
Camp Solitude

This laid-back, isolated Adirondack Great Camp retreat is a haven for dogs and dog lovers on the shores of Placid Lake

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PLACID LAKE, Aug. 15, 2000 — One day last month, a Lake Placid visitor walked into the News office on Mill Hill to ask if we knew of a really unique place where he could spend a few days, “Something nobody knows about — something really special.”

Advertising representative Sandy Dupree, who’s more familiar with local businesses than anyone else in our office, scratched her head for a moment, furrowing her brow before breaking into a broad smile and quietly uttering two words:

“Camp Solitude.”

The name alone caught the attention of a News reporter eavesdropping on Dupree’s conversation; her description of the rustic Adirondack Great Camp hooked him.

This week, that reporter and his wife went to visit the camp for themselves — and what a visit it was!

Built around 1896, according to Lake Placid historian Mary MacKenzie, Camp Solitude is part restaurant, part B&B and part camp resort.

“Lodging rates start at \$10 and run to \$160,” Solitude owner Jay Kelsall will tell you, wryly but with tongue only partly in cheek, “\$10 for a lean-to, \$160 for a modernized cabin.”

The Princeton, N.J., native and off-season resident of Oakland, Calif., across the bay from San Francisco, has had his life wrapped

around Camp Solitude since he was a youngster.

Kelsall’s parents, voice coach Joseph Kelsall and contralto soloist Elva Kelsall, bought the remote, wooded compound in the early 1950s, starting an 8-week, highly regimented summer music camp for kids 10 and up that ran from 1952 through 1976.

Jay Kelsall, however, being a computer consultant, not a music teacher, has run Camp Solitude somewhat differently since taking over in 1992. Perhaps it’s something in the mellow California air that’s gotten into his blood, but he’s brought a decidedly more laid-back philosophy of rest and recreation to



A guest approaches the front porch of Camp Solitude’s Main House.

the sprawling, rustic retreat.

"The camp is in a perpetual state of make-it-better," Kelsall explained as he took a News reporter on a tour of the wooded campus, pointing from the boathouse window to a configuration of concrete pylons sticking up from the lake's bottom, pylons that used to support a swimming pier.

He described the heavy machinery that contractors ship across Lake Placid today to build new camps around the shore, contrasting their modern methods with those of the olden days.

"Today, we have heavy equipment," Kelsall observed. "Back then, they had *men*. Rather than using cranes and pouring concrete, they would basically build the framework of a log cabin and float it out onto the sunken log supports, and that was your boathouse."

Though there is always more work to do than hours in a day in caring for an aging Great Camp, Kelsall spoke with feeling of being able to work so hard in such an extraordinarily lovely setting.

Affixing iron bands one day around the concrete pylons sunk into the lakebed, breathing through SCUBA gear, Kelsall said he experienced a unique encounter with the wildlife of the lake.

"You're working on the bottom, twisting away with your wrenches, focused on what's right in front of you," Kelsall related, "and you look around and realize you're not alone."

Surrounding him, Kelsall said, not more than a foot or two from his underwater mask, were many dozens of small lake fish swimming in place, watching him intently, curious but unperturbed.

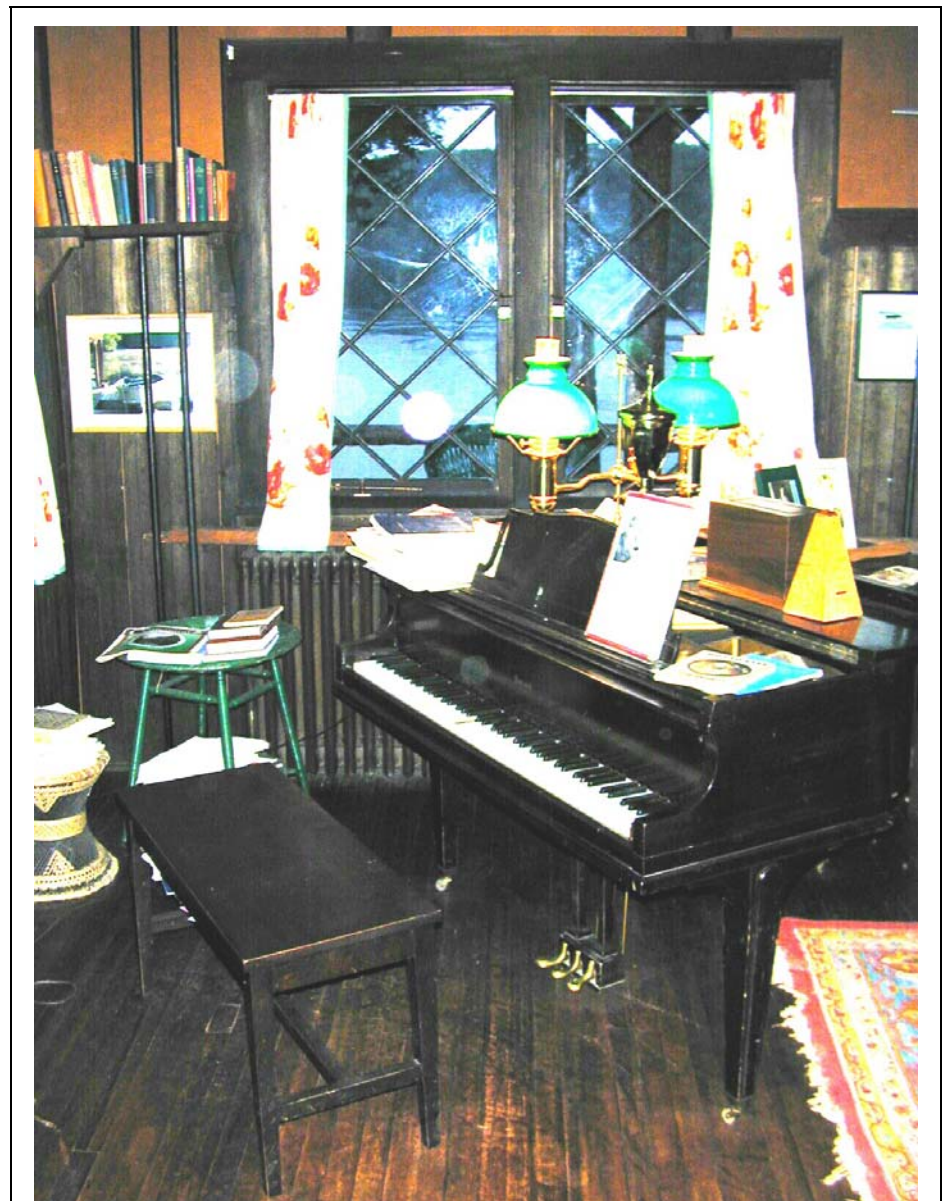
A reflector telescope mounted on a tripod sat in a corner of the upper story of the boathouse. Won in trade for an old computer, Kelsall said, "Its true value is that you can point it from the deck here toward that osprey nest over on Buck Island

and see it like it's at the end of your arm."

Kelsall told a story about the night Camp Solitude guests watched from the boathouse deck as the osprey dove into the waters of Lake Placid, snaring a large, lively fish in its crossed, barbed claws. The fish was a little too large for the hunting bird to handle; talking among themselves, the guests finally came up with a solution to the predator's dilemma, watching the fish twist in the bird's grasp, almost overwhelming the flying hunter.

"Go to the rock!" they shouted to the bird, urging it to a boulder on the shore of the opposite island where the osprey could land with its prey — and, slowly, the bird turned in midair, turning the fish in its claws, aiming it forward like an aerodynamically streamlined torpedo, flying to the chunk of granite sticking up from the Buck Island lakefront, landing there and mastering its supper.

"We also use the telescope to watch Whiteface Landing for hikers we've sent up the trail," Kelsall said.



The Main House piano at Camp Solitude, once a focal point of activity during the Great Camp's years as a youth music training camp.

Three hours up, two hours back, the innkeeper checks every so often through his eyepiece for guests to return to the dock after he's ferried them over, waving for him to pick them up and carry them home for a hot shower and nourishing meal.

From the boathouse, Kelsall took this reporter to the Guide House, a very simple four-bedroom cabin with a sitting room, bath and pot-bellied stove situated directly behind the camp's primary building, the Main House overlooking the lake.

"This used to be the servants quarters," he said, "and it's pretty plain, but this is just the kind of place some people want out here."

Some quarters on the tour were even more rustic, while the decor of others was more in line with what a modern suburbanite would expect of a vacation home.

The Solitude Award for the Most Rustic would have to go to the Ice House — which was, appropriately enough, the old ice house for the camp's original kitchen. Little more than an unfinished room with a big, plain bed — not even a ceiling compromising its rustic splendor — the Ice House is lodging at its most basic, Kelsall said, "But on a cold, wet night, it's a dry room with a bed and blanket."

Running a close second in Kelsall's rusticity competition is the structure known at least since Solitude's music-camp days as The Barn, and properly so.

"We're trying to get people to call it something with a little more charm," Kelsall said, "like the Carriage House."

Why?

Because someone, long ago, bought an old horse-drawn carriage at someone's estate sale, disassembled it, trucked it across the lake and up into the hay loft of the camp's old horse stable, reassembling it there for purposes unknown — perhaps with nothing more in mind than to puzzle future generations.



Camp Solitude owner Jay Kelsall stands in front of the Guide House.

Mission accomplished.

Kelsall moved on, pointing out two cabins that contrasted sharply with The Barn and the Ice House, one with drywall, running water and satellite television, the other with everything a family would need to take care of themselves in peaceful isolation from the rest of the camp.

Solitude seemed ready to accommodate all tastes and pocket-books — and palates, too, for Kelsall's next stop was the camp's kitchen where chef Jeannie Darrah was cooking supper for a baker's dozen. And what a supper it was, the powerful aromas of the roast game hen, the glazed carrots, the freshly baked bread piercing this reporter's allergy-impaired nostrils — quite a feat, indeed.

From there, Kelsall led on to the Main House where the other guests were gathered around the great fireplace in the comfy, softly lit living room, waiting to break bread together.

They were urged through the dining room's serving line, helping themselves to the aromatic delicacies offered.

Sitting down, looking around the table, Kelsall's partner Mary Sue Wallace noted that several compound guests were taking care of their own suppers.

"You can cook in your cabin," she said, "you can eat in town, or you can eat here — but I think most of the fun happens here!"

After enjoying an evening meal under the watchful gaze of the woodland caribou's head that is mounted over the dining room's fireplace, this reporter would have to agree.

Part of the table talk was generated by Kelsall himself, who is a master conversationalist.

"Sometimes we'll go around the table once, and everyone will introduce themselves and tell the others what they do in the real world," Kelsall related. "Then we'll go around again, the question being, What is the one thing you know that you would want others to know, too?"

Monday night, seven guests — five overnighters, two just for dinner — joined this reporter, his wife, Kelsall, Wallace, Darrah and another Camp Solitude associate.

Kathy Nutt and her daughter Molly, both of Staten Island, were enjoying their first visit to Camp Solitude. They'd found the rustic resort written up in one of the dozens of brochures contained in a lodging packet sent them by the Lake Placid Visitors Bureau, "and it just spoke to us," Kathy Nutt said.

"We knew we'd love it," Molly said, "and we do!"

Travelmates Susan Eisenlohr, of Flushing, and Ricki Olshan, of Manhattan, guests in a Lake Clear cabin, had seen an ad for Camp Solitude in a local paper and called on a whim. By the end of the meal, they were wondering how they could get their bags from Lake Clear so they could spend the rest of their vacation in Kelsall's wooded kingdom.

Linda Grimes, a friend of Kelsall and Wallace's from San Francisco, had just arrived in the area that afternoon.

"It's much different than what I expected," she said. "I thought it would be more completely isolated. I mean, it's quite isolated and very quiet, set in its own serene little spot – but it's just a 15-minute boat ride across the lake from the bustling businesses of Main Street."

Ayo Moon had come with husband Al Cristancho, from Manhattan, to celebrate their 13th wedding anniversary.

"Wonderful!" was all they could say, gazing at each other in the soft

About Camp Solitude

- Built in 1896 as Camp Grenwolde by B.I. Ward
- Located on the northern end of Placid Lake's west shore
- Renamed Camp Solitude, 1952
- From 1952 to 1976, run as a youth music camp by Joseph and Elva Kelsall, of Princeton, N.J.
- Today, run as a B&B and camp resort by Joseph and Elva's son Jay and partner Mary Sue Wallace, of Oakland, Calif.
- Consists of about 18 buildings, including a Main House, on about 300 acres of secluded lakeshore forest property
- Accessible only by boat, which leaves from Paradox Landing on Victor Herbert Drive at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., with last return to shore at about 9 p.m.; additional runs available at \$15
- Supper available at \$38.75 for evening guests – that's with tax, tips and transport included
- Lodging rates: \$99 w/shared bath, \$120 w/private bath
- Telephone 523-3190 (yes, telephone – and they have electricity, too, both from cables laid along Lake Placid's bottom)
- Web site <http://www.campsolitude.com>

light of the dining room, though this reporter could not be sure whether they were referring to their relationship or their holiday.

The long-lovestruck couple had read about Camp Solitude in a New York travel magazine article on "Dog-Friendly Getaways," which certainly describes Kelsall's retreat – it's one of the few hostels in the area that welcomes guests with canine companions, and apparently the more the better.

Another couple, who'd made their own supper in their cabin, trailed into the Main House dining

room for coffee and dessert.

The two had come to Camp Solitude several weeks earlier, but it had not been quite their cup of tea – in fact, they'd positively hated it.

"She was going to divorce him," Kelsall said, "all the kids had asthma from allergies to the dogs, it was cold and rainy and boring ...

"And now they're back, and we can't seem to get rid of them!"

"Who knew?!" the wife shrugged her shoulders, happily grinning.

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