond, and the West Branch of the Pleasant River, are in collections at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the New York City Public Library.

A trail over Chairback Mountain linked the Chairback Mountain Camps to Joseph A. Thompson's early (around 1870) house on Big Houston Pond

which he called Saint's Rest. Thompson was a friend of both Dean and Billings, and Thompson and his wife, Grace, allowed their camp to join with one Frank Tibbetts built in 1894 called Big Houston Camps. Access to the camp was from KIW, three miles east. On Long Pond's south shore a mile east of the outlet in 1898, Monson farmers James S. and Mary A. Leeman and their two sons, Thomas and Arthur, built and opened a camp in 1898. They named it Camp Damfino after the line, "Damned if I know where the fish are." They met their guests with a horse and cart at the Abbot Village train station and proceeded eight miles to their farm four miles north of Monson. After a night at their farm, they continued to Bodfish Intervale just above the head of Lake Onawa and went up Long Pond Stream to the former Trustim Brown home at the mouth of Vaughn Brook, nine miles from their farm. Here they left the horse and cart and walked the last five miles to camp.

In Bodfish Intervale lived the wilderness farming family of Nymphas Bodfish. Similar to James Lyford, Bodfish moved here with his parents in about 1830, and the family began to build this wilderness farm complex. The extended family lived year-round in the valley for more than 125 years, during which time they logged, hunted, trapped, farmed, guided, and hosted loggers, teamsters, and transients. When sports first came into the valley (1860s) with their guides, they could spend a night with one of the Bodfishes before moving on. Their farm was always a dependable and welcoming waypoint within the wilderness.

By 1900, another eleven sporting camps dotted the southern half of the AT's 100-Mile Wilderness. But no others ever were established, and only the camps at Bodfish Intervale, Long Pond (two camps), Big Houston Pond, Little Lyford Ponds, Big Lyford Pond, and First West Branch Pond survived more than the next 30 years.

These seven surviving sporting camps shared a distinguishing element: a leadership chain of either women or wife-husband ownership. After Helen Brown's husband, Albert, died in 1898, she continued to run Chairback Mountain Camps for at least another 22 years. After six years of two different male owners, Lillian and Ralph York revived the operation and sold in 1936 to Minnie and Earl W. Perham; Minnie ran the camps for the next 18 years. Phillip Randall sold his Little Lyford Camps after his wife Hatti died in 1900. The struggling new male proprietor sold to Clara and Edgar Sherburne about 1909, and they sold about 1928 to Grace MacLeod and Marion Call who for a dozen years advertised as "MacLeod and Call, Proprietors."



Guests gathered on the porch of the main lodge at Big Houston Camps, c. 1930. BERT CALL /
COURTESY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, RAYMOND FOGLER LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

They were followed by wife and husband teams, just as Gordon was at Big Lyford: Winfred and Everett Patten, Florence and Fred Webster, Annie Belle and Willis Sherman, and Eva and Ivan Sherman. Charles Randall at First West Branch Pond sold in 1914 to Alice and Louis Chadwick, and the sporting camp has remained in and run by the family since then. The Leemans on Long Pond sold in 1917 to a single man who operated it for four years before selling to Pearl and William “Will” Dore, who ran the sporting camp until 1949. At Big Houston a succession of eight male owners followed Tibbetts from 1896 until 1920 when Winifred and William Llewellyn “Lell” Arnold took over the operation and ran it until 1947.

Comforts in the Wild, and Friendships

Chairback Mountain Camps proprietor Helen Brown designed her dining room to please women guests, one of whom was Constance DeMille, the wife of actor and filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille. Mrs. DeMille told her New York

friends about the camps, attracting more guests. So women owners became friends with women guests, who would want to return with their husbands. The women camp managers told stories that showed they loved their work, tales of gardening, cooking, animal and bird sightings, raising wild animal pets, handling bears, and caring for sports who became ill or sustained fishing tackle or gunshot injuries. They worked with what they had. Their ingenuity attracted guests—also their friends—back year after year.

They knew how to make women comfortable. At Big Lyford Camps, Eva Sherman's outhouses were not only extremely clean and neat; they included a bucket full of fresh pine needles, with which a user could cover the waste and keep the air fresh. A cabin girl cleaned the cabins daily, and once a week the huge copper pots went on the stove for laundry. Chairback Mountain Camps' library with its books and comfortable chairs was a gathering place where women socialized. At Little Lyford Camps, newspapers came in regularly with the mail, and guests' letters were taken out for posting. Big Houston Camps had an extensive set of walking paths. First West Branch Pond Camps guests used a hiking trail to the White Cap Mountain fire tower. Camp canoes and boats provided transportation for excursions to interesting picnic spots on the various ponds and lakes. The comforts also included porches on sleeping cabins; they provided a quiet contemplative spot.

These women managed the sporting camps' greatest changes and challenges, which revolved around food. They moved away from the lumber camp hearty fare to more closely match, if not at times rival, what sports and tourists received at the hotels and inns at the edges of this wilderness. They changed the logging-camp-style meals to varied dishes emphasizing quality rather than simply quantity. Meals typically included meat, starch, vegetables, salad, and dessert, at both the midday and evening meals, until the 1930s, when the midday meal was a little simpler than the evening meal. In the late 1930s Minnie Perham at Chairback Mountain Camps never served a guest the same meal twice over a fourteen-day period. These women took great pride in their dishes' appearance and the ambiance of the dining room.

The women planted, tended, and harvested vegetable gardens; the distances to tote in all expected foodstuffs on a regular basis were too great, difficult, and costly. Between the mid-1880s and the early 1900s, many camps' hay and oat fields enlarged to include vegetable gardens and farm animals. By the early 1890s Charles Randall had a garden and chickens and pastured cows and horses. In the 1930s at Little Lyford, MacLeod and Call were still driving in a cow and toting in 30 chickens in May to start the season. The

vegetable garden at Chairback Mountain Camps included green beans, wax beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, lots of lettuce, radishes, and potatoes. Some proprietors grew strawberries. Camp Damfino continued the practice in March of tapping maple trees and making maple syrup and sugar. As the summer and fall passed, they canned any harvested food from the garden not put on the table. By the time camps closed, after the fall hunt, their root cellar's shelves were well stocked and ready for the following year. The day before closing at Little Lyford Camps, MacLeod and Call killed the remaining chickens and canned them.

The changes in the menu during each camp season reflected the women's ingenuity. With no garden to harvest and little to forage from the woods, their meals in May and June revolved around trout, potatoes, canned vegetables, beans, bacon, a little pork, bread, cookies, doughnuts, eggs, hot cereal, and pies. Clara Sherburne at Little Lyford Camps served a different trout dish at almost every meal: fried trout, pickled trout, stuffed trout, trout chowder, and boiled trout. In the early spring, when a camp had many sports fishing, the cook faced a daunting task. At Chairback Mountain Camps Perham organized a seven-step assembly line for preparing fish: cut open, gut, clean bloodstream, rinse, dry, newspaper wrap, place on ice in ice house. As soon as the dandelion greens and fiddleheads were ready, they were on the menu and any left over were canned for the following year. For fresh fruit, the women picked wild berries: strawberries in June, raspberries and blackberries in July, and then blueberries in August, often with the help of women guests. Women proprietors served the fresh berries with cream, used them in fruit pies, and canned them for next spring's pies.

The menu also included fresh game whenever it was available. When a cook served a meat dish, she might not share that it was of a wild animal until asked. She created delectable recipes for the skunks, coons, and foxes caught trying to break into the hen house and porcupines that chewed on the cabins. MacLeod and Call chose not to waste bothersome animals they had to dispose of and served them as curiosity dishes, whereas Maude Turner, who succeeded them, cooked such game as a necessity to make ends meet. For hunting season, birds, small animals, deer, bear, and moose were all an expected part of the menu.

When the AT first opened in 1934, hikers relied on the shelter and services provided by the sporting camps of these women and their families. At the Bodfish farm, the first stop north of Monson, Sarah "Sadie" Bodfish and Edmond Drew greeted the hikers. Pearl and Will Dore provided

transportation up Long Pond to Chairback Mountain Camps for those who wished to not hike the Barren-Chairback Ridge. A side trail went down Chairback Mountain to Winifred and Lell Arnold's Big Houston Camps; Lell guided the first group of hikers, all women, over the new AT route to Katahdin (August 22 to September 3, 1933). MacLeod and Call's Little Lyford Camps hosted hikers bypassing White Cap on the Pleasant Valley tote road. Abbie and Fred Chadwick at First West Branch Ponds Camps welcomed the hikers as they came off White Cap Mountain on the AT.

The AT relocations between 1975 and 1983 moved the trail away from these camps, important Maine cultural resources and historical landmarks that pre-date the AT by more than a half-century. The sporting camps at First West Branch Ponds, Little Lyford Ponds, and Long Pond continue to offer public accommodations and are accessible from the AT.

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