

The Portland Press Herald

It's Worth the Trip: Decades Later, Rediscovering Deboullie

By JOHN CHRISTIE

July 24, 2011

I feel especially blessed that as a youngster growing up in Maine I was exposed to, and able to experience, the best of both worlds: living and going to school on the coast in Camden in the winter and cutting my skiing teeth at the Camden Snow Bowl, and spending the first 13 summers of my life in the North Maine Woods at a set of camps my grandfather, Dr. Arthur Christie, had built on the west shore of Portage Lake, and another compound on idyllic Island Pond in what is now the nearly 22,000 acres comprising the Deboullie Preserve in the state's Public Reserve Lands system.

In fact, it's because of my grandfather's great love of the outdoors that our family even ended up in Maine. He was a radiologist in Washington, D.C., and an avid sportsman. In the late 1920s, his fly fishing fetish led him to Aroostook County and, as a result, he built a set of log camps on the then-inaccessible west shore of Portage, north of Ashland.

Barging materials across the lake from Perley Daggett's camps on Route 11 between Portage and Fort Kent, he built a couple of large buildings with kitchens in which his and his brother's families dined and gathered for evenings together in the light of kerosene lamps, and several smaller log cabins to house my part of the family, other relatives and guides. Add to that an ice house to store ice for the summer, a pump house, a woodshed and a few other assorted outbuildings, and it was quite a little village stuck up there in the woods.

As soon as school ended in June, my mother would pack my older brother and me on the train with her headed north from Bangor (with a change in Oakfield Junction), and we were off to the woods, joking that we were the only family that left Camden in the summer!

But my grandfather, dedicated sportsman that he was, wanted to have a place to fish even deeper in the woods, so he and Will McNally, who owned a set of commercial sporting camps on Big Fish Lake, bought a set of camps that had been built by a Massachusetts industrialist named Chapman in 1887. It included a main lodge, several shorefront cabins, a separate cabin on a tiny island and a remote camp several miles to the south at Fish River Falls, where Round Pond emptied into the river's headwaters.

As Alice Arlen tells us in her wonderful book, "In the Maine Woods: An Insiders' Guide to Traditional Maine Sporting Camps," "after Chapman built it ... his wife got tired of him spending her money and the place got sold to the Whitman family who owned several textile mills in Massachusetts. They bought it as a family compound."

My first trip to Red River (T15R9 in the DeLorme atlas) and the Deboullie country was with Herschel Currie, grandfather's guide and caretaker, poling up through the rapids of Fish River for over 10 miles from Portage Lake, then on horse and buckboard for another 10 miles or more to the camps. It was an experience that has lived with me for nearly 70 years.

In the late 1940s, grandfather sold the camps, not including the camp at the falls, to Herschel, who with his wife, Ida, and their daughters, operated the camps as a commercial operation, which it has continued to be under subsequent owners. My brother, Mick, spent his college summers guiding for Herschel, becoming a master fly fisherman himself and my mentor. My last visit to Red River, prior to a couple summers ago, was in 1954 when we flew in with Thannie Coffin in his Super Cub from Portage. By then, one could drive on a Great Northern Paper Company road from Eagle Lake, and the last few miles sports were dragged on a makeshift arrangement with a Cletrac caterpillar tractor through several mud holes.

Today, you can access the area via a well-graded 20-mile gravel road south from St. Francis, designed by the Bureau of Parks and Lands, passing through (and paying a modest fee at) a North Maine Woods checkpoint. Or alternatively, you can head north out of Portage on a similar 30-mile road. So it was with great excitement, more than 50 years since I had last been there, that my wife, Marty, and I packed up our camping gear and headed north for a trip down memory lane for me, and her first look at a very important place in my life.

The good news: Little has changed. Although the main lodge burned down just a few years ago, the current owners and operators have rebuilt it with a perfect log replica. Rather than stay at the camps, Marty and I chose to camp on the shore of Pushineer Pond, one of 25 lakes and ponds that are all, unbelievably, within a five-mile radius of the camps. Most of the ponds are fly fishing only, and four of them support a population of arctic char (black-backed trout) that came down in the Ice Age. Only 10 bodies of water in the entire state are habitat to such a fish. A favorite pond of mine, Galilee, is not only great fishing, but sheer cliffs on one side provide a unique spectacle from the campsite.

I still remember a day in mid-July when I was very young and we were caught in a hail storm there, and Herschel leaned the aluminum canoe against a tree and we hunkered under it. What a sound!

Not to be missed on your visit to the preserve is a climb up Deboullie Mountain, a 2,000-footer that, from the still-standing fire tower on the summit, provides a breathtaking view of the wild surroundings.

From the end of Pushineer Pond, where the road ends, it's about a five-mile round trip hike, but it can be shortened substantially by paddling to a campsite on the shore of Deboullie Lake. Tom Hanrahan, in his highly readable book, "Your Maine Lands: Reflections of a Maine Guide," describes his climb this way: "I begin my ascent with some trepidation. The climb is, in places, just short of technical climbing. In other words, a rope and some carabiners would probably come in handy. But I stumble into a cluster of purple trillium, and I marvel at the wildflowers. ... I find some old telephone wire leading up to the fire tower and the old ranger's cabin. I keep climbing. I have more than 1,800 feet to go, most of it straight uphill. I pause often. But finally the summit is in sight, and when I crest the mountain I am rewarded with a vista that is a perfect summation of the Maine forest. Water is all around me."

Couldn't have said it better myself, Tom, old friend.

John Christie is an author and a year-round explorer of the Maine outdoors. He and his son, Josh, will share this space this summer to highlight places to enjoy the beauty only Maine has to offer.