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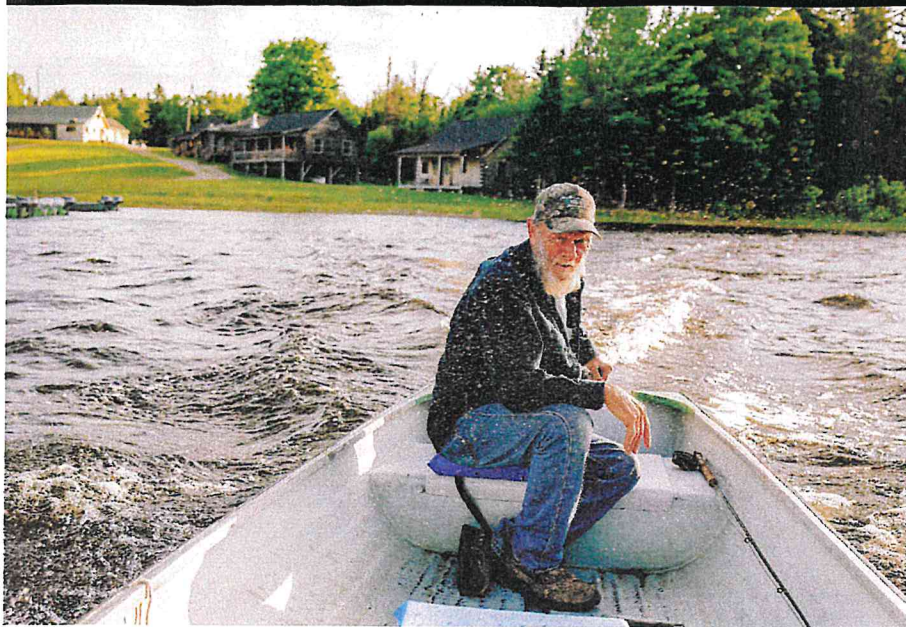
By Ethan Daly

Rustic sporting camps have drawn generation after generation to hunt and fish in the Maine woods, but their numbers have been dwindling for years. What does it take to keep these classic backcountry outposts going?

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MAT TROGNER







Left: Jody Hodgdon first came to Tim Pond as a kid. Now, he helps out with various projects around the camp and serves as harbor-master, keeping the boats running and helping guests in and out. Below: the camp is home to 11 cabins that range in capacity from two to eight guests.

BENEATH THE GLASSY EYES of white-tailed deer and caribou mounts, a woodstove crackled. Coyote furs, bear skins, and photos of brook trout also adorned the walls at Tim Pond Wilderness Camps, and through a spotting scope by the window, a young bull moose could be spied trotting along the water's edge. Between mouthfuls of bread rolls, broccoli-cheddar soup, scalloped potatoes, green beans, and slabs of ham, guests chatted excitedly about a chill in the air.

They wondered which flies were hatching and debated the merits of an evening sortie to fish for Tim Pond's native brook trout. Bill and Darcie Calden, the second generation of Caldens to operate the camp, took a break from the kitchen to make their rounds, greeting new and returning guests with handshakes, hugs, and stories from past seasons. After coconut-cream cake for dessert, a few people ambled down to the water.

Wilbur "Yank" Shugg is one of the Caldens' longtime customers. From Newtown, Connecticut, Shugg has been coming to Tim Pond to fly-fish for 39 years. Now, at age 80, he doesn't usually feel the urge to go out after dinner. That's for the younger crowd, he said. This particular spring evening, though, he was game to putter around in one of the camp's square-stern canoes, rolling a cast here and there, taking mental notes for the next morning. A passing rain cloud glided west toward the Kennebago mountains and in its wake left a double rainbow. "I can't believe the changing colors here. Every time I look, it's different," Shugg said. "The camp has changed since I've been coming, but it will always be my home away from home."

Sporting camps like the one on Tim Pond have been a part of the fabric of the Maine woods for, give or take, the past 150 years. The basic formula is much the same as ever: barebones cabins and homestyle meals in a remote setting, with the promise of good hunting or fishing or both. By the early 1900s, Maine was home to some 300 such camps, mostly scattered across western and northern parts of the state, welcoming eager "sports"—the era's jaunty shorthand for sportsmen. Today, fewer than 50 are still operating.





Tim Pond Camps is the oldest surviving sporting camp in Maine. A brochure bills it as “the place you’ve been looking for—but didn’t know how to find,” and it is indeed off the beaten tourist path, 14 miles north of Rangeley as the crow flies—but not as the road goes. A floatplane is the quickest way in, but most guests drive up to the small town of Eustis and then bump along 10 miles of logging roads. I went the latter route, and when I arrived this past spring, Bill Calden was standing in the door of his office, connecting to newly installed Starlink satellite-internet Wi-Fi in order to text the guy who delivers supplies for the kitchen. “The road’s a little too rough for him now, so I’m trying to meet him in town,” he said.

Bill looks a lot like his father, Harvey, who bought the camp in 1981 with his wife, Betty. Harvey, who is mostly retired now, had a career that included stints in body shops, paper mills, and shoe factories, and he had a weekend gig giving scenic airplane rides. Now, Bill runs a business repairing small airplanes in the off-season. For people who run sporting camps, some mechanical know-how and general handiness are pretty much prerequisite. When something breaks, there’s nobody to call. Other things on Bill’s mind that day included—but were hardly limited to—regrading the road, reframing a cabin window, and getting ham salad ready for the guests’ lunch. The list of projects only ever grows. “You’re definitely not going to get rich running a sporting camp,” he said.



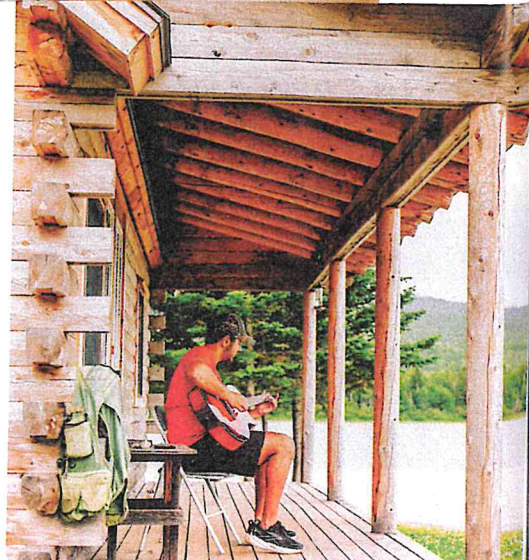
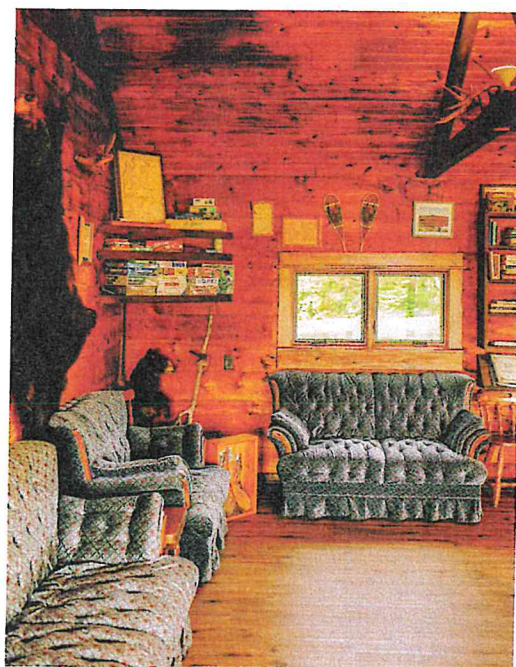
While I was at Tim Pond, Harvey flew in on his floatplane to help with some upkeep. He’s the seventh owner in the long history of the camp, which was built in 1832 by Charles Lyman Eustis, who had made money in the timber trade, and his Native American guide, Tim Sutton, from whom the pond got its name. Years later, after Sutton had died, a frequent visitor to the camp wrote an ode titled “Tim”: “For 40 years through the pathless forests, he followed the moose and caribou. But never again shall we hear his rifle, or piercing the darkness, his loud halloo.”

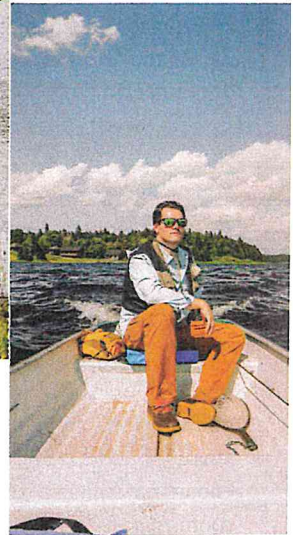
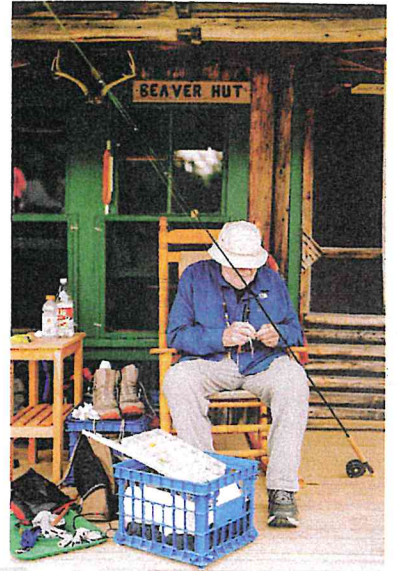
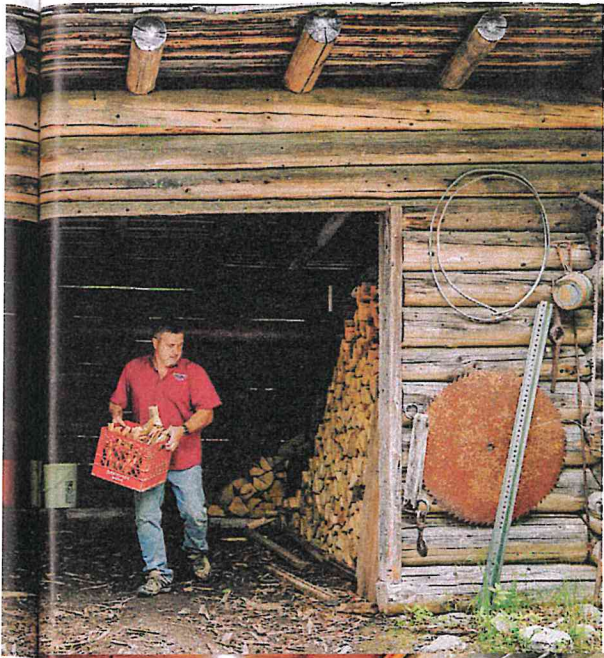
Early on, the camp was primarily a stopover where lumbermen could rest, fish, and hunt. In 1877, Eustis sold the camp to Kennedy Smith, who built more cabins. In 1896, Julian K. Viles took over. He also added cabins as the camp became a destination for travelers from farther afield. The going rate for a cabin was \$1.50 per day. At the time, rail networks were growing. By the early 1900s, Tim Pond guests could ride a narrow gauge from Portland all the way to Eustis, and a horse-drawn wagon would get them the rest of the way—advertised as “only a 10-hour trip from Boston.”

The clientele at sporting camps was predominantly men, many of whom traveled from New York and Boston and other big East Coast cities. These sports were interested in hunting and fishing but also, more broadly, in a romantic notion of rugged individualism. Spartan accommodations in the deep woods fit the bill, and even pockets of settlement like Rangeley still felt like frontier towns in those days, says Michelle Landry, executive director of the Outdoor Heritage Museum, in Oquossoc, on the old portage route between Rangeley Lake and Mooselookmeguntic Lake.

Some of that backcountry feel faded once fancy hotels went up in the Rangeley and Moosehead Lake regions, and by the turn of century, the “pinnacle of recreational tourism” had been reached, Landry says. “We had grand resorts in addition to all these historic sporting camps. You could come here and fish and

Top left and middle: Bill Calden tends to the camp’s ample stash of firewood; Darcie Calden rings the dinner bell. Bottom middle: three generations of Caldens gather around the table.





hunt and not have to rough it quite as much. Families could stay for the whole summer or a couple of months. There were even steamers that plied all the big lakes and wharves that would take you down the lake to your camp or hotel.”

Even amid the tourism boom, sporting camps retained their rusticity, and effective marketing helped them continue to thrive, says Catherine Cyr, a curator at the Maine Historical Society, “Up north, the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad created a publication called *In the Maine Woods* that ran for decades. It essentially said how to get to camps, what you need when you get to camp. There were tables in the publication that would tell you the best landings for deer, moose, bear, and other hunted animals at each train depot. It was really a one-stop shop—and state-sponsored.”

Sporting camps were not, however, immune to the impacts of the Great Depression or, later, the ubiquity of the automobile. No longer were people loading up steamer trunks for entire summers away in Maine. “You start to get more of those roadside hotels and people are doing the ‘road trip’ type of traveling,” Cyr says.

In the ensuing decades, some sporting camps managed to hang on. Many others fell by the wayside, either shuttered for good or converted into private camps. Cyr, who studied American material culture for a master’s degree, wrote her thesis on sporting camps (title: “Headin’ Upta Camp”—*Defining the Vernacular Architecture and Historical Significance of Maine Camps*) and traveled all over the state documenting them and talking with owners. “I would come across instances of places where somebody went in and bought the land and then they just condo-ized an existing camp structure and they built new ginormous abominations,” she says. “These were not supposed to be giant lake houses. You’re not supposed to have all of the comforts of your normal life. As the times changed, not everybody wanted to go into the woods and be disconnected from society.”



Today, sporting camps aren’t feeling any less squeezed, but the challenges aren’t just that tastes have changed. They are also confronted with a new breed of landlord, funding gaps, and regulatory hurdles.

The cabins at Tim Pond Camps come with names that range from whimsical (Rabbit Hut) to prosaic (Bunkhouse). Inside, twin beds are covered with flannel sheets and quilts printed with images of moose and trout. There’s a small table that can accommodate a game of cards and a cooler that’s big enough to chill a six-pack. The woodstove has plenty of wood provided. Bathrooms have flush toilets and showers hooked up to a water heater, a couple of luxuries made possible by a generator that runs part of the day. On front porches, rocking chairs face out toward a shared lawn and the pond.

After an afternoon of fishing, cigar smoke drifts from porches and the cold snap of beer cans being opened echoes around the property. Guests tend to be a sociable bunch. I found a group joking about dropping a ball at the back of the cabin and watching it roll, with gathering speed, right out the front door. Getting up to use the bathroom at night requires a degree of sure-footedness, they warned, though it was clear to me that the uneven floors were all part of the charm for them. “Lost Trail, the second cabin down on the right, we just had a group that left here, and one of the gentlemen has been coming for 56 consecutive years,” Darcie Calden told me. “He stays in that cabin every

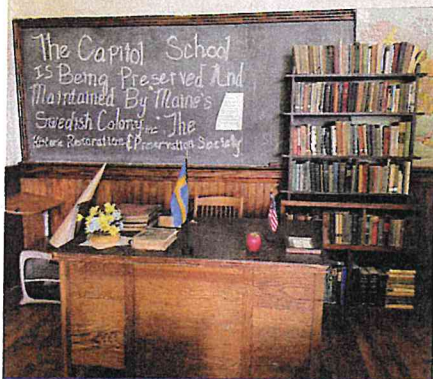




Clockwise from top: the camp's flotilla of square-stern canoes; an aerial view of the camp and Tim Pond's otherwise undeveloped shore; Bill and Darcie Calden.



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Although the Caldens would never want to fancify Tim Pond Camps, time takes its toll on buildings, and they often have renovations or new construction on their minds. Financial considerations generally hold them back. While owners of other types of businesses might go to a bank to fund capital improvements, owners of sporting camps struggle to get loans. The majority of camps operate on land leased from timberland owners, often on year-to-year agreements. In the absence of long-term stability, lenders look askance.

It hasn't always been that way. In the 1800s, the timber and paper companies that had acquired great swaths of land tended to offer camp owners low rents locked in for many decades. "Their leases were really generous," says John Rust, president of the Maine Sporting Camp Heritage Foundation, which aims to provide business advice and assistance to camp owners. "When those leases ended and the land ownership in the forest industry changed, those kinds of deals disappeared."

As forest industries foundered in the latter part of the 20th century in the face of increasing market volatility and international competition, the companies that had long owned and worked the land felt more pressure to harvest. They also looked to offload big chunks of their holdings, and investment groups swooped in to gobble up a significant portion of the Maine woods. Those groups have fiscal benchmarks to hit. "They want to generate a lot of cash by cutting and need to turn over the land in a certain length of time because they may have a 10-year investment fund," Rust says. "They don't want anything like what we call an inbound lease or rights-of-way on their property that's going to screw that up."

Harvey Calden says there's an additional consequence to the changeover in forest proprietorship. Boise Cascade, an Idaho-based forest-products company, once owned and managed more than

600,000 acres in Maine. Now, Bayroot LLC, a shell company for Yale University's endowment fund, owns the land around Tim Pond. "Boise Cascade used to bring buses in here. They'd take people on logging tours and they'd come in here for lunch. They came in here one time, they were going to do a cut up here, and they brought in a scope and a map," Harvey recalls. "The forester designed that cut so it wouldn't interfere with the view from this camp."

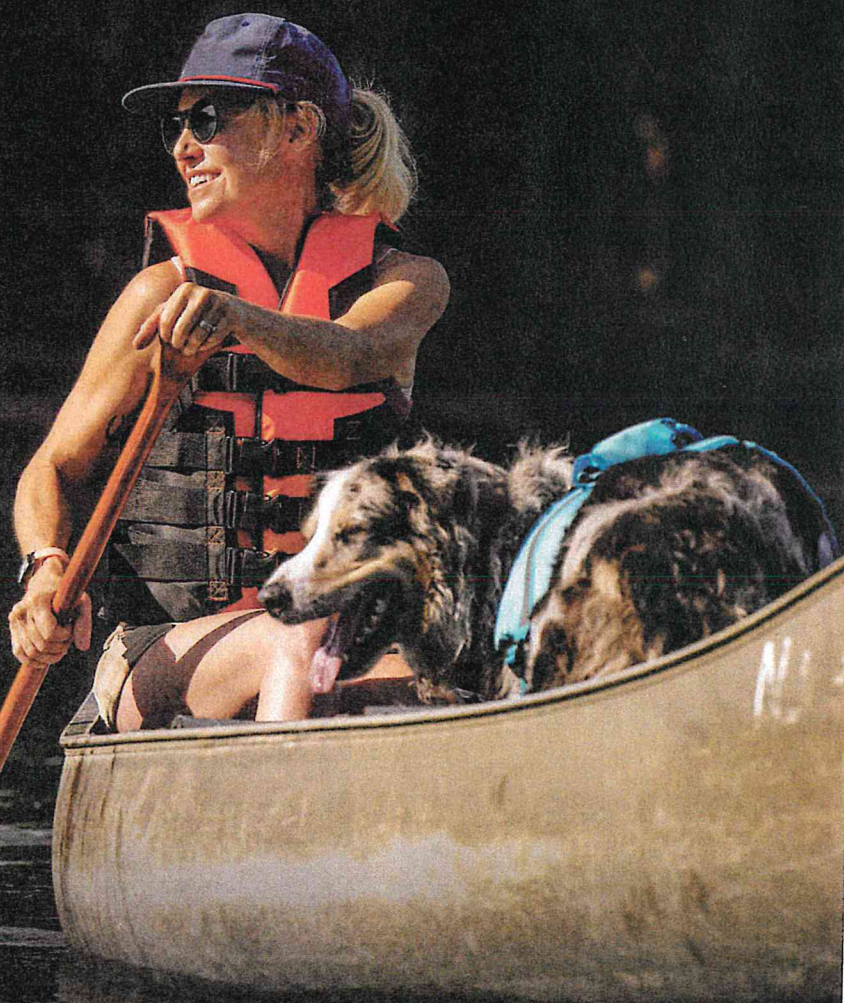
Now, a paddle around Tim Pond still yields lovely views, but some of the forest on surrounding hillsides is broken up by patches of clear-cut.

Harvey has stepped back from the day-to-day at Tim Pond Camps, and he's currently the president of the Maine Sporting Camp Association, a nonprofit coalition of camp owners trying to preserve what's left of their industry. To that end, the association hired a lobbyist to go to Augusta and push for changes to what its members largely view as the most existential of threats: state regulations. Old sporting camps have generally been grandfathered in, but in the event that a camp changes hands, new owners have to bring their facilities up to code. The cost of, say, modernizing septic systems and plumbing or removing structures built too close to the waterfront is often prohibitive for existing owners and potential new owners, so camps languish and eventually close.

"We've lost six sporting camps here in the last two years, mostly because of regulation," Harvey says. "We've got one camp right now; it was built in 1904. They have to get a relicense for a new owner, which means you have to bring everything up to code. They have to tear the cabin apart and make the bathroom larger, even though it's been working properly for 120 years. It's absolutely asinine."

Last year, Trey Stewart, a state senator from Aroostook County, cosponsored a bill that would ease some of that regulatory pressure, including by elim-

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inating the need for new owners to retrofit camp structures. "Codes intended for hotels and restaurants in large cities are being applied to sporting camps," Stewart told the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. "However, rules that may work for Augusta hotels and restaurants are not always appropriate for rural areas and off-grid locations."

Even producing a legal definition of a sporting camp posed challenges, though, resulting in a notably wordy section of the bill. Then, the Department of Health and Human Services came out against the measure, with Maine CDC director Dr. Puthiery Va describing the proposed exemptions as "broad" and saying they would limit the state's ability to ensure "health and safety standards for eating and hospitality establishments, drinking water sources, and wastewater disposal." Eventually, the bill fizzled in committee. Bill Calden was one of many camp owners who had supported it. "The environment is how we make our livelihood," he told me. "We are environmentalists in the utmost. We're not trying to cheat the system, but there's got to be a little give and take."

Other possible ways forward for sporting camps are being kicked around. The Maine Sporting Camp Heritage Foundation's John Rust has looked at conservation easements as models for preserving the unique natural environments around camps and severing their fates from the economic interests of timberland owners. Catherine Cyr, the Maine Historical Society curator, thinks that some older camps could qualify for the National Register of Historic Places. The application process is difficult, but on the other side would be tax benefits, potential flexibility with building codes, and good publicity.

Tenley Skolfield, a Master Maine Guide, ran Fish River Lodge, in Eagle Lake, for 14 years, starting in 2005.

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Now, she's on the board of directors for the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, and she sees marketing as the key for sporting camps, especially aimed at people who haven't been a big part of the guest demographic in the past. "One of the messages that I pushed through my marketing was that I love to book the female, the youth, the novice hunter and angler," Skolfield says. "I'd make sure that they got matched up appropriately with a guide. In order to be in this business, you really have to love people and be a people person."

Ultimately, after all, it's not just the owners but the guests who keep Maine's sporting camps alive. At Tim Pond Camps, Wilbur "Yank" Shugg and two friends call themselves members of the Order of Ancient Fishermen—OAFs for short—and, over lunch, they told story after story of visits to camps and lodges around the world. They mentioned a friend who had cancer, went on a fly-fishing trip in Labrador with Harvey Calden, and then turned the corner on the disease. They also noted that the group of young women in the dining room always seemed to come back from the pond with fish.

"Politics aside, it'd be a damn shame if Maine lost these camps," Mike Herman, from the southern Maine town of Cornish, said while he and some other guests made their way back down to the dock after lunch. Arms and shoulders were stretched. Tips were exchanged about where fish had been biting. Northern flickers jabbered and red-winged blackbirds sang. The Caldens all went in different directions: Darcie to the office to do the books, Bill to work on the generator, and Harvey to fix a window. Meanwhile, a moose sauntered back into the woods on the far shore and, somewhere low in the pond, brook trout waited. ■

Ethan Daly has written for Backcountry Magazine, among other publications, and he previously worked as a hut caretaker for the Appalachian Mountain Club. He lives in Portland.