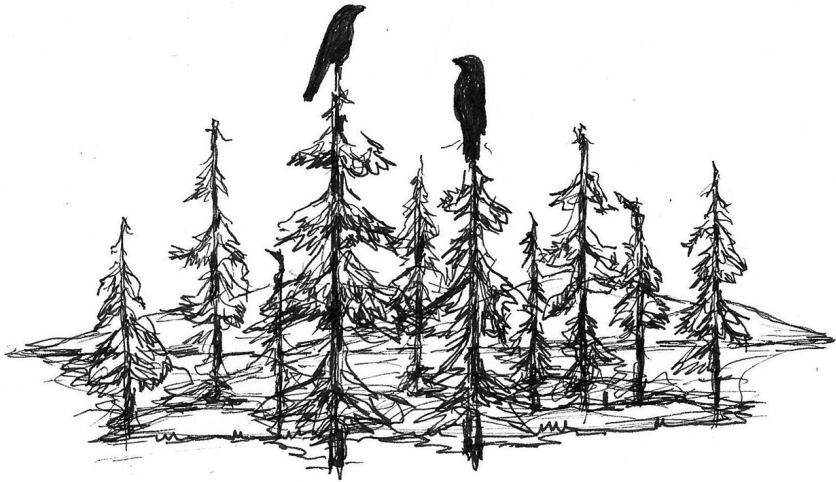


A Camp in the Wild, 1945–1952



What writer can resist exploring with words the places they feel deepest in their bones? It might take them back to their childhoods, as it did in my case; along the way I saw how those early summers formed a foundation, a cornerstone, for my whole life.

I published the original version of this chapter in Northern Woodlands, a magazine founded by Stephen Long and Virginia Barlow with the mission of drawing together loggers, foresters, and woodlot land owners who shared common ground but could otherwise be at cross purposes. My essay appeared in the Summer 2013 issue, in the back-of-the-book column called “A Place in Mind.” Writing this was a special pleasure since Northern Woodlands was published

in my small town, and Steve and Ginny are friends. I also acknowledge Elise Tillinghast, and this story is reprinted courtesy of Northern Woodlands magazine, northernwoodlands.org.

This camp, the camp of my childhood, was in the woods. It was surrounded by greenery and smelled of spruce, balsam fir, and loamy soil. It was every child's dream camp, though being a child myself during those years I did not discover this until I began to write about it.

Here was where I and my brother encountered Nature head-on. There was nothing to distract us like playmates or neighbors. No one stopping by.

Our mother helped us create a terrarium in a shallow pottery bowl. She guided our hands around the trowel as we selected mosses—low and soft under our searching fingers, or ones that branched like miniature Christmas trees. We proudly placed our offering in the center of the dining table made of oak. It was hard to keep our hands from exploring this wild world we'd just made.

My mother was the grandniece of Frederick Law Olmsted, among the first great visionary landscape architects. Through his genes, I like to think, she possessed a subliminal connection to nature that had us—her children—looking, and soon naming the plants when we took our evening walks through the woods or along the infrequently traveled dirt road.

“We shall not cease to explore,” T. S. Eliot, in “Little Gidding,” wrote, “and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

Loggers, foresters, and owners of woodlots were all children once, too. When each discovered the woods their world enlarged and became real. Real enough to sustain a life and a livelihood.



We arrived by train, an overnight trip, and were met at the Brattleboro station by a family friend, my father's colleague. They were working on a book together—the reason we had come to spend the summer in Vermont. We had no car. It was 1945, the last year of the war. I was five, my brother two.

“Smell the air!” my father exclaimed, as we wound up from the Connecticut River into the forests near Wilmington. We all breathed in air that was so cool and sweet. My father knew Vermont air. He was born in Vermont. That was the other reason we were here. My father wanted his children to know Vermont, too.

The camp was on a lake. There was no telephone. “Your ice will be brought weekly,” Mr. Barber, the real estate man who opened the camp said

to my mother. “There’s your icebox.” We saw a shed through the window. A woodstove took up half the kitchen floor. “Could roast a moose,” Mr. Barber said, patting the stove’s cast iron flank. My mother blanched. “But you’ll cook on this.” He gestured to a two-burner oil stove sitting on spidery legs. “Here’s your oven.”

He picked up what looked like a bread box. “You set it on top.” He demonstrated, to show my mother how easy it would be to prepare meals for her family of four. He turned a knob at the sink. Water gushed out in a silvery stream. “It comes from the lake. You’ll heat your hot water on the stove. Don’t drink it,” he said, turning the water off. “The well’s out back. Send the kids for the drinking water.” He grinned at us. “Make sure you prime the pump, otherwise you’ll wreck it.”

My mother walked into the living area and sat on the couch in front of the fieldstone fireplace. The couch swung back and forth, and squeaked. It was a swinging couch on springs. My mother burst into tears. Our father saw Mr. Barber out.

We spent the next eight summers there.

The camp was in the woods. The air around us smelled of balsam, fresh and tangy. There were other camps on the road, but we couldn’t see them. Across the lake the woods were undisturbed by people. Our camp had a porch across the front from which we could look deep into the surrounding woods—thick, dark, and green. My brother and I scanned for movement there.

We became fascinated by chipmunks. When our parents had drinks on the porch with guests, who came because of my father’s work, my brother and I would strew cocktail peanuts up the porch steps to entice chipmunks. Chipmunks, shy of adult talk, remained aloof. But when we came out after dinner to inspect the steps, the peanuts were all gone.

When it was just us kids, a chipmunk might hop up the first step, grab a nut, and retreat to a nearby rock. We’d be extra still. The chipmunk would come back, hop up two steps, scarf a peanut, scamper to the same rock, and nibble rapidly, working the nut between his paws. Our goal was to entice a chipmunk up the six steps to the porch itself. One day this happened: the chipmunk took the nut from the porch floor, only a few feet away from where we crouched, motionless as any woodland creature who doesn’t want to be seen.

One became our friend. Well, not a friend exactly, but he became identifiable because he lost his tail. In a battle with another chipmunk? For several weeks it dragged behind him until it fell off. Then he became

Chippy. We were relieved to see Chippy could climb, scamper, and scurry as well as if he still had his tail. Each summer, as we drove up from New Jersey, our whole family asked, would Chippy be there? Chippy always was, until suddenly he wasn't. My brother and I roamed those woods hoping to encounter him. We never did.

In the evenings we walked along the road with our mother. "That's Indian paintbrush," she said, pointing out the orange tuft on an upright stalk. "And that's black-eyed Susan. See the dark disk of her eye?"

My father found picnic spots for us: a field of ferns and steeplebush, an old woods road leading to a rushing stream. We'd bring our bathing suits.

Our parents transplanted by the porch a jack-in-the-pulpit and a pink lady's slipper from the loamy woods. "Be careful around them, children," they said. We were, because they were so undefended and beautiful. Would they be blooming when we arrived the next June? They always were.

We made balsam pillows under our mother's direction, clipping boughs, stripping the needles, and sewing little sacks to be filled. We took them back to our winter home and tucked them in our dresser drawers. On days when school bore down, and summer seemed far away, I would open up a drawer and release that tangy balsam smell. Vermont's summer would come again—the woods, the chipmunks, the lake where we learned to swim. It was sleeping for the time being. And waiting.