

2022

## The Settling of Lobster Lake: Sporting Families Built Wilderness Enclaves in a Remote Part of Maine

William Geller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Geller, William (2022) "The Settling of Lobster Lake: Sporting Families Built Wilderness Enclaves in a Remote Part of Maine," *Appalachia*: Vol. 74: No. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol74/iss2/5>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

# The Settling of Lobster Lake

*Sporting families built wilderness enclaves  
in a remote part of Maine*

**William Geller**



**A** STRONG EXAMPLE OF HOW LOBSTER LAKE'S PRIMITIVE CAMP TRADITION started is the story of a doctor's trip in August 1909.

Dr. Lucius Donohue of Bayonne, New Jersey, headed to Greenville, Maine, by train to take one of his regular canoe trips to Lobster Lake. The lake, so called because it is shaped like a giant lobster claw, lay deep in the Maine wilderness. Like hundreds of adventurers, who were known as *sports* back then, Donohue had first read about this remote area in magazines or heard about it at sports shows in Northeastern cities. He expected another refreshing vacation of canoeing and fishing.

But that year, his ties to Lobster Lake became permanent when some strangers pressed him to use his medical knowledge in surprising ways.

As was the custom, Donohue set his trip plans by writing to a guide he had hired for his previous trips. The guide packed the necessary provisions and equipment. All Donohue needed to do was show up in Greenville with his clothing. Because Donohue already knew the routine, his guide did not have to meet him at the Greenville station at the foot of Moosehead Lake. From Greenville, he boarded a lake ferry to travel 35 miles north to North East Carry. His guide greeted him there, and they walked the two-mile carry road to the West Branch of the Penobscot River, where the packed canoe was waiting. With Donohue in the bow, the duo set off downriver.

At the 2.5-mile mark, the guide steered them into Lobster Stream. If the water were high enough, the current carried them into Lobster Lake, but generally in August paddlers worked against the current. It was hard work to reach the lake's unique white sand beaches, good tentsites, and magnificent views of Katahdin. It was a beautiful spot for first and last nights of trips that explored the West Branch. From the North East Carry, paddlers only had to cover seven to eight miles to the lake. Others came to camp for multiple days to relax, perhaps climb Lobster Mountain, and fish the nearby small ponds and the West Branch.

Nearly the full extent of the 24 miles of shoreline was open to the public; only four camp leases were active then. The landowners of nearly all the land north of Greenville, including Lobster Lake, held their lands for timber cutting. A lessee typically had wealth, influence, and a connection to the owner; the exceptions were trappers, who served as the lands' protectors.

*The camp Dr. Lucius Donohue had built on the shores of Lobster Lake after he saved a child's life. The grateful parents introduced him to someone who would sell land on the remote lake.* COURTESY OF JERRY PACKARD

Donohue's guide probably directed the canoe to a camping site they had previously used on the west side of Lobster Lake. They could see Katahdin. On their way down the lake they passed the Spaulding Camp, a log structure on a point that would later be named Spaulding Point. Below Spaulding's they might have seen the smoke from the Hyde Camp, the Long Camp, or both. With the exception of a trapper's camp, these were the only structures on the lake.

SINCE 1911, ONLY FOUR CAMPS HAVE STOOD ON THE SHORES OF LOBSTER LAKE. Their lessees and their descendants have maintained them as primitive camps and in their original ambiance. Donohue was to be one of them. Three others had come a few years earlier, also by hiring guides: William W. Spaulding, Thomas Worcester Hyde, and William J. Long.

All four of these men spent a number of years and canoe trips around Maine, and eventually each man wanted to establish his own camp on Lobster Lake. All were respected and successful, which was considered necessary to acquire a land lease on which they could build. Spaulding, who owned the largest shoe factory in Haverhill, Massachusetts, had arrived in September 1895 with his son Harris. It rained for ten days out of fourteen. On the way back to the North East Carry, Spaulding complained that he had had enough of camping. The guides suggested he build a "shanty," and on October 10 the party paddled into Lobster Lake to the point now known as Spaulding Point.

Spaulding immediately sought out the landowner, successfully negotiated a lease for one acre at the point with the right to cut firewood from around the lake's edge, and construction soon began. Following the recommendation of the head of the Kineo Hotel on Moosehead Lake, Spaulding hired John Hildreth, a longtime guide, to build the camp. Spaulding and Hildreth returned to Lobster Lake and the point, and Spaulding drove the corner stakes for the 20-by-24-foot log camp. He returned to Kineo and went on to Bangor, where he bought a cook stove and a good size tent and shipped them to North East Carry where Hildreth picked them up, floated them to the point, and set up camp. Meanwhile Spaulding stopped in Guilford, ordered such necessary building supplies as lumber, nails, windows, and shingles and had those shipped to North East Carry before the lake froze.

Once the lake froze, Hildreth and two assistants, Jim Finley and Orlando Barrows, also guides, moved into the tent at Lobster Lake and began cutting the logs. A teamster crew at the carry made two trips toting the delivered materials to the point, and then twitched the cut logs to the site. Spaulding





*The Hyde family's main building, believed to have been built by an out-of-work shipbuilding crew in 1906.* COURTESY OF JOHN PHILLIPS

first used the camp in spring 1896 and immediately had the crew build an addition that was ready for fall 1896 when his whole family came for a visit.

Hyde (born in 1841), founder of Bath Iron Works, and his son John S. Hyde (born in 1869) traveled with a guide at various times through the North Maine Woods. John, who took over the company when his father died in November 1899, decided he would like a hunting and fishing camp on the lake. Sometime before 1904 John took a lease on two miles of shoreline from Spaulding Point south to what was locally known as Cranberry Point near the mouth of Cranberry Brook.

The Hyde family lore was that the shipbuilding company had a lull in 1906 so John sent a crew north to build a camp with a small living room, kitchen area, two bedrooms, a loft, and front porch. In 1909 he had his veteran guide Davis Mullin build additional buildings that included a log house for dining and cooking, guides' camp, ice house, and boathouse on the island. The camp had a sophisticated set of systems that included running hot water and a large, elevated wooden water tank with a wood-burning, steam-driven pump to keep the tank filled.

Perhaps in the early 1890s, Long, then a Harvard student interested in nature and science, traveled up Lobster Stream and into the lake. At some point in 1899 he published his first book pertaining to nature and science; *Way of Woods Folk*. By 1903 Long's books had captured the attention of prominent naturalists, including President Theodore Roosevelt, who criticized his work. Long's observations of nature were contrary to generally accepted ideas of the time. Among his admirers were his Lobster Lake guides; they knew him as "no fake." By the close of 1907 Long had published ten popular science and nature books based on his observations made during his Maine Woods visits.

Long sought and received a lease from John Hyde for land behind a rock ledge on the lake's east side, opposite the north end of the big island. Long began building in about 1904. He immediately began bringing his family. Each summer they spent at least the month of August at the site.

LET'S RETURN TO THE STORY OF DONOHUE IN 1909. HE TOO HOPED TO BUILD a place. He probably wondered if he had the influence to secure a lease. But that question became inconsequential during his 1909 trip, when an emergency called him into service and elevated his standing.

Among the other parties camped on the lake that summer were a father and daughter. The daughter suddenly began suffering severe abdominal pain that would not subside. Their guide, who knew all the other guides and what they were doing, knew Donohue was a doctor and sought his help. Donohue came to their camp, spoke with the father and daughter, and examined the young woman. He determined that she was having an appendicitis attack and needed immediate surgery. The father and daughter agreed to an operation. There was no time to ferry her back to Greenville nearly 50 miles and two days away.

With the support of their guides and those at the Spaulding Camp, they moved the daughter to the Spaulding structure where Donohue performed the operation. The Spauldings probably supplied the needed linens, and their kitchen supplied the boiling water for sterilizing. What Donohue might have selected to make a delicate cut is unknown, but the guides knew how to sharpen to a razor edge anything Donohue chose as a scalpel and had needles and thread; they were used to sewing up flesh wounds. What Donohue used for anesthesia (perhaps alcohol unless he had an emergency surgical kit with him) was not revealed.

Such surgery was relatively new. Doctors in the United States were perfecting appendectomies in the 1880s; in 1886, New York City surgeon Charles

McBurney set the standard for the “open appendectomy.” Donohue, an 1894 New York University Medical School graduate, probably used the procedure, which required anesthesia, a 5-centimeter incision, removal of the appendix, and management of postsurgical care to avoid infection and deal with pain.

Following the successful surgery the Spauldings probably housed the father and daughter, and Donohue must have stayed a week or more to manage her recovery. For her return to Greenville the guides probably chose the smoothest route and means to North East Carry and the ferry.

The exceedingly grateful father offered to pay Donohue or return the favor in some way. Donohue asked if he would introduce him to the landowners and encourage them to let Donohue buy land for a camp. The father had the right connections, and Donohue negotiated a purchase of 1,581 acres on the west side. In 1911, a crew that may have included Donohue’s guide poured a concrete step and built the camp’s first structure. Owning land—rather than leasing it as Spaulding, Hyde, and Long did—was highly unusual.

All four of the men used their compounds to gather their families. As the number of family members increased in size, so did the number of structures, but in the 1920s other changes began to occur. The Donohue family children were all older and served in World War I; that, along with the influenza pandemic, took members’ lives. Only Donohue, a stepson, and their associates continued to use the camp. The Longs gave up their camp by the mid-1920s, saying that they thought the lake had become too crowded with people, interrupting their sense of wilderness.

They weren’t wrong. An increasing number of canoeists were starting their journeys down the Allagash River or the West Branch from the lake. Or they just came to stay for a week or longer. Between 1910 and 1912, as many as 1,700 canoes came through North East Carry, and many of the paddlers visited the lake. Farther down the West Branch, Joe Francis noted as many as 30 canoes a day from North East Carry passing his camp in 1912. Beginning in 1919, attendees of at least one summer camp spent their first few days on Lobster Lake training for a canoe trip down the Allagash. Nearly all these groups camped at sites on the lake’s west side.

Donohue had another “family,” those in his medical sphere, whose members he thought would benefit from a stay at the camp. In support of a program for them, he added three commercially prefabricated structures that included cooking, dining, and sleeping quarters. This family included addicts whom he and other staff brought from his hometown in northern New Jersey to this site. Addiction treatment programs were rare during the prohibition

years, 1920 to 1933; those with alcohol and drug problems generally tried to hide the problem to avoid being ostracized. But Donohue had devoted his life to the development of medical services at Bayonne City Hospital, and he recognized the need for rehabilitation. He also knew the stigma attached to addiction, which is why going deep in the Maine Woods for his program seemed right.

Exactly when Donohue, his staff, and patients first traveled to Lobster Lake remains undiscovered. They probably gathered in Bayonne looking like any other group headed north to Greenville by train for a summer or fall vacation. Some guides probably joined them on the ferry ride up Moosehead Lake and moved their bags over the portage. Awaiting them on the West Branch was Donohue's 28-foot Elco motor launch and canoes that carried the baggage. No one would have recognized them as anything other than vacationers.

When Donohue closed the treatment program is unknown. By the time prohibition ended in 1933, addiction programs were beginning to evolve and become more acceptable. Donohue might have continued the program into the early 1940s given a 1943 assessment of his camp compound structures that indicated they were in good condition; unused structures deteriorated quickly in the Maine Woods. In 1942 Donohue at 72 years old was still an active physician. By 1950 he had retired, and he died the next year.

By the late 1930s a next generation of leaders for the Donohue, Hyde, and Spaulding camps needed to emerge. Donohue's addiction program and personal use of the camp probably ceased during the war given that Donohue was in his 70s by then and his stepson, Frank Winants, had moved to the Midwest. Donohue did not include the compound in his will, so it went to his only living blood relative—a nephew who gave it to Winants.

When Spaulding died in 1929, his grandson Way Spaulding took the family lead that included preservation and renovation work in the early 1930s. He continued the camps with the help of his sister Evelyn, but a divorce and tiny family tree meant few users.

In contrast to the Donohue and Spaulding families, the large Hyde family continued their visits after John Hyde died in 1938. John's sister Eleanor Hyde Phillips and her two sons picked up the lead role after the war and continued the camp as simple off-grid retreats.

The lease for the small old trapper's camp near the lake's outlet about 1932 became that of Augustus Rode, an executive employee of International Harvester. His lease included the right to build a second camp. His company



built heavy tractors beginning in the 1930s, and at that time Great Northern Paper Company had an interest in such equipment. Rode's family apparently did not use the camp after the war and sold to the Wyland Leadbetter family.

The 1950s were the beginning of another era in the evolution of these camps. For the Donohue camp, the next 25 years were a period of abandonment. In 1959 Burton Packard, a successful sporting camp owner on Sebec Lake (Maine), offered to buy them, but Winants was not interested. Early on Winants would occasionally visit the camps, but he never spent a night at them. He hired local guide and all-round handyman Carl Kennedy as his contact to the camps, but never engaged him as a caretaker. As a consequence the ruthless vandalism that followed and the natural consumption by the forest left little to preserve when the Packards did succeed in buying the site in 1976. This fate was not unique to the Donohue family in Maine camp history.

At Spaulding Point, Way Spaulding returned to the camps after the war and did some guiding from them. About 1950 his sister Evelyn also returned to the family camp and began using their compound as a commercial sporting camp. In 1961 they decided to sell and did so to the Leadbetter family, which retained its ownership of the Rode Camp.

The Hyde and Phillips families continued their presence, giving permission to Evelyn Spaulding in 1961 to run a commercial sporting camp in their compounds when they were not there. After she retired in about 1976, a sequence of guides ran the sporting camp operation until 1995 when the Phillips family returned it to a private residence for family members.

The preservation work at the Donohue, Spaulding, Hyde, Long, and trapper camps started at different times and took years. The Morrills began peeling the bark from the logs of the Long structures in about 1930 to prevent rotting. Ann Morrill died in 1965, and her longtime friends and frequent guests—the Soule, Pratt, and Lamb families—assumed the ownership, maintaining the compound as it originally existed. When the Leadbetter families bought the camps on Spaulding Point, they were already restoring the Rode Camp and preparing for years of restoration work at Spaulding Point. The Norton Lamb Jr. family became sole owners of the Long Camp in 2000 and continued the preservation tradition. The Phillips family has always kept the Hyde structures in excellent condition.

The Donohue compound began to reemerge in 1976, when the Packards bought and began to restore the camp's original ambiance. Only one of the compound's original three log camps, the main camp, was standing. Its roof had to be completely replaced. The Packards saved the large elegant

boathouse but remodeled it as a camp. They tore down the prefabricated buildings. The Packards' crew could not save the icehouse, woodshed, and handyman's camp. The Packards took apart a log camp at their Sebec camp and reassembled it at this site. The family opened the camp as a commercial sporting camp during the moose seasons for 30 successive winters, before selling for noncommercial use.

The only remaining Donohue restorable item of the fine fixtures and furnishings was in the boathouse. On marine rails and out of the water, the Packards found Donohue's once elegant 28-foot Elco cruiser stripped of its brass and accoutrements and somewhat hacked at with a dull axe. The acts of Mother Nature, rain, and a leaking roof kept the hull of the boat moist and watertight. An Elco restorer bought it, and the Packards, without the assistance of water pumps, successfully towed it across Lobster Lake for its overland journey, successful restoration, and use on another body of water.

Patriarchs Donohue, Spaulding, Hyde, and Long would no doubt admire the preservation work and salute their successors. To tour Lobster Lake in 2023 is to step back in time. The Rode Camp and the Spaulding compound are still owned by the Leadbetter family and preserved in their original state. The Hyde-Phillips compound is owned by the Phillips family, and the Lamb family owns the old Long compound. At the foot of the lake and unseen from the water is another old small preserved camp from about 1930. And across the lake, the camp Lucius F. Donohue built in 1911 is once again a private family camp.

---

WILLIAM GELLER, a retiree who explores in the outdoors in every season, lives in Farmington, Maine. His research and writing are available at his website Mountain Explorations, [sites.google.com/a/maine.edu/mountain-explorations](https://sites.google.com/a/maine.edu/mountain-explorations). More Lobster Lake history by Geller is at [digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/522/](https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/522/).

---

---

*“I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features.”—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber*

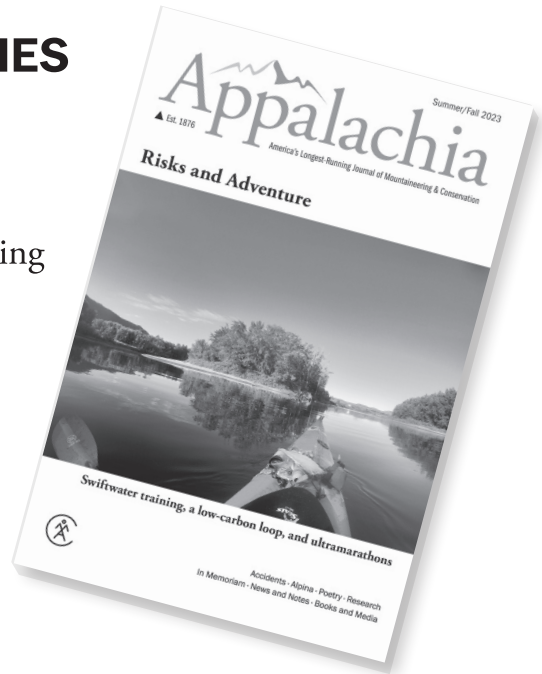
---

---

## SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America’s longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit [outdoors.org/appalachia](https://outdoors.org/appalachia) for a special offer: 36% off the journal’s cover price. That’s three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you’ll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at [outdoors.org/appalachia](https://outdoors.org/appalachia) or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of January 2023. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date information, visit [outdoors.org](https://outdoors.org).