
Acanthus Press specializes in fine publishing and focuses on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century houses for the wealthy. Volumes are usually illustrated solely by contemporary black and white images drawn from archival sources and accompanied by text describing both the design and the occupants. An Elegant Wilderness, the latest in the press’s Architecture of Leisure series, subscribes to this formula, although the subject matter sets it slightly apart in that the Adirondack “camps” are unusual for their relatively informality as compared to the permanent homes of the moneyed class in New York. Furthermore, the Adirondack camps were characterized by rustic architecture and a use of natural materials not to be found in the vacation homes of Newport or similar.

However, it should not be implied that the camps weren’t just as grand as their owners’ other residences. These sprawling collections of buildings featured individual structures for specialized functions—dining halls, boathouses, guest cottages, ice houses, farms, and service buildings—and sported whole log construction, all set within estates that could encompass tens of thousands of acres. Some began as tent compounds modeled on Civil War or religious revival complexes and all owed something of their site planning to these influences. The interior decoration was a mix of rustic natural materials including bark and taxidermy and souvenirs from foreign trips, Arts and Crafts objects, Japanese fans and parasols, and Mission Style furniture.

A lengthy introduction outlines the major factors in the history of the camps, namely the rising interest in natural areas such as the Adirondacks during the Industrial Age, the influence of European hunting estates and architectural styles, and the social life of the summer residents. Author Gladys Montgomery devotes the rest of the book to profiles of twenty-five camps in individual chapters averaging six to twelve pages in length. Period photographs detail both the exteriors and the interiors of camp buildings as well as their surroundings and are accompanied by informative captions. The text sketches the history of the camp, including its present day fate, the story of the owner(s), and the distinguishing aesthetic or historic features. An extensive bibliography and an index are included.

The Acanthus Press formula of lovingly reproduced black and white archival photographs sets this book apart from others on the subject. For a recent, color exploration see Adirondack Style: Great Camps and Rustic Lodges (Universe, 2011); for a more detailed history of the topic see Great Camps of the Adirondacks by Harvey H. Kaiser (David R. Godine, 1982).

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