

# The Allure of the Great Lodge & Guide Tradition in Nova Scotia



Cabin at Birchdale Lodge



One of the later Yarmouth steamers

From far and wide the inveterate globetrotters came to Nova Scotia, Canada in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, drawn by the spirit of adventure, exploration, and the enjoyment of pristine and uncharted nature. Bankers & industrialists joined the likes of Amelia Earhart, Ernest Hemingway, Franklin Roosevelt, Babe Ruth, Zane Grey, and America's finest adventure travel writer, Albert Paine Bigelow, as they sailed off to the southern tip of this maritime peninsula, landing at Yarmouth and then proceeding inland.

The Grand and Markland Hotels, the Lakeside Inn, and Birchdale, Braemar, and Bayview Lodges awaited their leisure-loving summer guests who boarded the stocky Boston-Yarmouth steamers, crossing the Gulf of Maine in that great age of adventure travel. Others founded private family clubs, like the Ardnamuchan, or built secluded lodges of their own like the Argyle, where many a lobster bake and soiree fêted the rich and famous who came to the annual World Tuna Fishing Championship on the coast.



Zane Grey in Yarmouth County, 1924



The Yarmouth Grand Hotel



Steamship and Train at Yarmouth Docks

The word « lodge » itself in the sense of a « hunter's cabin » came into use in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with origins going back to French and German words for arbor or shelter of foliage. Lodges were always places of attunement with nature. Akin to their southerly neighbors in the Adirondacks, the Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia lodges were intentionally rustic but comfortable and gracious dwellings built from hand-hewn logs, stone foundations, and rought-cut timbers. Here, without contact with the outside world of hustle and bustle, the globetrotters relaxed:

« **The spell of the forest and the chase gripped me body and soul. Only these things were worth while. Nothing else mattered nothing else existed.** » Albert Bigelow Paine, *The Tent Dwellers* (1908). Some relaxed at the shore or the nearby woodlands & lakes, near the Town of Yarmouth itself. The brave at heart, though, ventured across the countryside by carriage to the edge of the seemingly impenetrable Acadian forests, where the rivers became the highways.



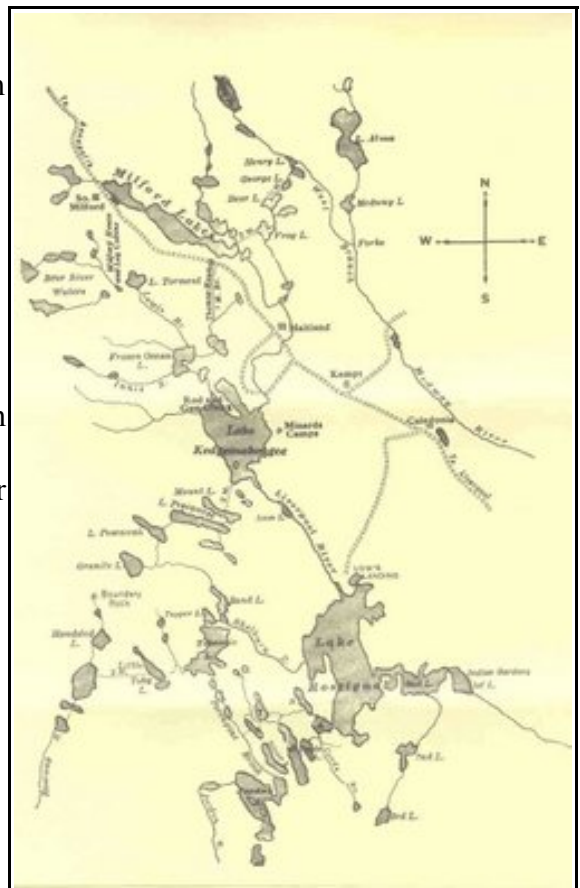
Lakeside Inn, Yarmouth

The heart of it all—the frontier territory—was the Tobeatic, called the « empty quarter » of Nova Scotia, a terrain left unto itself by the last glaciers. Etched, rocky, and rough with upland bogs, erratics, eskers, deadwaters, pools, and chutes, giant boulders and granite barrens the area was always best accessible by water routes, often up the river. Here moose, black bear, bald eagles, snapping turtles, brook trout, porcupines, and flying squirrels far outnumber any human denizens. Local canoeist Andy Smith describes his respect for the Tobeatic thusly:

the Tobeatic is addressed with profound reverence, in hushed, respectful tones, quietly, softly, in deference to all the ghosts she harbors, and to all who have ever paddled her caramel waters, walked her granite face and wizened vegetation, and felt her forbidding and sometimes inhospitable remoteness.

Some travelled further afield, to places like Milford House and Kejimikujik, however the majority centered themselves around Yarmouth County and Argyle Municipality with its famous Tusket River, a place where backwoods French Acadian, New England Planters, and MicMac Indians blended culture and traditions.

Map of the expedition recounted in *The Tent Dwellers*





As Michael McAdam of the Atlantic Salmon Federation has written:



her myriad lakes and tributaries fed an ever-widening stream that flowed through muskeg-laden meadows and rolling thickets of spruce and poplar overseen by giant flat-top pines. Shards of "old man's beard" hung from the hemlock and tamarack that lined her granite banks and her waters took on their characteristic peat stain as she picked up each tarn and brook on her seaward course. Moose grazed in her bogs and wetland meadows and local fishermen packed thousands of barrels of salted gaspereau (or "kiacks" as they are known on Nova Scotia's South Shore) each year for shipment to the New England states. . . . And from those same New England states, and New York, to southwestern Nova Scotia came the sports; the rich and the famous. Baseball's legendary Babe Ruth fished her waters for the large salmon which returned, virtually unmolested, to her upstream spawning gravel each summer.

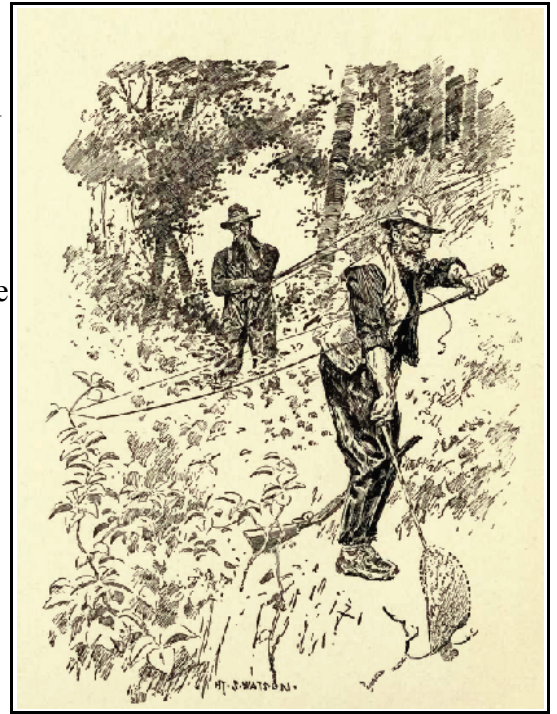
In villages like Kemptville, guiding became a major enterprise for generations of local men, while the woman cooked and tended to the guest quarters. These were old-time backwoodsmen who knew the rivers, lakes, and trails and fishing was the primary pursuit, with a little hunting too. One could sportfish for tuna off Wedgeport one day, and retreat to the Tobetic Wilderness for fly fishing the next. As early as the 1900s, Nova Scotia had grown a reputation that drew the adventurous spirit:

**«Tell me about it, Eddie,» ; I said. «Where are you going, this time?»**

**Then he unfolded to me a marvelous plan. It was a place in Nova Scotia he had been there once before, only, this time he was going a different route, farther into the wilderness, the deep unknown, somewhere even the guides had never been. Albert Bigelow Paine, *The Tent Dwellers*, 1908.**



Peter and Lewis Vacon, local Acadian French guides, hosted Babe Ruth as he fished and camped on the Tusket. Salmon and trout drew the enthusiasts for hours of fly casting, canoeing, and exploring. In a community where story-telling is a favourite stoveside pastime, the false is often told of Babe's favourite wake-up exercises while based at Billy Lovitt's nearby woodland camp. After an evening of cards, yarns and Jack Daniels, Babe and the guides would retire to be up by dawn. The Babe would sneak outside at 3 or 4 a.m. and discharge both barrels of his 12-gauge Remington into the air. Out would spill the guides, Peter and Louis, swearing in French and struggling to get their pants and shoes on as they careened out into the chilly air. Never a man to sleep more than a few hours at a time, Babe would then rack the shotgun, march back into the cabin and make everyone breakfast as they waited for the dawn, muttering to themselves as the big slugger grinned over the stove.



A young Franklin Roosevelt (third from right) in Nova Scotia

After World War II, the Grand Hotel, Braemar Lodge, and the Markland became, over time, distant memories, each having suffered fires. The Boston steamers stopped running. Birchdale Lodge shifted to private hands, at one time serving as a Carmelite Monastery, and the elegant Lakeside Inn was converted to a retirement home. The great lodge & guide tradition almost faded from the scene.

In 1998, though, the Province of Nova Scotia declared the Tobetic Wilderness a vast protected area. And with the new millennium, a Lodge opened on the banks of the very Tusket River where Babe Ruth had once sojourned with his Acadian guides. Trout Point Lodge brought back the glory and romanticism of the Golden Era of Nova Scotia Great Lodges. An architectural master piece made from giant Eastern Spruce logs, chiseled granite and sandstone, with full scribe notch and dovetail joinery, Trout Point's owners built the Lodge in celebration of the local Great Lodge tradition. Here, impeccable service and gourmet dining beckon to world travellers alongside the age-old call of the wilderness.



Guests can once again stay within the Tobeatic's majestic woodlands, swim, canoe, and kayak the Tusket, and fly fish to their heart's content. Re-experience the gone-by era of Nova Scotia wilderness expeditions and be sure to bring along a copy of *The Tent Dwellers*!

“Trout Point Lodge is somewhat like an overgrown cabin, made of local wood, with a long second story porch: the beds, chairs, and tables are handmade from saplings.”

*The Hotel Book: Great Escapes North America* (2006)

Trout Point Lodge of Nova Scotia

[www.troutpoint.com](http://www.troutpoint.com)

photographs of W. R. MacAskill <http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/macaskill/>

*The Tent Dwellers* by Albert Bigelow Paine <http://www.openlibrary.org/details/thetentdwellers00painrich>

« Against all odds » by Michael McAdam <http://www.asf.ca/Journal/1999/Spr99/tusket.html>