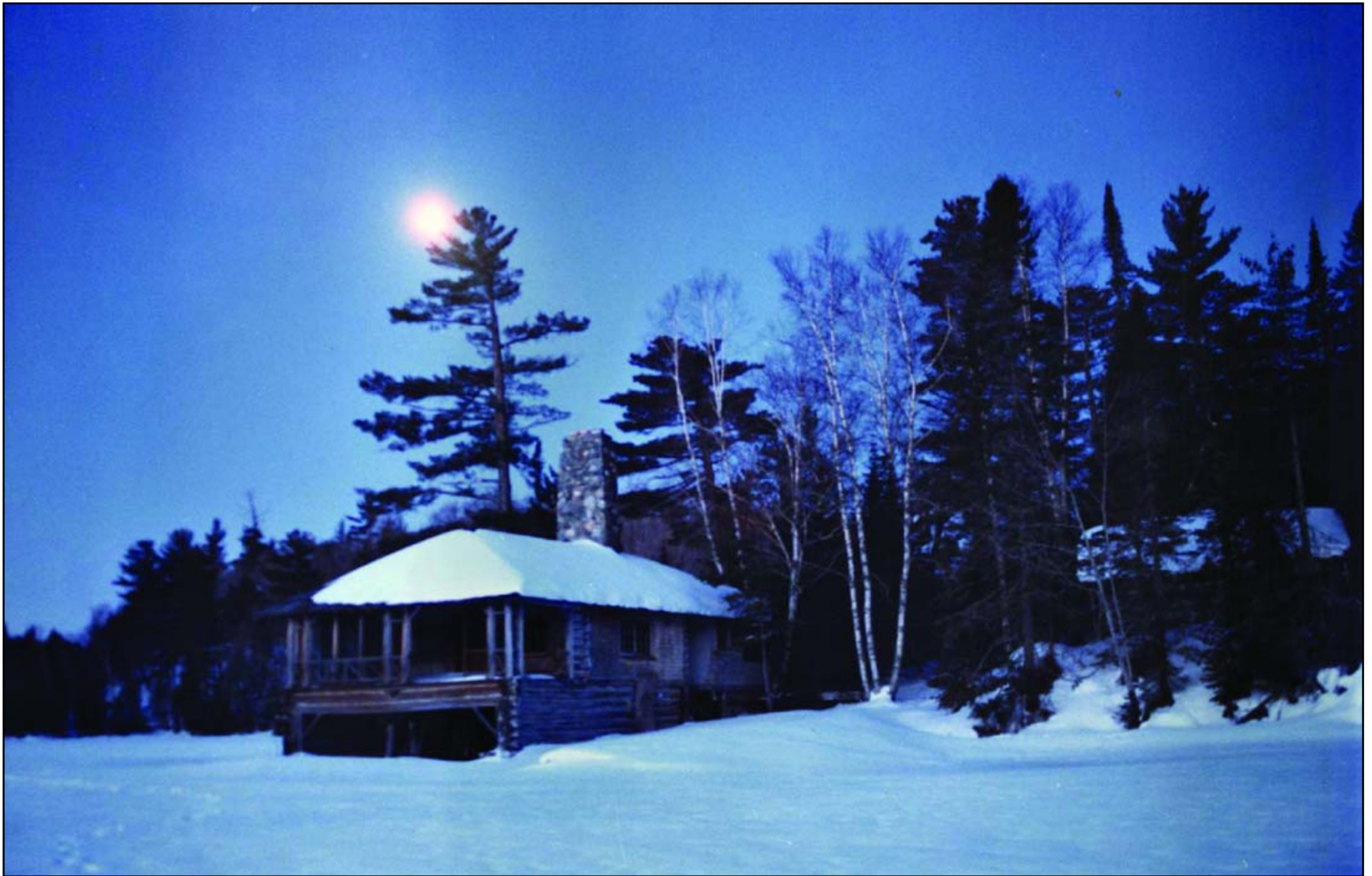


# ROUGH CAMP

## *The Rise and Fall of a "Great Camp" in Michigan's North Woods*

by Dick Bentley, with Fred Rydholm

One spring morning in 1902, a party of five men set out from Michigamme to travel by compass to the interior wilderness of Michigan's Peshekee River Valley and on to Lake Superior. Arrayed along the trail, in careful acknowledgment of rank and status, were a guide, a cook, a "land-looker," and two gentlemen from Chicago. The country through which they traveled was, in places, virgin forest. In other parts the terrain was muddy, burned over, and rutted from recent logging. The men followed primitive trails and an abandoned railroad grade on their explorations. They spent the nights in lumber camps or pitched their tents on the high ground between creeks and marshes, sleeping on balsam branches. One of the men, a Chicago lawyer named Cyrus Bentley, kept a diary of the trip:

*10 May 1902—Last night was not so cold as the night before at 30 degrees. We were up at 4:30 and after drinking a cup of coffee with a cracker, we started to get through a bad place in the road covered with water, which might become impossible to cross, if the flood from the upper river arrived before we got past. (The dams were to be opened early this morning.) We got through all right on a raft, but the wagon box floated off at the high water point, carrying all our food supplies and much of our baggage which finally were submerged.*

*11 May—The sun has been warm and the air cool—a delicious morning for a walk. We first waded through a cedar swamp, then walked over ridges of hardwood which must be beautiful in leaf. We came upon a pretty lake in Section 31 and crossed an awkward dam at the foot of the lake. Such beauty! But McCormick seems intent on challenging the forest, conquering it. So we kept moving.*

*12 May—Cloudy day with mist and rain—We camped for the night near a deserted cabin in a swamp in section I-50-30—We have no bread since day before yesterday and are out of jam, condensed milk, and coffee….*

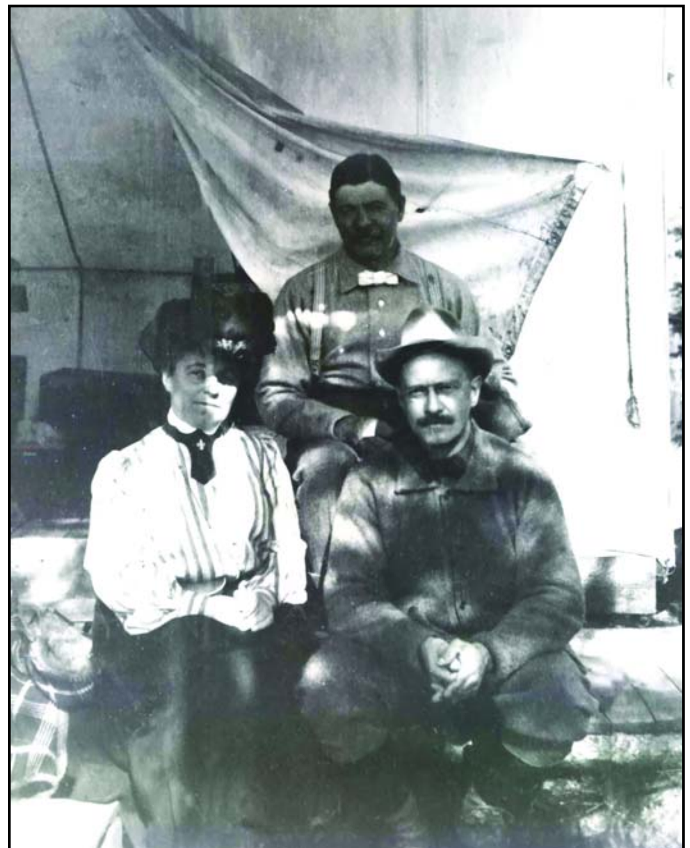
Despite the hardships, perhaps even because of them, two members of the party—the Chicagoans—were enjoying themselves. Bentley, the diarist, was an attorney for the expedition's nominal leader, Cyrus McCormick Jr. The weeklong trip had a purpose: the establishment of a site for a permanent camp in the area.

Cyrus McCormick Jr. was the son of the man who had invented the reaper, a machine which had dramatically altered farm production methods and America's place in both world trade and world history. The younger McCormick was a serious, reserved man who, at 26, on his father's death, became president of the McCormick Harvesting Machine Co., the largest manufacturing concern of its kind in the world. In 1902, with William Deering and other leaders in the industry, he was successful in engaging John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan to underwrite the International Harvester Company. The merger of the various farm equipment manufacturers brought industrial peace to a branch of commerce where intense competition, lawsuits, countersuits, and claims of patent infringement had been raging for decades.

Cyrus Bentley had been McCormick's attorney in the tough and protracted negotiations toward the merger. After the formation of the Harvester Company, McCormick became its president and Bentley its general counsel. The two men were longtime friends as well. Now McCormick was showing the lawyer his version of the North Woods. McCormick had established a summer tent camp on an island in one of the backwoods lakes, hiring local guides and woodsmen to act as caretakers.

The two men would return to the island many times over the next quarter century, as the tent camp grew to a wilderness retreat and secluded private estate of close to twenty thousand acres. Even with its seventeen massive log lodges, boathouses and outbuildings scattered across the island and throughout the surrounding woods, the men would always refer to the place as the "Rough Camp."

In 1903, a men's cabin and a ladies' cabin were the first buildings to be constructed. Then in 1905, Bentley and McCormick built an immense lodge to house their families. The foundation and chimney were made of native stone. For the next few years, the rough camp grew, log by log, stone by stone, building by building. The two men continued to buy land from the lumber companies once logging operations were completed, paying $10 to $15 an acre. Other parcels, virgin forest, were assembled from whatever source was available, using local land dealers as front men. Both were vigorous hikers, hacking out miles of trails along streams, across swamps, and to various lakes and lookout points.



**Opposite page**: Living Room Cabin by Moonlight

**Above**: Cyrus McCormick and Elizabeth and Cyrus Bentley

Camp entertainments were simple, from stalking an albino deer to long hikes through the countryside. (They named their paradise White Deer Lake, and the uncharted lakes after friends, relatives or natural features that struck their fancy.) In the mornings, an icy dip in the lake; in the evenings they would read aloud by kerosene lantern or listen to grand opera from a hand-cranked gramophone with a horn shaped like a huge morning glory.

The wilderness they had claimed was both rustic and romantic. Theodore Roosevelt, that advocate of "the strenuous life," was in the White House. Roosevelt personified an American tradition that reached back to the Puritans who found "sermons in brooks, morals in stones," with the wilderness as a metaphor for our uncorrupted, vigorous young nation. This muscular outdoorsmanship merged with an earlier, more sentimental tradition. Rustic furniture and summerhouse architecture were part of the fanciful scenery of the eighteenth-century English landscape garden. By the 1840s, rustic summerhouses, gardens and grand hotels could be found along the East Coast. Cyrus Bentley's grandfather owned and operated one such establishment,

**1**: Cable-operated raft connecting the island to the mainland.

**2**: A View of the Island

**3**: Living Room Cabin

Columbia Hall, a spa in Lebanon Springs, New York, which Lafayette visited during his American tour in 1824-25.

Many families attempted to escape the formality and rigid social structure of these resorts by opting for more remote places. Beginning in the 1880s, a rebellion against the constraints of the "society resorts" led people to such places as the Thousand Islands in the St. Lawrence River, the narrows around Desbarats, Ontario, and the Adirondack Mountains, as well as parts of Michigan and Wisconsin. Camp craft, Indian Lore, hunting and fishing, survival in the wilderness were the emblems of the revolt. The camps that were established in truer wilderness were also, the captains of industry noted, physically removed from reporters, social climbers, salesmen, extortionists, and the social hierarchies created by women.

The beauty of these wilderness areas, their healthy atmosphere, and their dependable hunting and fishing, inspired the industrialists to hire local craftsmen to build lodges of native materials on a scale matching the "cottages" of Newport and the spas of Saratoga. As ownership of wilderness lodges became fashionable, the magnates built camps in isolated areas surrounded by hundreds, sometimes thousand of acres. Owners would visit for a few months, weeks, or sometimes only a few days. For the rest of the year the camps—in some cases virtually small villages—were residences for the caretaker staff. At the same time, clubs were formed to buy up large tracts of land and create private preserves. These clubs typically might have had a central lodge and private cabins, each member sharing in equal privileges. Collectively called "the Great Camps," they reflected rustic designs compatible with their wilderness environment. Local craftsmen and jacks-of-all-trades developed a vernacular architecture that evolved from available lumber and stone put together with basic tools. Giant logs for structure and design, massive pieces of stone accented with filigrees of twigs and roots. Interior decoration might include light fixtures made of deer antlers, primitive artifacts, Indian baskets, handwoven rugs and blankets, animal pelts as wall hangings, crossed skis and snowshoes. The camps expressed a complex blend of assertiveness over the natural environment and submission to it, reflecting contradictory attitudes of the nation itself as the wilderness was opened and tamed. Generally, a "great camp" was a collection of rustic buildings conveying the character of the forest in their log construction, even if guests dressed formally for dinner and were served with silver and crystal.

These islands of wilderness inspired an extraordinary body of writing and art. Despite the reality of the industrial Revolution, the dominant flavor of the age remained rural and romantic. The "picturesque" was a major conceit of the nineteenth-century sensibility, attracting the curious with rifles, fishing gear, and notebooks and sketchpads in hand. *Wild Scenes in the Forest and Prairie*; *The Adirondack, or, Life in the Woods*; *Wild Northern Scenes: or, Sporting Adventures with the Rifle and the Rod* were best-sellers. Arthur Fitzwilliam Tate celebrated the call of the hunt in northern settings, and his scenes of masculine adventure in the woods were frequently lithographed for popular Currier and Ives prints. The encampment known as the Philosophers' Club, inspired by the back-to-nature works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell, became legendary and gave an aura of romance to camping in the woods.

But there was a less romantic strain in the thinking of McCormick and Bentley. Bentley's diaries chronicle thirty years of the life of the camp, from its founding in 1902 until the Great Depression. The diary is a practical catalogue of temperature readings, barometric pressures, lists of supplies, construction technologies, guest lists, and time elapsed to row lakes or walk sections of trail. Despite the calculated appearance of the simple life, the camp seems to have been built to prove that it could be done. Difficult of access, difficult to provision, staff and maintain, it may have been those very difficulties which motivated the builders: Perhaps they took personal satisfaction in taming an unpromising environment and creating a civilized mode of living exclusively by their own means.

By the 1920s the "Rough Camp" had begun to assume a distinctly epicurean flavor, its roughness abraded by the refinements of entertaining. When Henry Ford or Harvey Firestone came for a visit, a solicitous host could not simply hand him an axe and send him out into the woods. Electricity and plumbing were introduced, and a French chef joined the crew of woodsmen and guides, followed by an English butler. Next came a sous-chef, followed by a valet named Charles Donald Benjamin Hakin Edward Stevens. Motorcars were acquired, and the camp harbored a fleet of them, including a Model T coupe and a Dodge touring car. Arriving guests were furnished with a trail map in a folded leather case, each guest's initials embossed in gold on the cover. An initialed, gold-lined, collapsible drinking cup served as a similar souvenir. A supply of gear, clothing, and fishing equipment kept on hand for often unprepared guests, included hobnailed boots of all sizes manufactured in England. No longer did McCormick and Bentley work side by side with the men. Instead, they received regular reports of the crew's hourly activities, delivered to their offices in Chicago.

One hiker from the Huron Mountain Club, a family retreat on the shores of Lake Superior, thirty-five miles away, was greeted on arrival by a valet who offered to press his dinner jacket before the evening meal. Since the visitor was traveling light that day, equipped only with a trout rod, a toothbrush, and a copy of *The Compleat Angler* in his tackle bag, he waved the valet aside with a reverse air of *lese majesté*, indicating his democratic preference to dine with the men in the bunkhouse.

Margaret Bush Clement, President Bush's aunt, visited the camp in the early 1920s. She recalls: "It was fabulous. There was an immense dinner table with a lazy Susan in the middle for condiments. During dinner, you would order your picnic lunch for the next day. If something you wanted wasn't on the menu, you were told not to worry, they could provide it. They prided themselves on being able to get you anything you wanted. Just to be funny, just to test them, I ordered a caviar sandwich. Sure enough, the next day when I opened my picnic basket, that's what I got."

The lavishness was tempting, and not just to *invited* guests. A 1927 heist, in the middle of the Prohibition era, netted seventy-two bottles of imported whiskey and fine French wines from a cabinet next to the billiard room, all that five men could carry off on foot through miles of woods. "We had to leave a lot of it behind," one of the thieves remarked ruefully, many years later.

**4**: Interior of Living Room Cabin

**5**: Library Cabin

Emily Post's 1928 book of etiquette devoted an entire chapter to proper behavior at a woodlands camp, while unconsciously revealing the kind of feminine social tyranny from which the men were trying to escape. The camp, in Mrs. Post's imagined account, resembles a collection of wooden packing crates dumped in a clearing. Guests are implored not to bring personal servants: "This isn't Newport, you know." In the dining camp, each participant is provided with a birch-bark napkin ring, which one of the diners regards "as though it were an insect." (In a previous chapter, Mrs. Post had vigorously condemned the use of napkin rings of any description.)

"Let no one think, however, that this is a simple form of entertainment," Mrs. Post exclaims. "Imagine the budget! A dozen guides, teams, and drivers. Natives to wash and clean. Food for two or three dozen people sent hundreds of miles by express."

Mrs. Post admonishes: "Well-bred people never deteriorate in manner….With the very best dissimulation at your command, you must appear to find the food delicious. You must disguise your hatred of red ants….Though you feel starved, exhausted, mosquito-bitten until you resemble a well-developed case of

chicken pox or measles, by not so much as a facial muscle must you let the family know that your comfort lacked anything that your happiest imagination could picture—nor must you confide in anyone afterwards how desperately wretched you were."

The fact that hired help and guests lived in close proximity could sometimes cause inadvertent breaches of etiquette. George Baker, the "island boy" in the summer, would arise every morning at five o'clock, go down to the cable-operated raft which connected the mainland to the island, and pull his way over to the island, hand over hand, the quarter-mile distance. There, working very quietly so as not to disturb the sleeping guests, he went about his chores in the various cabins—picking up glasses, coffee cups and ashtrays, cleaning out the outhouses, setting the fireplaces, filling the woodboxes, sweeping the porches.

One morning, George suddenly felt the need to relieve himself. George was forbidden to use the toilets on the island; he was a working man, and they were for the guests. In his rush to meet an emergency, he grabbed a newspaper he was about to use for starting a fire. Spreading it out on the ground beneath the front porch, he accomplished his task there. Without much forethought, George wadded up the paper and threw it out into the lake, expecting it to sink. The matter taken care of, George went about his chores.

Later in the morning, he was splitting some wood by the boathouse. He could hear McCormick, Bentley, and a visiting Illinois senator, doing exercises on the porch. Looking up, he saw they were still in their pajamas. Something white out on the lake seemed to have caught their attention.

"What's that out there, McCormick? A piece of birch bark?" asked the guest.

"No, it's probably a seagull. He's always sitting out there in the morning," came a voice.

"It looks to me like a blob of white foam formed by the waves during the night; the morning's change of winds often takes them out," commented a third.

"Nonsense, Bentley, it's a seagull."

"Well, my eyes are rather keen when it comes to distance, and it certainly looks like a piece of birch bark to me," said the first.

"We should make a wager. Here's fifty says it's a seagull."

"I'll raise you fifty, Cyrus. It's birch bark."

"Foam."

"Let's get in the boat, then, and take a look at it before breakfast." George Baker froze. As soon as they went outside, however, George hopped into a boat and rowed out to the drifting paper with its ominous cargo. He whacked at it with an oar until it began to disintegrate. Years later he could still exclaim, with a frightened but relieved look, "I sunk the goldarned thing. They never found out. They never found out."

As the years wore on, with Bentley and McCormick approaching their late sixties, their temperaments hardened and their rustic Camelot began to come apart. Bentley's eccentric perfectionism demanded that his one hundred miles of trail be forever widened and smoothed—he wanted the trails wide enough so couples could walk through the wilderness two abreast, with the brush cut back far enough to accommodate a lady's parasol or a man's umbrella in the rain. The trails had to be smooth enough for a bicycle, too. Every small jagged rock or inconvenient tree root had to be cleared or flattened, and the smoothly hewn log walks across wetlands constantly upgraded. But Bentley's miles of wilderness trail, upon which every detail demanded improvement, could somehow never make his world—even this somewhat unreal and forgiving version of the world—a masterpiece of his unrelenting vision of nature crafted and contained.

McCormick, on the other hand, became more withdrawn and contemplative. His wife died and he married his secretary, to the consternation of the international social circles in which he traveled. Then came a series of family embarrassments culminating in his brother's well-publicized and medically avant-garde experiment with a gland transplant operation. The procedure was intended to improve the brother's sexual prowess while he pursued a Polish opera singer. The donor was a monkey from Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo.

The wistful McCormick, contemplating human sadness and fatuity, liked to stroll short distances to favorite spots on the property and sit for hours as an observer. One day, his eyes were captured by a glacial boulder, covered with moss and sprouting oak ferns and wildflowers in its crevices. He remembered how his first wife, Harriet, liked to sit by this boulder, looking out across the lake, in the early days of the camp. It had been one of her favorite places. He decided to have the boulder moved to the family cemetery plot in Chicago as a memorial to her.

The rock weighed 24 tons. Nine bridges had to be shored up with temporary pilings as the boulder was dragged by a fleet of International Harvester supertractors down the Peshekee River grade to the town of Champion. From there, a special train hauled the boulder, now wrapped in wet burlap to preserve its delicate flora, to Chicago. The monument now rests in Graceland Cemetery, mossless, fernless, flowerless—mostly buried—and barely noticeable beneath a thicket of yews. A few hundred feet away, on an island in the middle of an artificial pond, surrounded by willows, stands a Grecian temple with the name "McCormick" inscribed on its entablature.

Bentley, having served for a quarter century as McCormick's legal adviser at work and his chief executive officer at play, used a characteristic hiking metaphor as he observed sourly, "[McCormick] is wont to follow the direction and devious path of least resistance, which may take him one direction today and the opposite direction tomorrow."

One day, in October 1926, the "adventure" became real. Bentley and his wife set out on the familiar trail to the Huron Mountains. A guide from the Huron Mountain Club would meet them toward evening at the end of the trail, then row them down Mountain Lake and accompany them for the last seven miles to the club's cabins on the Lake Superior shore. The day began crisp and sunny—a delicious autumn morning for a walk—but by

mid-afternoon a cold and driving sleet storm took them by surprise. Because of the weather, the guide, assuming the trip had been canceled, neglected to meet them at Mountain Lake. The sixty-six-year-old Bentley, having already walked twenty-eight miles, had to clamber slowly across exposed and slippery rocks around the edge of the lake, working his way the three miles to the opposite end. There he found a rowboat, and rowed back the length of the lake to pick up his drenched and exhausted wife. He then set out again, in choppy waters and against the wind toward his destination. The October storm lashed cold spray across the bow, blowing them back toward the tossing woods. His hands were blistered, his back burned, and his body ached.

They arrived the next day around noon, in falling snow. Both took to their beds, Bentley for several weeks. The following spring, he sold his share of the partnership to McCormick, and never returned to White Deer Lake. He died in 1930, but his wife survived him by two decades, returning summer after summer to the Huron Mountain Club with her children and grandchildren.

As the 1930s advanced, Cyrus McCormick's son Gordon, a Beaux Arts-trained architect, became the centrifugal force at the Rough Camp. Prohibition ended, and Gordon greeted Repeal with a whoop worthy of his Princeton classmate, F. Scott Fitzgerald. "It might be well for the Camp account to include enough stimulant for emergencies—these emergencies coming

**Above**: Chimney Cabin in Winter

no oftener than cocktail hour every afternoon. For we must remember that it's fun to be young and hilarious and do foolish things."

Gordon hired Nestor Kallionen, a skilled craftsman who had built other log structures in the Upper Peninsula, including the graceful Granot Loma Lodge on the Lake Superior shore. Together they went to work building, from Gordon's designs, an $80,000 boathouse and another lavish structure whose sole purpose was the storage of firewood. Central heating was installed, along with insulation and vapor barriers. Roof beams were raised, chimneys torn out and rebuilt, stories added, plumbing modernized, interiors repanelled, roofs and porches extended, and balconies moved from here and there and back again. Fanciful bridges and rustic gazebos crowned stream crossings and scenic spots with names like "The Acropolis" and "The Crow's Nest." Curiosities included gnarled furniture, a floating tennis court, and a driving range where guests whacked golfballs out into the floodlit lake.

The "Rough Camp" now encompassed 17,125 acres that included sixteen inland lakes, many waterfalls, and miles of trout stream. A special dam constructed at one end of the lake raised and lowered its level to protect the lodges from winter ice damage.

Ice was made in the winter at a spring deep in the woods, then hauled to a special place of honor in the icehouse for guests' cocktails. To assure the preservation of large trees, lightning rods were attached to the tops, while wire skirts around the base of others protected them from beaver damage (trapping and hunting were forbidden). Trails led to lakes and waterway, where boathouses sheltered light, swift Rushton rowboats that awaited the guests' pleasure. Some of the pathways around the main lake became boulevards three feet wide and level, with hewn log walks at the water's edge equipped with pole railings. The farther-flung trails, however, began to deteriorate from disuse.

As Gordon McCormick grew older, health problems diminished his enjoyment of the property, but he continued to keep the camp fully staffed. For the last twenty years of his life, he would plan visits, and word would come to the camp of his impending arrival. Supplies would be ordered, and everything made ready. Then, invariably he would fail to appear. For the most part, the camp stood from the 1940s until the late 1960s as a sort of museum, its forests untouched, its lakes and wild rivers home to the moose and the wolf, the fisher and the marten, the lynx and the cougar long after these species had disappeared from the rest of the Upper Peninsula. When Gordon died in 1967, the U.S. Forest Service assumed control as specified in his will.

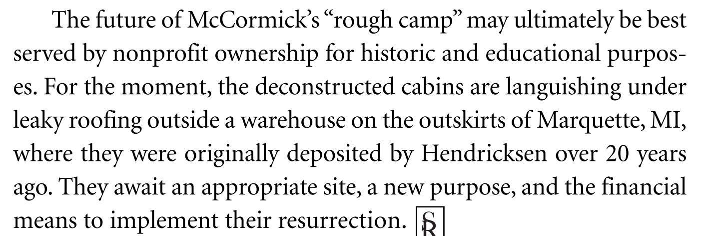
## Epilogue

In 1984, about 80 years after Cyrus Bentley and Cyrus McCormick first set eyes on the site of what was to become Rough Camp, a young man from Manistee in Lower Michigan named Richard Hendricksen, a self-styled "failed real estate developer," paid his first visit to the now abandoned and decaying retreat they had built. He was entranced by it. Discovering that the buildings were scheduled to be burned to the ground by the U.S. Forest Service in a few months—there had been no interest in them when they were being auctioned off and the bidding deadline had passed—Hendricksen submitted a late bid and, for $50.00 and a promise to remove them from the island within a year, became the owner of all the cabins that remained. With severely limited resources and no construction experience, but undeterred by the impossible magnitude of the task he had assigned himself, he set up housekeeping in one of the cabins and began to form a strategy for their disassembly. If the Forest Service demanded the structures' removal, he was betting his life that the whole camp could be reassembled on another site as a historical curiosity.

In a heroic effort, for the most part working alone with makeshift tools and teaching himself the necessary skills as he tackled the job, Hendricksen met the challenge. By August 1986, he had removed the last of the disassembled cabins. A month later, the Forest Service burned the last remaining scraps of lumber, in accordance with its legislative mandate to keep its "forests forever wild." The fire spread, engulfing portions of the island woods and giant pines that Hendricksen and his predecessors had worked for years to protect.

The decision of the Forest Service to burn the camp, while deplorable, was not without precedent. The Catskill Mountain House in New York State, famed in the paintings of Thomas Cole, Asher Durand, and other Hudson River school artists, was acquired by New York in 1962 and burned the next year. A similar retreat, the Laurel House, featured a two-story Greek portico facing the Hudson River with architectural elaborations carried out in various styles through later periods. The Department of "Conservation" burned it in 1967. In the 1970s fires set by government agencies leveled such historic establishments as the Seward Webb estate in the Adirondacks and Foxlair, a wilderness retreat owned by Richard Hudnut. In recent years, historic preservationists have tried to save the great camps and grand hotels from excessively literal interpretations by authorities of "forever wild" provisions in wilderness legislation. Of those saved from destruction, some remain unused, some have been put to public use, while others have been maintained in private hands.

The future of McCormick's "rough camp" may ultimately be best served by nonprofit ownership for historic and educational purposes. For the moment, the deconstructed cabins are languishing under leaky roofing outside a warehouse on the outskirts of Marquette, MI, where they were originally deposited by Hendricksen over 20 years ago. They await an appropriate site, a new purpose, and the financial means to implement their resurrection. SR



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard N. "Dick" Bentley served as Chief Planner for the Mayor's Office of Housing in Boston, and now teaches at Western New England College and the University of Massachusetts. He attended Yale and the Vermont College MFA Program, and was a prize-winner in the Paris Review / Paris Writers Workshop International Fiction Awards for 1994. His grandfather Cyrus Bentley was a friend and business associate of Cyrus McCormick, Jr., and collaborated with him in creating the Rough Camp. This article is adapted from a much longer piece that originally appeared in *Michigan Out of Doors* and was reprinted in Post-Freudian Dreaming, by Dick Bentley, a collection of nonfiction, poetry and short stories published in 2002 by Amherst Writers & Artists Press.

Those interested in learning more about Richard Hendricksen's efforts to find a permanent home for the structures that he rescued are invited to visit his website: www.richardhendricksen.com.