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The Guides All Knew Each Other

The West Branch of the Penobscot River, 1890–1935

William Geller



Editor's note: With this story, we continue our series by Maine history enthusiast William Geller, whose unique research reveals the ways of life in Maine's North Woods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

IMAGINE THIS: A YOUNG MAN JUMPED OFF A TRAIN AT NORCROSS, Maine, on an early summer day in 1935. He shook hands with his guide, John Farrington. He took a room to freshen up at Fowler's Norcross House, just as he had done with his father fifteen years earlier. He ate something before leaving on a seven-day journey by steamboat through the Lower Chain Lakes, followed by a canoe paddle up the West Branch of the Penobscot River. This would duplicate the route he'd followed with his father in 1920. His grandfather, too, had made several trips downriver in the late 1890s and early 1900s, and had told the family stories about great fishing, visiting caves with year-round ice, watching otter play among the river's boom logs, and the antics of bears that visited the sporting camps.

This traveler, Jacob Wilmock, had no illusions that 1935 river life would be the exciting and bustling interaction among river residents and visitors that his grandfather and father had known.

No, much had changed on the river. In 1934, a forest fire at Pockwockamus Deadwater had burned the last of the river's sporting camps, Katahdin View, and its proprietor, Fred Pitman, decided not to rebuild. He had the financial backing of his longtime guest and neighbor, William Gannett, but business was waning. An era had ended. Wilmock hoped that by taking the trip one last time, he could etch its rich history in his imagination.

Farrington had guided Wilmock before and had a long history of leading trips. He'd started working at age 14, in 1912, in logging camps, then guided at one time or another for most of the sporting camps on the river. His two 20-foot canvas-covered canoes provided all he needed for his guiding work. He was quiet, reflective, and inquisitive. He carried a microscope in his pack.

In 1920, Norcross had been a busy place, a regular stop on the railroad with two morning trains and a daily steamer schedule. By 1935, Wilmock was the only sport (as recreational travelers were called) at the hotel. He arranged

River guide John Farrington and his wife, Annie, who was a cook at one of the camps, married in 1936. They stand near the Penobscot River, not far from their farm in Lincoln, Maine. COURTESY OF RALPH BOYNTON

a steamer ride on Fowler's Norcross Transportation Company's last remaining boat, the *Rex*. The boat took them twelve miles through North Twin, Pemadumcook, and Ambajejus lakes to the mouth of the West Branch, where Harry Cypher greeted them at Ambajejus Camps, just as Seldon McPheters had when Wilmock's grandfather stayed there. McPheters opened in 1894, the year the railroad reached Norcross and sports started to flock to the area. Ambajejus Camps served as an information and supply hub for at least ten more sporting camps upriver. McPheters passed sporting camp supply orders to the boat captain, Albert Fowler filled them at his Norcross store, and the captain delivered them to McPheters, who stored them until camp guides picked up the orders.

About midafternoon, Farrington and Wilmock paddled across to the carry (which, in Maine parlance, means the land over which one must carry [portage] a canoe to continue the river journey). No one waited with a cart and horse to take them and their gear across the short half-mile, as someone had for Wilmock's grandfather's first trip in around 1900. And in 1935, Wilmock and Farrington had to portage their own canoe; Wilmock's grandfather had enjoyed the sporting camps' earlier practice, leaving shared canoes at each end of the carries so that one rarely had to carry one across.

Farrington and Wilmock paddled a short distance and heard Passamagamet Falls. Farrington steered the canoe into the cove on the river's north-side carry. As the canoe lightly touched the bank, Wilmock envisioned Eugene and Hattie Hale coming down to help. They had run this camp between 1917 and 1928. (A man named Parker [first name unknown] opened it in 1899. Parker had run a toting service that probably closed before 1900, when loggers began using tote roads farther inland.) The Hales' business began to decline about 1925, when a drivable tote road reached beyond Ambajejus Lake to Togue Pond, where a new hiking trail, the Saint John Trail, led to the top of Katahdin from the southeast. This new trail was an alternative to following the logging roads from Togue Pond into the Great Basin and to Chimney Pond and then climbing the mountain from the north side.

FARRINGTON AND WILMOCK SET UP CAMP AT ABOUT THE MIDPOINT of the carry and then paddled across the river into Passamagamet Lake to see what might be left of the old Elias and Gertrude Boyington homestead and sporting camp. Cecil B. DeMille and his family had stayed at that camp in 1911, when he was searching for and found inspiration for a new play.

Norcross Supply Store.

SPORTSMEN going into the great game country from Norcross, would save freight and unnecessary delay by buying their provisions here.

*A Full Line of Camp Supplies, Guns, and
Fishing Tackle, Cooking Outfits, Bedding,
Moccasins, etc., always on hand*

Steamers leave daily from wharf near Store for all points on the Lower Lakes.
Guides, Canoes, and Outfits furnished on short notice.

NORCROSS, ME.

F. A. FOWLER, Propr.

An old advertisement for the store, where many visitors to the West Branch area bought their food and gear. IN THE MAINE WOODS, 1903, PUBLISHED BY BANGOR AND AROOSTOOK RAILROAD

COMPANY

The camp had operated between 1900 and about 1918 near the portage to the southwest corner of Debsconeag Deadwater. Wilmock's grandfather had stayed here once when logs clogged the river above Passamagamet Falls. Farrington knew the sporting camp owners' son, Ralph Boyington, who had run the Hale place in about 1915.

The next morning, Farrington paddled them upriver to a cabin of his friends, the Boynton family, on the Debsconeag Deadwater. The Boyntons had purchased it from Joe Francis in the early 1890s. River drivers often stayed there, but Farrington and Wilmock had the place to themselves. They unloaded and walked the beach to the first point to look around the abandoned site where Francis had run another camp after selling the first to the Boyntons. Farrington led Wilmock on to the second point a quarter-mile up the shore, where his fellow guide, Joe Dennis, Francis's son-in-law, had operated a sporting camp until about 1917. No one had taken over the operations of these two sporting camps.

That afternoon, Farrington and Wilmock paddled into First Debsconeag Lake and on to the Debsconeag Outing Club Camps, which opened in 1900 and were abandoned in the mid-1920s. Farrington beached the canoe, and they hiked a path up a steep boulder-strewn hillside to caves where ice remained most of the year. Locals collected ice there during the summer to stock their iceboxes. Farrington and Wilmock returned and climbed to the top of the low ridge above their canoe to see the still-standing cabins and get a view of both the lake and Katahdin. To bring up water, the outing club had a unique system that was basically a bucket and a line on a pulley that one lowered down the hillside into the water and pulled back up. The outing

club was the site of the U.S. Post Office that served everyone upriver as far as Ripogenus Gorge until about 1913. Francis had delivered the mail three times per week.

The next morning, Farrington and Wilmock found the wheelbarrow at Wheelbarrow Pitch, just below Debsconeag Falls, and used it to move their gear. At the carry on the west side of the falls, they paused for a moment at the old watchman's cabin, Dennis's occasional home in his later years. He had died in 1932, never having stopped guiding since he began in the 1890s.

By midmorning, Farrington and Wilmock passed into an area that had burned in 1934 and soon docked their canoe at the old ferry landing, where water preserved the log abutment. The fire had destroyed the fourteen structures of Katahdin View Camps, Fred Pitman's old place, and the nearby Roy Nelson family home, the Marcus Hanna family cabin, and the William and Guy Gannett family cabin. Wilmock's grandfather had stayed at Katahdin View in 1898. The New York City artist A. D. Turner had built probably the first cabin on the site, in 1896, and he'd lived there for a year. Pitman had taken over the sporting camp in 1915.

Many referred to the sporting camp as either Pitman Farm or Pitman's Tavern. Fred and his wife, Margaret, grew vegetables that served them and the sporting camps at Hurd, Kidney, and Daicey ponds. Their milk cow grazed across the river in a swale with good grass. In the early evenings, crowds of locals, guides, and guests gathered in the main building. As many as 30 people sat in overstuffed chairs and enjoyed their nightly cocktails. In the early years, the guides, all of them friends, included Joe Francis, Joe Dennis, Bill Moriarty, Ernest Mayo, Maurice York, Irving and Lyman Hunt, Charles Daisey, and Ralph Boyington. In later years, the group included Roy Nelson, Walter Dickie, Clint Boyington, Fred Daisey, and Denny Stevens. These men worked for every proprietor on or near the river at some point. They worked together and relied on each other's help. No guide served only one sporting camp. Every one knew that good guiding led to return visits and strong advertising.

Guests included such notable individuals as L. L. Bean and members of the Hanna, Gannett, and Roosevelt families. William Gannett and his son Guy, outdoor enthusiasts and publishers, stayed at the sporting camp when Ben Harris was proprietor. The Gannetts later bought from Harris because they wanted the property to continue as a sporting camp. Gannett and

Hanna, the Cleveland industrialist, likely knew each other through either the publishing business or their participation in the National Republican Party.

Back to that 1935 afternoon: Wilmock followed Farrington over the tote road to Hurd Pond so he could visit with Clint Boyington, who ran Hurd Pond Camps, previously the other Hanna site. Hanna had died a few years earlier, and the family wanted to divide its private Hurd Pond enclave among its guides. Boyington, who had grown up on Passamagamet Lake at his parents' sporting camp, was the only one interested.

As Farrington and Wilmock paddled past the nearby outlet from River Pond, they thought they might see someone coming through it from Pitman's garage on the Millinocket Tote Road. From about 1905 on, people had sometimes caught rides with a logging camp teamster headed upriver from Millinocket. At Pockwockamus Stream, visitors got off the wagon and paddled through to the river. The trip was easier by 1935 because the Civilian Conservation Corps had rebuilt the road the year before.

The duo reached the carry at Pockwockamus Falls, and Wilmock remembered that his grandfather had found, chiseled in a rock near here, "Robert T. Cyr 1894." They found it. Cyr had been a river driver. Above the next carry at Abol Falls, Farrington paddled them to Abol Point, where Sabat Shea, an American Indian guide and trapper, had built a cabin in 1894. The duo looked out over this area of the river, and Wilmock tried to envision the multiple parties camped there, some for as long as two or three weeks at a time. He could hear echoing conversations and see in his mind the canoes at the water's edge, smoke rising from fires, and people paddling into Abol Stream to fish. Before about 1875, most people who were going to climb Katahdin came upriver to this point. The first guidebooks suggested a canoe route that went up Moosehead Lake to Northeast Carry and down the upper West Branch into Chesuncook and Ripogenus lakes, into the Lower West Branch to this spot, and then up Katahdin. Farrington noted that his guiding to this area had nearly ceased a couple of years prior, when the CCC had completed a drivable road from Ambajejus Dike to Katahdin Stream and Baxter State Park had opened. Back in August 1912, Francis counted 30 canoes a day passing his sporting camp.

From this point, guide Peter W. Ranco and his sports had begun their hunting trips into the Klondike. The only guides willing to penetrate the exceedingly rugged area were the American Indians and one white guide, Ernest Mayo. Only Ranco and Francis, both members of the Penobscot

Nation, had cabins in there. Before 1899, Ranco had used tents or his trapper's cabin, which he made out of tree bark. In 1899, he finally built a traditional log cabin, a six-mile walk from the mouth of Abol Stream. In addition to his guiding, Ranco was a lumberman, basket manufacturer, and representative of the Penobscot Tribe to the Maine State Legislature in 1913 and 1917.

AT KATAHDIN STREAM, A QUICK PADDLE FROM ABOL POINT, FARRINGTON maneuvered the canoe into a landing. He wanted to see if anyone was at the Crawford river cabin, which had opened a year before in a former logger's cabin a short walk upstream on a west-side bluff. The Crawfords were proprietors of Togue Pond Camps, which had opened about ten years earlier when a road was completed into that area. No one was around.

Across the river, Farrington and Wilmock could see the site of the old Debsconeag Outing Club branch cabin, first built in about 1902. The club had also constructed another cabin at 2,200 feet of elevation, on Katahdin's Abol Slide. The slide cabin fell into disrepair, perhaps because Bert Haynes and Frank Sewall later built a fire warden's cabin above it (at about the 2,850-foot mark), and sports tended to stay there.

As Farrington and Wilmock resumed their paddle upriver to Bradeen's cabin, Farrington pointed to the site of an American Indian double-decker lean-to between the two logans (swampy areas) above Katahdin Stream. At Foss and Knowlton Brook, they talked about what Pitman (from the burned-out Katahdin View sporting camp) might do with his Foss and Knowlton Pond cabin, which Francis probably built and shared until he died. Within another couple of miles, Farrington paddled them across the mouth of Nesowadnehunk Stream, to the landing on the west side, just as the McLains, Hunts, Daiseys, and Yorks, all guides, had done with their guests from 1896 to about 1910. These guides could reach this spot in a long day from the head of Ambajesus Lake. They shared a horse corral here but did not leave horses for too long due to bears.

They walked the half-mile up Nesowadnehunk Stream to the site of Irving O. and Lyman Hunt's cabin, at Indian Pitch. The Hunts, who had a sporting camp on Millinocket Lake in the mid-1890s, left that to build here in about 1898. Within a year, they were building what became known as Kidney Pond Camps on the nearby pond. For at least the first five years, the Hunts provided a horse-drawn conveyance for their guests and those of Camp Phoenix, much further up the valley at Nesowadnehunk Lake. Typically, they spent a night at the Indian Pitch cabin and the next day traveled along the stream's

edge to their sporting camp at Kidney Pond, where they had dinner before proceeding on to Camp Phoenix. In these early years, the Hunts and the Yorks at Daicey Pond Camp worked together and divided the guests between their two sporting camps.

Farrington knew the Indian Pitch cabin had fallen into disuse after 1908, when a tote road from Millinocket had finally reached Nesowadnehunk Stream a mile above Kidney Pond. Charles Daisey, who had bought Camp Phoenix in 1904, worked diligently to keep this road passable by buckboard until the CCC rebuilt it in 1933–34. The Yorks, Hunts, and the Hunts' successors, Roy and Laura Bradeen, transitioned to this travel route and one from Greenville that ended at Nesowadnehunk Stream in the early 1920s.

IT WAS NOW MIDDAY, SO FARRINGTON MANEUVERED THEIR CANOE across the current to the Bradeen river cabin, opposite the mouth of Nesowadnehunk Stream. When Wilmock had passed by here in 1920, Roy Bradeen, Ernest Mayo, Mel Scott, and Edmund Perault (also called Edward Perrow), all guides, were building the cabin, a difficult task when cutting, moving, and trying to put in place six feet off the ground eight- to twelve-foot logs eight inches in diameter without the aid of horses. In 1935, the Bradeens owned the site that had a lean-to for the guides, a sleeping cabin, and an open-sided structure for cooking and eating. They made the site available to Appalachian Trail hikers.

As Farrington and Wilmock paddled up the deadwater above the falls the next morning, Farrington pulled up to the cabin of Reginald Crawford of Togue Pond, but no one was there. No one was at Charles Daisey's place either. Farrington noticed smoke coming from the Rainbow Lake Camp's river cabin, so he paddled back over to the south side of the river to Horserace Brook. His friend and guide Clark Lakeman was there. Lakeman had built the cabin in 1927 or 1928 for guests who wanted to fish the river. Two years later, Fred Clifford was sharing it with the Bradeens, his former partners at Kidney Pond Camps. By 1933, the newly opened AT passed through the cabin's yard and climbed over the ridge past Clifford and Woodman ponds to the north side of Rainbow Lake. Hikers "rang a bell," which sometimes meant banging on a pail, and Clark paddled over to pick them up, charging 25 cents.

Farrington and Wilmock reached the Big Eddy in the afternoon and found quite a few men fishing. Many of them had walked over the carry from Ripogenus Dam for the day. A few were camping, but no one was traveling downriver. Farrington often spent the night here when he was taking sports



The original Debsconeag Outing Club guide's cabin, built around 1900, is the central structure in this 2012 photo. It lacks its earlier enclosed porch and left-side room.

WILLIAM GELLER

to the sporting camp at Frost Pond. This was one of the places where travelers might find a horse and cart to haul canoes and luggage across the carry. If Farrington had to do the carry, he liked to get the canoes across in the evening and bring the rest of the gear the following morning. After an early supper, the duo walked the carry. Nothing much had changed about it, probably, for about a century.

The next day, Farrington and Wilmock started their return trip and reached the Debsconeag Deadwater for the night. From there, Farrington could paddle them to Norcross in a day, but he changed plans, and the next morning they paddled across the deadwater into First Debsconeag Lake and made the carry to Second Debsconeag Lake. Some daring folks going in the other direction put their canoes into the sluice at the Second Lake dam and let the water carry them a half-mile down and into First Lake. After a short

portage to Third Debsconeag Lake, a breeze pushed Farrington and Wilmock gently to the southeast. They saw smoke coming from Sammy Smith's place on the knoll on the west side of the peninsula and passed close to the former Spencer Camps, by then the private camp of artist Talbot Aldrich. They used the portage to Pemadumcook Lake at Nahmakanta Stream and Myshrall's White House Camps, where they spent the night.

In the morning, with the wind at their backs, they paddled in near silence the fourteen miles through Pemadumcook and North Twin lakes to Norcross. Wilmock thought about the changes along the river over the previous fifteen years. This was probably the end of an era for Farrington. They parted at the Norcross wharf, and Farrington paddled back up North Twin Lake. He was headed back up the West Branch to Rainbow Lake to see Manley Boynton, a close friend and the owner of a sporting camp. Farrington wanted to begin preparations for his winter caretaking job there.

The next year, 1936, John Farrington came out of the woods at 38 years of age and married Annie Nolan, who was 51. They'd known each other for years. She'd worked as a cook in the lumber camps and at sporting camps, such as those at Rainbow Lake and Frost Pond. The new couple took up farming and carpentry, and they lived on the Penobscot River in Lincoln, Maine. By 1947, Farrington was still guiding, a bit. In 1947, he took Annie's grandson, Ralph Boynton, from his family's circa-1893 cabin on the Debsconeag Deadwater up into the woods that he knew so well.

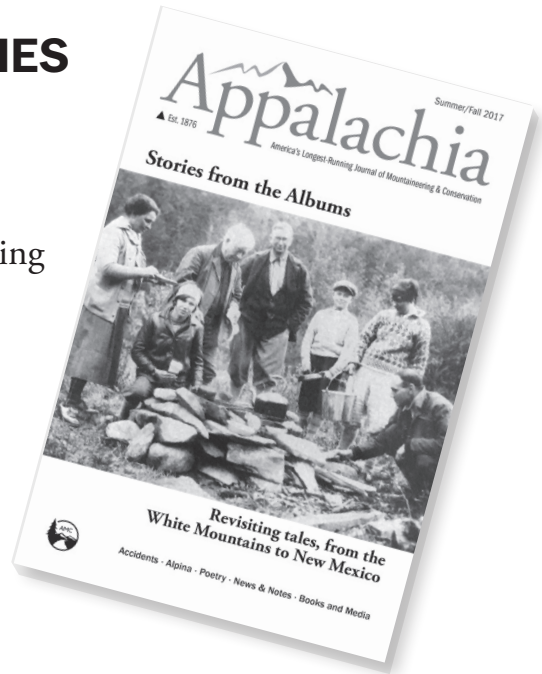
WILLIAM GELLER, a retiree who explores the outdoors in every season, lives in Farmington, Maine, with his wife, Anne. He is working on a book and articles about the history of logging and sporting camps in Maine. Visit him at sites.google.com/a/maine.edu/mountain-explorations.

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