

The Future of Adirondack Guiding

BY CHARLES BRUMLEY

My folly in trying to predict the future of Adirondack guiding may be rendered harmless to me by the fact that if I project far enough ahead, I'll be gone from this mortal coil when none of it comes true.

But if you look at the history of guiding and try to stretch the direction ahead, certain trends look as if they might hold true. Among the trends is the fact that Adirondack guiding has been mostly reactive rather than pro-active. We shouldn't confuse the idea that guides did, indeed, actively go out into the woods and waters with the fact that they did it only in response to a need they hadn't created.

The earliest guides were market hunters and trappers, a number of them extremely antisocial Revolutionary War veterans who were better left alone. But they knew their own area, which usually was on the periphery of the Adirondacks, quite well. The early tourists pressed them into service; if we posit for the tourists an adventurous and accepting nature, they were perhaps the very best that fate could have sent the quarrelsome hunters. It was the literal or metaphorical sons or grandsons of these hunters who began to develop a bona fide profession as guide.

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On paper there was not much to it. A stream of hikers, would be developers, writers, artists, scientists, theologians, poets and others came to the Adirondacks beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century. Lacking decent maps, guidebooks, woods skills and trails, they needed someone to show them the way. Most any native teenage boy in the Adirondacks was thought to have the requisite skills to lead tourists — he might have lacked the ability to keep up his end of a metaphysical conversation around the evening campfire, but at least he knew the way back. But the guides received the brunt of the results caused by more and more people putting greater pressure on less and less fish and game. Their livelihood was snatched away from them, and they formed a private association in the 1890's to deal with the problems. In addition to the diminishing of the fish and game, the whole nature of recreation in the Adirondacks changed a hundred years ago. Big hotels meant more people could come and not have to rough it outdoors with guides; Mom and the kids could come and enjoy croquet, leisurely hikes on better trails with better maps, golf, speed boats, and a host of other activities. By the turn of the century the guide and their beloved guideboats had lost their *raison d'être*.

The early associations in the 1890s, along with some early guide books, and the later state licensing of guides — voluntary in 1919, mandatory in 1924 — gave guides a first chance at actively marketing their services. Pamphlets, with lists

of guides, were prepared that could be sent to tourists. The guides didn't have to depend as much on word of mouth or the vagaries of being a low-on-the-totem-pole hotel guide. In the twentieth century a very few guides created a niche for themselves almost by default: Dan and Bill Frayne, for example, became fishing guides in Lake Placid for affluent tourists, many of whom stayed at the Lake Placid Club. They were on a retainer; that is, Tuesday's might be judge so-and-so's day. If he wanted to go fishing with Bill, Bill was on stand-by ready to go. If he didn't, Bill got paid anyway. Thus, the two brothers were paid for every day of the season. They had been discovered by word of mouth, aided by their father being a guide before them.

But such an arrangement was the exception, not the rule. Probably not until the 1970s and 80s did a shift occur in the general makeup of the guide population, from wood-wise local boys to transplanted college graduates. The transplants, even though they may have gone to college to study something such as wilderness recreation, still had plenty to learn when they got here — where to hunt and fish, the secret and best spots, the routes out and back, the fact that the locals didn't think much of them as interlopers.

But the newcomers also brought other interests and skills that the locals never thought of: specialties in skills such as photography, all-women consciousness-raising outings, corporate team-building trips, the adrenaline sports such

as rock and ice climbing, white-water rafting and canoeing, and others. Many skills that could be adapted to the outdoors were now marketed to mostly urban populations that at some level in their souls cried out for them. The new breed of guide could talk the talk as well as walk the walk; they were up on the news, they understood the pressures of urban living and could make allowances for them, they could serve as meaningful sounding boards for the clients for the myriad of problems they came to hear around the campfire.

They began to market these services to their perceived clientele. But it was and has been a tough sell, not so much because the services are no good, but because some of those audiences are hard to reach, or don't know exactly what they lack, or companies won't spend the money, or the same services can be provided in a warm hotel. Additionally, the total number of guides may be dropping as new guides discover they haven't even recouped their initial licensing fee, increased to more than a hundred dollars in the mid-eighties, or the enthusiasm of youth has given way to the reality of making a living. (The true full-time year-round Adirondack guides can probably be counted on one hand.) In 1998 the state listed approximately 1,840 guides statewide; a Great Lakes fishing guide based in, say, Pulaski, N.Y. would be included in this number.

Thus we see that the guides have become more formally educated and somewhat better and more diversified at marketing their services. But once again, as in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, we have to look at what the greater pressures from the outside world hold. On one hand the increasing aloofness of life from the land has created in many a fervid desire to experience the

land, and to test themselves in rigorous ways: triathlons, adventure courses, "extreme" sports of all kinds that push the limits of what has traditionally been thought of as sane. These people will need leaders, even if it is merely to shepherd them through their trials.

But this gap between what it means to live day in and day out with the outdoors, in at least a kind of push-pull harmony, and a life most of the year in a removed state from the outdoors grows. The gap throws an outdoor experience into the realm of adventure, almost fantasy, an experience foreign to what is for the

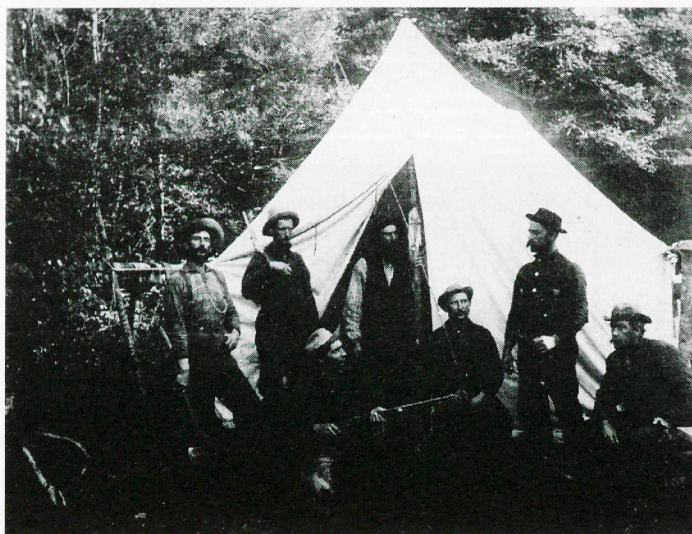
there is one thing we don't lack, it's water. But suppose the water here had to be piped away? Or, if discretionary money continues for recreational wants, what will follow in the figurative destructive wake of the jet-ski? Any of these could throw the guides for a tail spin.

I believe the gap between what most people do with most of their lives and their outdoor experiences will grow. The outdoors will attain a sense of precocity, the down-staters will continue to vote to protect the Park while the residents vote to sell it down the river in the interests of short-term economic gain. The guides

will need to couple New Age touchy-feely therapy with woods skills. Unisex thinking will negate the old notions of manliness, with a concomitant wish to preserve all wild animals. Hunters and trappers will be beleaguered as smokers are now. The outdoors will become a laboratory for metaphysics and poesy. Greater restrictions in the form of party size and camping rules will be put in place; the guides themselves may have to lobby to be given preference for hiking permits in restricted areas.

Running a guiding business will have all the growing attendant headaches of any small business, the "sign-your-life-away" forms will provide less and less protection, and many guides will say the heck with it.

The old days will grow increasingly older, and not just from the passage of time. The whole gestalt of life will drive guiding more than ever. The Adirondacks, now a mostly safe version of the end of the road for some, will lose that quality; the true misfits will still push on for a while to Montana and Alaska and then have nowhere to go. They will then be with us everywhere. I pray they will learn to give thanks for what we have left, and, as guides, see the wisdom of taking the clients' money, and preaching the poetry of the outdoors.



Adirondack guides circa 1886

denizen of the electronic world "real," because it takes up such a short period of time and is so different.

How will the guides cope with that? What will increasing population pressures on the outdoors mean? Project the scenario out a few hundred years and try to imagine a worst-case scenario. While I can all but guarantee it won't be the one I think of (I'll be gone, remember?), picture one where all at once the supply of fossil fuels runs out, solar and nuclear energy have fallen onto some sort of bad or ill-managed times, and a burgeoning population needs, for fuel . . . trees. How long do you think that Adirondack forests would last? Weeks? The "Forever Wild" amendment would be gone in an eye blink. What about water needs? If

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