



# Touring frozen Placid Lake

Words and pictures by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, February 17, 2006

If you're looking for a winter hike that will expand your consciousness and expose you to classic regional architecture, I heartily recommend a Nordic ski circuit of frozen Placid Lake.

Part of the experience is a free tour of one of the largest — and best — collections of Adirondack camp architecture to be found anywhere inside the Blue Line, taken at a time of year when these beautiful structures are more visible and more accessible than during any other season.

Another aspect of this tour is the vastness of the trackless, unbroken Antarctic plain that Placid Lake becomes in the depths of winter, overseen everywhere and at all times by Whiteface Mountain, arising from the lake's northern head.

I took this tour last Friday, February 10.

My point of departure was the end of the dock at the municipal marina off Mirror Lake Drive. In summertime, this is a very busy place indeed, with almost every slip taken by a

small motorboat. In wintertime, however, the marina is empty, like the lake.

I was a little concerned about the safety of the ice, especially with the repeated freezes and thaws we've had this winter. I delayed my excursion, however, until after a series of nights with temperatures at or below zero degrees Fahrenheit.

When I got to the lake, I had the added assurance of seeing numerous snowmobile tracks running across the snow — and if those thousand-pound rocket sleds could safely skiddoo across the ice, then surely so could I.

**PLACID LAKE** looks like a realty broker laid it out. Running about 3.5 miles from head to foot and 1.5 miles from east shore to west, the potential for shoreline real estate is maximized by the presence of three islands in the lake's midst. Buck and Moose islands, the southern two of the trio, are quite large. Hawk Island, near the northern head of the lake, is petite by comparison.

The marina, my starting point, is

on the southeast bay of Placid Lake. The route I had chosen would take me due north to Sunset Strait, west between Buck Island and Brewster Peninsula, northeast up the West Lake, east to Whiteface Bay, then south-southwest around Hawk Island and back to the marina.

Total trip distance: about 7.5 miles, as near as I can figure it.

There was no track for me to follow across the snow, which meant that I was *hiking* with cross country skis more than *gliding* along a hardened Nordic trail around the lake.

Still, the experience was stupendous.

A big part of the day's special beauty came, I'm sure, from the very clear, very blue sky. The temperature was quite frigid, ranging from about 6 degrees Fahrenheit when I started, to about 11 degrees when I returned. With the proper attire, however, the

**AT TOP**, a panoramic shot looking northward on the West Lake toward Whiteface Mountain, with Moose Island on the right.

cold posed no problem — and on that bright, sunny day, the chill didn't stand a chance of freezing my enthusiasm.

**THE FIRST** notable camp I came to was Camp Sunshine, on the southern shore of Buck Island. It's the last in a series of camps extending westward from the island's southeast tip, called Picnic Point.

Originally called Camp Sunset, like the strait upon which it was built, the small compound was renamed Sunshine by the indomitably optimistic Kate Smith, the singer who made "God Bless America" one of our unofficial national anthems.

Kate loved Placid Lake, by all accounts, spending as much of every summer as possible at Camp Sunshine. She even built a radio studio inside one of the camp's boathouses so that she could keep up with her regular broadcasts without having to leave her second — and favorite — home.

Passing out of Sunset Strait and onto the West Lake, on the far shore you will see the Whiteface Club, a resort colony built on the site of the old Whiteface Inn. Originally called the Westside, built in 1882, it was the third hotel to appear on Placid Lake.

Going up the West Lake, you will notice that the western lake shore is nearly covered with camps, while the shores of Buck and Moose islands to the east stand up like pockets of woodland wilderness from the snowy lake. The ownership of much of these two islands rests with the state, which holds them as parts of the "forever wild" Forest Preserve.

**ACROSS FROM** the western tip of Moose Island, between the points where Little Brook and Minnow Brook pour themselves into the lake, begins one of the most interesting series of camps on the lake, both architecturally and historically.

In 1872, just below the mouth of Minnow Brook, a well-known



The Camp Solitude boathouse. Previously named Camp Grenwolde, Solitude is a beautiful, well-preserved example of the Big Lake camps of a hundred years ago.

Shakespearean actor, William Fox Leggett, built a log cabin for himself and his wife. They soon enlarged it into a three-story building of unpeeled logs, said to have been one of the largest log structures in the world — at least half a decade before Henry van Hoeverberg began construction of his famous Adirondack Lodge on Heart Lake.

The Leggetts called their creation Castle Rustico, and until about 1888 they operated their log palace as a resort hotel. After Leggett's death in 1910, the structure went into a long, slow decline. It was demolished in the 1950s.

Several of the camps now standing around Minnow Brook were carved from the Leggetts' original tract, including camps Minnow Brook, Idilio and Rock Ledge.

Camp Idilio is probably the best known of these camps today, although by another name: Camp Solitude. Built in 1898 for W.G. Leland, owner of the Grand Hotel in New York City, it went through sever-

al changes of ownership and several names — Beechward, then Grenwolde — before taking on its present name in 1952, when it was purchased by Joseph and Elva Kelsall of Princeton, N.J.

The Kelsalls ran Solitude as a music camp until 1976, possibly in conjunction with The Music Trail, a summer camp that operated next door at Camp Minnow Brook beginning in 1951.

Today, Camp Solitude is run by the Kelsalls' son Jay as a B&B/camp resort/restaurant on the upper West Lake. The architecture of the place, as seen from the boathouse and main house close to the shore, has stayed true to its origins, as have the interiors of both these buildings.

If the place looks interesting to you as you ski by, consider spending a weekend there this summer — or, if you have a cool \$3.6 million lying around, you can just *buy* it!

**ON A POINT** a little farther up the West Lake is the site of Camp



The ruin of a small stone cottage is the only structure still standing at Camp Birchwood, on Whiteface Bay, built in 1910. The camp was acquired by the state in the 1960s — and torched.

Undercliff. By virtue of its location, Undercliff has nearly unobstructed views of both Whiteface Mountain to the northeast and the High Peaks to the southeast.

Built in 1879 by Charles Alton, Undercliff was one of the earliest camps on the lake. It has gone through several transitions in its 127-year history.

Ten years after building Undercliff, Alton expanded it with rental cottages and tent platforms sufficient to accommodate 100 paying guests.

In 1924, Undercliff was turned into a vacation home for New York Central Railroad retirees.

In 1939, it became a music camp. The new operation hosted campers through the summer of 1962, after which the property was broken up into eight separate parcels and sold.

The house on the point at Undercliff today is not the original camp, built in 1879, but a replacement called Skandario, built in 1902. That house, however, is not what will catch your eye as you near Undercliff

point.

Next door, to the south, you will see what looks like an architectural candy cane. The camp is called, simply, The Lodge. Both the boathouse below and the curiously leaning two-

story cottage above, painted red with white trim, look like they could well be Santa's summer place — if it weren't for the fact that everyone already knows his summer abode is located on the other side of Whiteface Mountain, at Santa's Workshop.

Beyond Undercliff is Echo Bay, the northernmost extremity of Placid Lake. On the west side of the bay stands Camp Woodsmoke, a children's summer camp that started out in 1880 as Echo Lodge, a summer hotel with tent accommodations. Though the original hotel building was torn down and replaced in 1896, an artist's studio that was built on the grounds in 1881 is the oldest surviving structure on Placid Lake today.

On the northern tip of Echo Bay once stood Eagle's Eyrie camp, built in 1908 beneath the hill for which it is named. Another camp next door, Camp Erdman, was built around the same time by a relative of the owner of Eagle's Eyrie. Both, however, are no more; the land upon which they stood was bought by the state for addition to what is now the McKenzie Mountain Wilderness Area, and the camps were torn down.



Looking down the East Lake from above Moose Island.

**THE SAME FATE** was met by Camp Birchwood, which stood to the east around the point below Eagle's Eyrie hill, on the west side of Whiteface Bay.

My editor, knowing that I like to poke around in ghost towns and old ruins and the like, told me before I left that I might be able to see the remnants of an old Great Camp as I passed by the Birchwood site. Lo and behold, as I rounded the point, I did indeed see the stonework of an old boathouse foundation on the shoreline.

Skiing closer and looking up the hillside above, I caught a glimpse of some kind of stone structure. Releasing the bindings on my skis, I climbed the remains of the boathouse steps and scrambled up the snow-covered hill. There, standing by its lonesome, was a two-room stone cottage, one wall fallen in, the roof supported by makeshift birch-log pillars. A little farther up the hillside stood Birchwood's former foundations, apparently rock-solid though no longer supporting the main camp house.

Built by Harrie Hull in 1910 and later owned by the Uihleins, in 1948 Birchwood was bought by Irving Platnik, a technical arts teacher from Queens, who converted the property into — you guessed it — a children's summer camp. Irv and Pauline Platnik and their daughter LouAnn operated Birchwood until 1963, after which it was bought by the state, added to the Forest Preserve, and torched.

**STRAPPING MY** skis back on, I started heading south, down the East Lake. After rounding tiny Hawk Island with its private camp, the expanse of the 3-mile-long Antarctic plain ahead hit me squarely between the frontal lobes. Pushing off, skiing into the weak winter sun, the whole world seemed to glow around me, and — I kid you not — my mind really seemed to expand upon the trackless, pristine waste that was the frozen surface of Placid Lake.

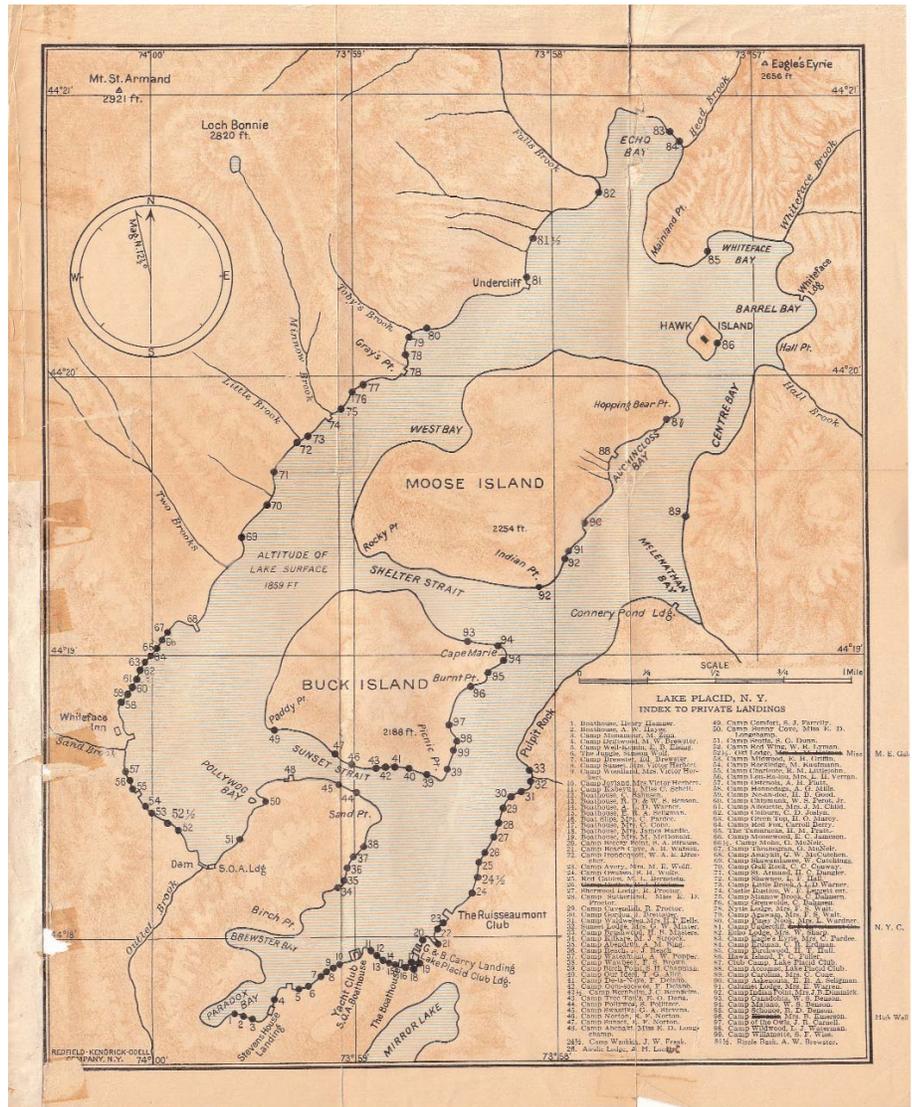
'This,' I thought, 'is the kind of lonely, desolate place where people go when they tire of the things of man. This is the kind of absolute wilderness where holy men and women run, head first, into God.'

Skiing past Camp Carolina, the northernmost camp on the East Lake, then past Pulpit Rock below the old Ruisseaumont Hotel site, and rounding Buck Island, I started scanning the distance for the marina. It had been a wonderful day, but a long one, and I had pushed my endurance level close to the max. I was anxious to find the dock, take off my skis, get in

my car and head on home.

But the lake, after giving me glimpses of so many beautiful structures with so much history, and giving my imagination so much emptiness into which to expand, had one more gift to give me.

As I reached the dock and released my ski bindings for the last time that day, I looked up for a final glance at the crown of Whiteface, the geological king of Placid Lake — and there, shining sideways through the atmosphere, the last rays of the sun painted the summit a bright scarlet before being cut off by the horizon.



Map of Placid Lake landings from the 1924 handbook of the Shore Owners Association of Lake Placid