



EXPERIMENTS IN WOMEN’S RIGHTS  
AND FEMINISM IN THE WOODS:  
ADIRONDACK VISITORS FROM  
ANNA CONSTABLE TO ANNE LABASTILLE

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**ABSTRACT**

In the 1860s, Helen Lossing tied up her skirts out of the mud to follow her husband to Lake Tear of the Clouds. A century later, Anne LaBastille wore men’s clothes and wielded a chainsaw to build herself a cabin. As women came to the Adirondacks through the years in between, they found a place in which the natural environment dominated one’s life and thought. Here they found the freedom to experiment with changing interpretations of their nature, with relationships to men, and with dress.

Not all women felt at home in the woods, while others gave up city life altogether. The vast majority were somewhere in the middle. They picked and chose, learning skills and ways of thinking that influenced the rest of their lives. This study examines the experiences of female visitors to the Adirondacks and sets these women’s experiences against the struggle for women’s rights and the development of feminism.

The history of women in America between the mid nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries is rightly filled with accounts of the struggle for legal and political rights – to the ballot, to employment, to control of their property and their children. The stage is usually urban, and the actors are commonly women who wrote or spoke their pieces to crowds.

FREESTYLE CANOEIST PADDLING PAST ISLAND IN HORSESHOE POND, SARANAC LAKES WILD FOREST, FRANKLIN CO., ADIRONDACK PARK & FOREST PRESERVE, NY

The present study takes a social historian's perspective and focuses on a different stage, the Adirondacks, and looks for evidence of the struggle for women's rights and the feminist movement there. How did women conform to the stereotypes about their own supposedly weaker physical and mental strength when confronted with wildlands? Did they fashion new relationships with men? How did they adopt more practical dress? How was the "woodswoman" of the mid-twentieth century shaped by history and by mainstream urban culture?

I admit to committing the error identified by Nancy Cott of adopting the "neologism *feminism* and applying it retrospectively and generally to claims for women's rights" (Cott 3). I suggest that the error be excused on the grounds that I am examining the personal, social attitudes of women, rather than their activities in the political sphere. I submit that we can gain a fuller understanding of this important period in women's history by asking how women adopted new attitudes into their personal lives.

I begin in the 1850s, when women were popularly held to be occupants of a "separate sphere" from men. The theory which influenced the upbringing of women like Helen Lossing (1834-1911) was that they were weaker (both mentally and physically) and needed protection from the rough, profit-centered sphere of men. They were also, however, believed to be more appreciative of beauty and nature. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the influence of the educated, active, independent "New Woman" is seen in the activities of women venturing into the Adirondacks and continues into the twentieth in women such as Paulina Brandreth (1885-1946) and Martha Reben (1906-1964). By the middle of the twentieth century, the modern feminist in the woods is exemplified by Anne LaBastille (1933-2011). Social history rarely exhibits neat boundaries, however, and throughout the century discussed here, we will see all of these women retaining attitudes and activities from their past.

I avoid the term "Adirondack women" in this paper. I reserve that title for women who lived in the region year-round. Adirondack women identified much less with the notions of separate spheres, woman's place, and woman's nature than the middle class urban and townswomen who are usually the subjects of women's histories. These Adirondack women were generally poorer than the middle-class urban women and were acknowledged as essential partners in economic endeavors such as farming, logging, and the tourist industry. There is a different story for much of the period under discussion.

Another term I should clarify is "wilderness." I do not find it useful here because of the multitude of ways it has been used to stand in for the Adirondacks. Is "wilderness" a tract of land with no signs of man? Is its size important? Is it a state of mind or a land-use planning classification? From the early nineteenth century to the present that word has been used in so many ways to stand in for the Adirondacks and carries so much baggage that it seems wise not to use it except when quoting primary sources. I propose the term "wildlands" instead.

## MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY CAMPER

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In the summer of 1850, William Constable III organized a family expedition from his home in the Black River valley on the western edge of the mountains to Raquette Lake in the interior of the Adirondacks, a 72-mile trip. Constable's grandfather had been the proprietor of the enormous Macomb's Purchase, and his father built the Georgian mansion there, Constable Hall, from which the group departed. With William traveled his sister Anna, six other female cousins and friends, Anna and William's three brothers, and two other "gentlemen." That last word is used in its nineteenth-century sense, for it clearly distinguishes the pleasure-seekers – the Constables and their friends – from the men they hired in the woods. As with most pleasure excursions of the nineteenth century, the group was accompanied by at least two of these woodsmen who made part of their livings as guides to hunters, fishermen, and other parties like that of the Constables (Pilcher 1992).<sup>1</sup>

The group travelled to Raquette Lake along the Carthage Road, which had been begun in 1841 and linked Carthage on the Black River with Crown Point on Lake Champlain. It never really became a thoroughfare, and in the Constables' time was not much more than "a path cut through the woods with an attempt at bridging streams and morasses with corduroy [logs laid crosswise]" (Potter 34).<sup>2</sup> William Constable provided a wagon for the ladies to ride in, but they often abandoned it as less comfortable than walking alongside the men. When the party arrived at the shore of Raquette Lake, the lake guides met them and rowed them to their campsite on what became known as Constable Point. The guides built the ladies a separate "shanty" near the beach screened from the men by trees and bushes so they could have some privacy for sleeping and their morning ablutions in the lake. The women had brought only the most basic of supplies for the trip: underclothes, "bathing dress" (not described, alas), and a thick shawl for warmth.

Anna Constable and her cousin were not the only women in the mid-nineteenth century who ventured into the Adirondacks in the years before the Civil War. For several years during the 1850s other "Ladies Expeditions" from the same group of family and friends spent a month or so on Raquette Lake. In 1856, the Hon. Amelia Matilda Murray, a visitor from the court of Queen Victoria, travelled through the Adirondacks from "Sarawak" Lake to Old Forge by boat and on foot. In 1860, Helen Lossing accompanied her husband, historian Benson Lossing, as he traveled to the headwaters of the Hudson as research for his book on the river.

All these early women campers belied the belief that women were not hardy enough for travel and life in the wild. We have practically nothing from their own minds about why they went, but context suggests that they, like the men of the time, traveled to experience nature up close.

Even in the woods, the women preserved at least an appearance of the proprieties of civilization. Amelia Murray and her female companion had to sleep in the same lean-to as the two gentlemen one night, but she hung her shawl (probably about seven feet square) as a "curtain of division" between the gentlemen and the women (Murray, *Letters*, 265). (The male

guides slept under the stars.) Young unmarried women, such as the Constables, traveled with chaperones. Anna Constable was unmarried as well, but at thirty years old, was probably felt to be old enough to act as chaperone to the others. Nor did any of the women discussed here travel without a man of *her own class* as “protector.” Several of the Constable party had brothers to look after them, and Helen Lossing had her husband. Amelia Murray was accompanied by Horatio Seymour (then between his two terms as governor of New York State) and a “Mr. H.” Also in the party was Seymour’s niece. Neither she nor Murray was married, but Murray, at 60 years old, could chaperone.

Part of the antebellum notion of woman’s place was that she occupied a separate sphere than men. Her sphere of influence was the home; man’s was the world. This is not to say that the women we have been discussing did much actual housework or cooking at home, and they had help in the woods as well. There, the guides (all men) constructed the camp and did the cooking. Women were expected to make the lean-to or shanty “more home-like.” Both Murray and Lossing helped gather hemlock and balsam boughs for mattresses at campsites. The Constable women, according to Bob Racket, “would occupy themselves in standard female occupations, reading, sewing, or walking in the woods” (Pilcher 70).

Written accounts of these trips, intended for a public with notions of societally-appropriate behavior for women, often highlight women’s gentle, sensitive nature. When a mixed party approached a deer on the 1850 Constable expedition, the lady begged the man not to shoot the deer, asking him, “how can you, when he looks so imploringly out of those sad and expressive eyes, so eloquently appealing for mercy?” She didn’t prevail; both the “entreaties of [the] fair companion and the life of the deer were ended by the rifle shot” (Pilcher 78-80). Descriptions of women’s reactions to the beauty of the region are replete with the sublimity of scenes and the recognition of God’s hand in the world (interpretations also heard from men at the time). Joel Tyler Headley, one of the first writers to call attention to the Adirondacks as a retreat, wrote in his 1849 *The Adirondack: or, Life in the Woods* that the ladies he encountered regretted having to leave. “These Lakes, dotted with islands – the dark, solemn rivers running all day long, almost without a sound, through the still forest – the distant mountain views – the wilderness and beauty that perpetually surround them, have a greater charm for the ladies than even the fine sporting has for gentlemen” (Headley 311).

In spite of the formalities being observed, the Constable expedition negotiated more familiar relationships appropriate for the woods while at the same time keeping distinctions of address. Readers of Adirondack hunting tales will recognize the practice of the hunters getting new names in the woods. “Bob Racket” (probably John Constable) explained in an account of the 1856 expedition serialized in *The Knickerbocker*. Once in the woods, he wrote, each camper was given a “*nom de chasse*, by which title we were always to address each other, thus avoiding the formality of mistaking and missing one another, as well as the familiarity of using the Christian names” (Pilcher 70). The names chosen were Indian names from history, literature, and legend, names such as Pocahontas and Hawkeye from Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans*, and Onkahye, an “Indian maiden” whose story had appeared in *The Knickerbocker* the year before.

Women did not feel confined to their “usual occupations” in camp. Several of the Constable women climbed nearby 4139-foot Blue Mountain on the 1850 trip, and as we have seen, went hunting with the men. For their active occupations in the woods, they and other early female campers necessarily adopted appropriate dress. They must have known about Bloomer costume, a significantly more practical costume for active women, but few seemed to adopt it. Also called “reform dress,” this outfit consisted of a just-below-knee-length dress over Turkish trousers, which were quite full and fastened at the ankle with cuffs. In the 1850s this outfit was associated with women who were outside of the mainstream such as suffrage and temperance advocates (like Amelia Bloomer herself), and these unconventional and controversial causes stigmatized the costume. When the Oneida Community, with its “Bible Communism” and what looked suspiciously like open marriage, adopted a similar dress for women, the practical costume became even more controversial. A few women did wear the outfit in the woods and it was recommended for others. Joel Tyler Headley noted a party of campers from Vermont in which the ladies wore “short dresses and Turkish trowsers,” but they seem to have been exceptions (Headley 311).



“Departure for Tahawus,” from Benson Lossing, *The Hudson: From the Wilderness to the Sea*. This engraving, made from Lossing’s sketch made on the 1859 trip, shows his wife’s dress for hiking in the Adirondacks. Adirondack Museum P7176.

Most women adapted more conventional costumes to accommodate both conditions in the woods and the proprieties. As Helen Lossing’s husband wrote of her solution,

“a woman needs a stout flannel dress, over shortened crinoline, of short dimensions, with loops and buttons to adjust its length; a hood and cape of the same materials, made so as to envelop the head and bust, and leave the arms free, woolen stockings, stout calfskin boots that cover the legs to the knee, well saturated with beeswax and tallow...” (Lossing 28).

Helen could thus shorten her skirt to keep it out of the dirt and make it easier to walk but easily lengthen it when back in civilized company.

## POST CIVIL WAR: THE "RUSH" TO THE ADIRONDACKS

Readers interested in Adirondack history are familiar with what became known as "Murray's Rush," the rapid increase in tourism to the region after the Civil War. It is named after William Henry Harrison "Adirondack" Murray, whose best-selling book *Adventures in the Wilderness, or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks* appeared in 1869. The volume described the benefits of the region for both mental and physical health, how to get there, what to wear and what to take, and concluded with a charming picture of life and adventures in the region through a series of short vignettes. At the time Murray's book appeared, rapid industrialization in the northeast had both improved transportation to the edges of the Adirondacks and made it easier and cheaper for people to escape the increasingly polluted and fast-paced cities. As the middle class grew and were able to take vacations both men and women wanted to spend time in the woods.

"It is marvelous what benefit physically is often derived from a trip of a few weeks to these woods," wrote Murray, focusing on the region's health-giving properties. "I have known delicate ladies and fragile school-girls, to whom all food at home was distasteful and eating a pure matter of duty, average a gain of a pound per day for the round trip" (Murray, *Adventures*, 11). This reference to weight gain may elicit a giggle from some modern readers, but at the time, frailty and loss of appetite and weight were characteristics of consumption (tuberculosis). Neurasthenia, or a weakness of the nerves, was another "modern" illness associated with life in cities. Women, with their supposedly more delicate and sensitive nerves, were especially prone to the condition for which doctors prescribed vacations in the Adirondacks, close to nature and away from the stress of urban life.

The belief in woman's more sensitive nature was felt to be an advantage to the study of plants. This not only helped ease the way for women entering the profession of botany, but provided another reason to observe nature in the Adirondacks. A group of young women from a ladies' seminary in New York City mounted a "botanizing expedition" to the region in 1873 and articulated this belief in their group journal of the trip. They explained,

*"All the officers of the Expedition should be females. Ladies are much better qualified for the varied and arduous duties of such an expedition by their power of observation, their patient and persevering industry, no less than by their delicate touch in the manipulation of instruments and the minute organs of plants, and by their intuitive sense of the beautiful in Nature"* (Benedict 1873).

Murray was riding a rising tide in urging women to visit the Adirondacks, if one believes Joel Tyler Headley. In the revised edition of *The Adirondack; or, Life in the Woods*, published the same year as Murray's, Headley noted that ladies were coming to the woods "in crowds." He distinguished two classes, those who wanted to "to rough it like any man. They like the tent-life – the distant exploration and the hunter's fare, and sometimes use his rifle or the sportsman's rod....Willing to take the evil and good together, the wild scenery and wilder life have a charm for them that makes them laugh at mosquitoes and the thousand little inconveniences to which they are subjected." He noted, however, that there was "another, large class that have no taste for such things. They want to see a little of the wilderness without being deprived of their

usual comforts" (Headley 444). For this latter class, entrepreneurs in the region were building boarding houses and hotels small and large along lakes and main routes of travel right into the middle of the region. These provided usual comforts of the city made all the more delightful by their settings in the middle of the "wilderness."



*"Miss Diana in the Adirondacks – A Shot Across the Lake" appeared on the cover of "Harper's Weekly," Vol. XXVII, No. 1392) in 1883. Fashionably-attired Diana has just killed a trophy buck, much to the delight of her male companions in the guideboat. The image, by W.A. Rogers, appeared on the cover of the magazine, and the accompanying article stated that it depicted a real occurrence and identified Diana as a young lady "well known in New York society." She was not named, of course, following etiquette of the time that held that a lady's name appeared in the newspaper only twice in her life: when she was married and when she died. Adirondack Museum 1994.027.0010.*

As Headley noted, some women hunted and fished along with the men, their supposedly sensitive and nurturing natures notwithstanding. Women's presumed delicacy was a positive advantage in fishing, according to an 1879 article in *Forest and Stream*. "In fly casting, than which no more delicate operation graces the sportsman's category, a skillful hand and supple wrist are necessary to bring about satisfactory results, and woman possesses both these attributes to a much finer degree than man." Late nineteenth-century writers often compared women hunters to the Roman goddess Diana, placing the women squarely in an ancient and honorable tradition.

As the century progressed, increasing numbers of men and women reported the freer relationships demanded by outdoor living. Mildred Phelps Stokes Hooker wrote that when she was a child summering on Upper St. Regis Lake in the 1880s, "the waiting hours [in still hunting] were not always tiresome, especially for the twosomes, which usually consisted of a young man and a maiden and more than once resulted in more permanent associations" (Hooker 23). Chaperones seem not to have been required. The English *Cornhill Magazine* expressed surprise at the practice in 1872: "On these expeditions brothers will take sisters and cousins, their sisters and cousins bringing, perhaps, lady friends with them; the brother's friends will come too, and all will live together in a fraternal way for weeks or months, though no elderly relative or married lady be of the party."

The ladies' botanizing expedition mentioned above is a particularly surprising absence of city proprieties for 1873. Six parties of six young women each set off separately on different routes to Blue Mountain Lake. For a month, the ladies camped and botanized, hiking or being rowed, accompanied only by the local guides. No older lady or no related male accompanied any of the six groups. Did this strike nobody as inappropriate because the women didn't perceive the guides as belonging to the same class and therefore the social rules didn't apply?

More practical dress for the woods and mountains continued to gain acceptance, although not along the lines the mid-century reformers had suggested. By the 1880s, fashion and societal change in America at large resulted in activities and dress soon to be associated with the "New Woman."

### THE NEW WOMAN IN THE ADIRONDACKS

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Some of the key characteristics of the ideal New Woman of the late nineteenth century were education, independence, athleticism, and less formal attitudes towards men, all of which, as we have seen, turned up in the Adirondacks at least concurrently, and perhaps in advance of, their appearance in the cities.

The conventional view of women didn't disappear (especially in accounts written by men), even as women proved themselves stronger and more independent. Most women still went with men when they ventured into the wildlands. Mrs. C.J. Mattison and her husband spent two weeks canoeing and camping from Fourth Lake in the Fulton Chain to Tupper Lake in 1906. He wrote "it will probably be a great surprise to many canoeists to learn that a nervous and frail little woman, weighing less than one hundred and twelve pounds, could sleep with only one blanket and poncho between her and the ground, but that is what my wife did, and she invariably enjoyed a night of refreshing sleep" (Mattison 117). On the last day of the trip, the frail and nervous little woman shot a muskrat with her pistol from the canoe, just for sport.



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*Mr. and Mrs. R.H. Stevens putting their canoe on the Marion River Carry Railroad to cross from the Eckford Chain of Lakes into Raquette Lake, 1920. Adirondack Museum P15672.*

Women increasingly hunted, fished, hiked, climbed mountains, and explored the region afoot or in small boats. The indigenous boat, the Adirondack guideboat, was primarily just that – a boat in which the passenger was rowed by a professional guide, and it had been the preferred vessel since before the Civil War. By the turn of the century, the boat and the guide were being replaced on the waterways by much cheaper wood-canvas canoes, paddled by the "outers" themselves. Charlotte Chesebro Hough, who was married to well-known outdoor writer Emerson Hough, felt positively that "Canoes Seem Made for Girls," as she titled an article she wrote for *The Ladies Home Journal* in 1915. Mrs. Hough pointed out that canoes were light and delicate, not unlike the enduring image of women, and that canoeing was a healthy, safe, sport (Hough 76).

Paulina Brandreth stands out in a survey of New Women in the Adirondacks, although she may not have considered herself as one. She certainly lived the outdoor life she wanted, but she also was shielded from having to explain herself or even show herself by her wealth and privilege. Brandreth was born in 1885 to a wealthy family with long ties to the Adirondacks. Her grandfather, Benjamin Brandreth, a manufacturer of patent medicines, had purchased township 39, of the Totten and Crossfield Purchase in northern Hamilton County, in 1852. By the time of Paulina's girlhood, several branches of the family had built camps on Brandreth Lake and used them extensively for hunting and fishing during the summers. Hunting and the outdoor life captivated Paulina. She never married, and as a grown woman lived much of the year in a cottage she built on Brandreth Park, somewhat removed from the main family complex on the lake. She farmed and raised Airedale terriers there, but her main activities were hunting whitetailed deer and writing about the pursuit.

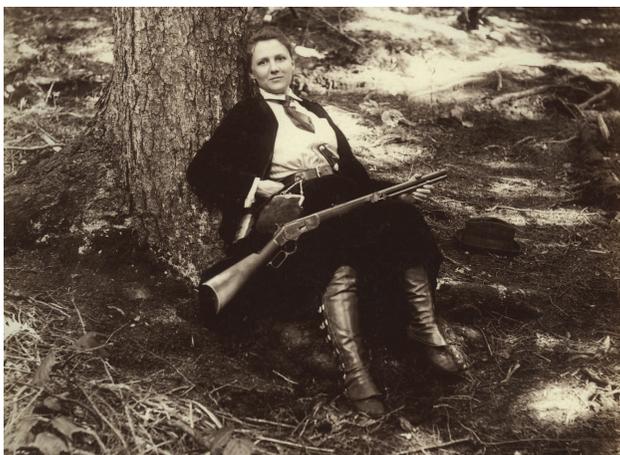


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*Paulina Brandreth (left) and hunting companions about 1920. Adirondack Museum P020183.*

Brandreth was known as a skilled still hunter in her own right, but she seems to have hunted with a male guide most of the time. Her favorite companion was Reuben Cary, four decades her senior and an employee of the Brandreths. Cary and Brandreth were partners in the field. In camp they were mistress and servant, in tasks though perhaps not in attitudes. Cary dressed and hauled the carcasses, and in camp he did the cooking.

Scholar Mary Zeiss Stange suggests that Paulina Brandreth was probably transgender (Stange, 320). Brandreth seems to have dressed and acted conventionally outside the confines of Brandreth Park, but sheltered within it she could, and did, wear male clothing and engage in what were still regarded as primarily male pursuits. But she maintained a foot in both camps. She published her poetry and plays – acceptable and even encouraged sorts of expression for women – under her own name. She published her hunting pieces under the male pseudonym *Paul Brandreth*. By the time of her death in 1946, these amounted to a book, *Trails of Enchantment*, and at least thirty-one articles in *Forest and Stream* and *Field and Stream*, all on deer hunting, nature, and the outdoor life. As the title of the book suggests, the subject is not just (or perhaps even primarily) a work on hunting whitetailed deer, but also about her joy at being immersed in the wonderful wildlands they inhabit. It is full of minutely observed, beautifully written descriptions of those wildlands – all supposedly written by a man.



*Madge Gibson Brandreth hunting on Brandreth Park in the late 1890s. Madge's husband was an uncle of Paulina. Adirondack Museum P862.*

Paulina Brandreth may have worn men's clothes at Brandreth Park, but other women visiting the Adirondacks adopted a more conventional costume, the practical dress for office work, bicycling, and sports like tennis which was becoming increasingly acceptable in cities. The Adirondack version, "short mountain costume," was current by the 1880s: straight, flared skirts with minimal volume which hung well above the ground for ease in walking. In the Adirondacks, women wore high boots that covered their ankles and lower legs and satisfied modesty while enabling them to negotiate rocky, muddy trails.

The ready-made clothing industry grew rapidly at this time, producing clothing for these outdoor women. One of the first to focus specifically on sporting women was Bird, Kenyon and Jones of Utica, south of the Adirondacks. "Ladies are appreciating more and more the benefits to be derived from outdoor life and sports of various kinds," they wrote in their 1908 catalogue. "No tonic is so good or will add so much to health, strength, and beauty as that supplied by nature and mother earth" (Duxbak 1908). Shortly after they opened for business in 1903,

they offered ladies garments made of their special waterproof Duxbak cloth. Women could purchase two styles of jackets, two styles of skirts, hats, puttee-like "leggings," and bloomers that were worn under the skirt, not seen. Both a five-gored and a divided skirt (the central division concealed by a button-down panel) extended almost to the top of the wearer's shoe, but by 1922, the length had risen to just below the knee. The more daring and active women could buy Duxbak breeches that laced up the calves.

## FEMINISM IN THE WILD

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The term "feminism" began to enter the American vocabulary in the 1910s. During this "first wave" of feminism, as historians now call the decades of the early twentieth century, Paulina Brandreth continued to hunt and write. Historians see an end to this first wave with the passage of the nineteenth amendment in 1920. With less fanfare, another milestone was passed: it became increasingly unremarkable for women to enjoy the Adirondacks unencumbered by the broader society's notions of their nature and place.



*Martha Reben and Fred Rice about 1940. Adirondack Museum P47524.*

Martha Reben came to the region for her health, a standard reason among both men and women. She stayed for the rest of her life, and made a reputation for herself because of the image she projected of a self-sufficient woman in the woods and because of her nature writings. Born Martha Reben in New York City in 1906, she came to Saranac Lake at the age of 21 to cure her tuberculosis. She made no progress with conventional treatments, so in 1931 she answered an advertisement in the local paper placed by a 55-year-old guide and boatbuilder named Fred M. Rice. Rice, whose failing eyesight was making it difficult to continue building boats proposed to take a consumptive into the woods for the season to cure. He was convinced that living and exercising in the outdoors was more efficacious than sitting passively in a sanitarium, as did most tuberculosis patients in Saranac Lake. He probably

didn't expect a young woman answering his ad, especially not one as ill as Martha was by 1931. On the first trip to their campsite, she lay on a mattress in the bottom of the boat, too weak to sit up. Rice looked after Reben for the entire summer at a camp he'd established on Weller Pond, just north of Middle Saranac Lake. She improved so much that after spending the winter with Rice and his wife Kate, she and Rice returned to the woods as soon as the ice was out and stayed until the lakes began to freeze pretty much for the next ten years.

As Reben's health improved, Rice took other guiding jobs, leaving her alone at the campsite for long periods of time. She spent much of her time observing the wildlife around her and keeping her notes in a journal. In 1952 she published the best-selling book, *The Healing Woods*, based on her experiences. Two other books followed. She died in 1964.<sup>3</sup>

Reben's family had supported her financially all the years she lived in Saranac Lake, although they didn't approve of her living arrangements or even her friendship with the Rices, who were quite poor (Benson 1983). Eyebrows were raised elsewhere in Saranac Lake, as well, but apparently not enough to damage Reben's reputation to the extent that it hurt her sales. Perhaps this was due to the difference in her and Rice's age or class, or the fact that she was beyond the pale as a consumptive. It is also the case that times were changing.

## SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM IN THE ADIRONDACKS

By the mid-twentieth century, many of the goals associated with women's rights and early feminism had been achieved (or, practically speaking, were available to middle-class American women). Women were active in careers and professions formerly thought the province of men. Their abilities were not necessarily defined by their peculiar "nature," nor did they need a man to protect or even support them. They wore clothing that suited them and their activities, and they could be active and athletic if they so chose. But there remained a sort of feminist last frontier: proving that a woman could do as well as a man when confronted with "the wilderness," that defining trait of the American consciousness.

When Anne LaBastille arrived in the Adirondacks, she had already achieved many significant feminist goals. She was well-educated, having earned a Doctorate in Wildlife Ecology from Cornell. She had worked alongside men in the field, written numerous scientific articles, and won national recognition for her work. She had no family and was self-supporting – a situation becoming rapidly less unusual and more acceptable. She had been married and divorced, and it was to heal from her divorce that she moved to the Adirondacks to live by herself in 1964.

During her time in the Adirondacks, LaBastille earned a New York State Guide's License, served seventeen years as a commissioner on the Adirondack Park Agency, and garnered many awards for conservation work. She was one of the first to call public attention to climate change and the damage it was doing to the Adirondacks. But the popular books she wrote about living in the Adirondack woods was what made her name among the general readership, and that must be included in any discussion of modern feminism in the outdoors.



Anne LaBastille, 1988.  
Photo by Clarence Petty.  
Adirondack Museum P76225.

LaBastille published the first of her *Woodswoman* books in 1976. It quickly became a bestseller. It was followed by three others in the series, describing a life in a cabin she built herself on a remote, sparsely inhabited lake in the Adirondacks and her observations of the nature surrounding it. Starting almost as soon as the book was published, Adirondackers and others began pointing out that her life was not nearly as isolated or solitary as she made out, nor did she do all the work in building her home and living her woodswoman life as she said she did. Nor does she ever define "woodswoman." Many Adirondack women, the rooted, year-round residents of the region, maintain that there is nothing unusual or notable about women taking on men's roles. Men have also criticized LaBastille. As guide Joe Hackett felt, "that was professional jealousy from guys who liked to take potshots because she was a woman." Hackett also identified a change in the way women in the Adirondacks are perceived by other men. "She was every outdoorsman's fantasy," he wrote (Grondahl 2011). This change may have horrified Anna Constable or the readers of the *Cornhill Magazine*, but it delights women who consider themselves woodswomen – or want to be woodswomen – in the LaBastille mold.

None of that mattered much to the admirers of her books, who saw an empowering story of a woman taking on the "wilderness" and combining both the nineteenth century traits of a sensitive woman appreciating nature with the classically male attributes of one who can take care of herself, whether building a house, splitting firewood, hauling water, dealing with wildlife, or confronting solitude. She wrote that she was more often afraid of being assaulted by men than by wildlife. At a time when feminism was becoming stridently political in the cities, LaBastille took the discussion into the "wilderness," that bastion of maleness, a place still conceived by so many outside as a dangerous place where one needed physical strength and mental stamina – still supposedly stronger in men – to survive. She tackled that symbol of American manliness, the "wilderness," and set about proving that she was as good as any man when confronted with the challenges of living there.

The *Woodswoman* books are classic products of their time in the history of modern feminism, at least in the personal goals of the period. On the broader stage, women were discussing issues like birth control, parity in employment and sexual violence. Instead, LaBastille was addressing many of the same issues that Anna Constable, Paulina Brandreth, and Martha Reben confronted. What was a woman's relationship with a man in the wildlands? What were appropriate attitudes and dress in this new environment? What was women's nature and what did it look like *in* nature?

LaBastille made her attitudes about men clear: the relationships would be on her terms. She described tackling all kinds of physical work, occasionally asking for help from men for two-person jobs. Emotional relationships were on her terms, as well. She was coy about the details, but designed her house with a sleeping loft, "a cozy, permanent resting place, preferably double, in case someday there would be someone to share the cabin with me" (LaBastille, *Woodswoman*, 17).

Dress was no longer a very controversial issue for LaBastille's generation, but she, like Helen Lossing, acknowledged the attitudes of society. Like Helen Lossing and her skirt that could be lowered in polite company, LaBastille tried to not be off-putting to women who might be concerned with the "unfeminine" aspects of a woodswoman's life, women who supposed "feminist" meant a frumpy, humorless, man-hater or life in the woods would mean straggling hair and no makeup. Her signature look, captured in the press and seen at book signings, included not only her red and black buffalo plaid shirt, but frosted pink lipstick and styled blonde hair. Book illustrations included pictures of her in a bikini, washing her hair in the lake, or hiking in the very short "Daisy Duke" cutoffs popular at the time.

LaBastille did not abandon conventional ideas of femininity, nor did she abandon home-making. Her account of making her cabin more "home-like" is delivered in a similar tone to suggestions in *Godey's Ladies Book* in 1888 for "brightening up" white tent interiors with chintz pillows, an old strip of carpet, and cot covers. "A little drapery may be taken if desired, for it can be used very effectively," *Godey's* continued. "There should be a supply of comfortable shawls and bright colored rugs" (Dodge 442). Bastille described furnishing her cabin eighty years later in similar language. "A glossy black Boston rocker, authentic red, black, and white Navajo rugs, a gay red cupboard," hand-woven red and white Guatemalan Indian curtains, a Mexican guitar, and a "pot of red geraniums lent a cheerful touch" (LaBastille, *Woodswoman*, 18).

Now, in the early twenty-first century, differences between women's and men's activities and dress in the woods have faded, just as the differences have faded in the world at large. There are female guides who specialize in taking women into the woods. The talk about women's "nature" and whether women are more sensitive than men has also faded.

There are echoes of the past, however, in LaBastille's appreciation of the land around her cabin. Her contemplation of the spiritual value of the woods was most often couched in an ecologist's language – wondering at and appreciating the beauty and force of nature but always aware of the whole picture, the harsh aspects as well. She used spiritual traditions, as well, to express herself, finding epigraphs in the Bible for the beginnings of the second two books in the *Woodswoman* series and writing of feeling as if she were "sitting in God's pocket" (LaBastille, *Woodswoman III*, 28). She invoked Carlos Casteneda and Michael Serano [*sic*] when describing hugging a white pine and feeling as if she were sharing its life force (LaBastille, *Woodswoman*, 56).<sup>4</sup> At the end of *Woodswoman*, she writes of feeling connected to a greater force present in the Adirondacks while boating at night. "Slipping over the star-strewn surface of Black Bear Lake, I'm gradually imbued with the ordered goodness of our earth. Its gentle, implacable push toward balance, regularity, homeostasis."

The botanizing women ninety years earlier wrote of similar emotions, couching them in the accepted religious language of the day. Arriving at Blue Mountain Lake,

*It was Sunday Morning and we never before had conceived of the stillness which sometimes reigns in a great wilderness. We all stood spell-bound for a time by a scene in which were blended so many natural harmonies. The majestic and solemn mountain at our backs that had for so many ages stood as a lonely sentinel to watch over the land of the lakes; the lake itself which lay mirrored before us in the peculiar light of the early dawn. We felt that we were emphatically in the presence of God (Benedict 163).*

#### ENDNOTES

1. Pilcher presents a complete study of the Constable family's relationship to the Adirondacks, including much biographical information and long extracts from primary sources, several of which would be difficult to access otherwise.
2. McEntee, Jervis. "The Lakes of the Wilderness," *The Great Republic Monthly*. New York: Oaksmith, April 1854 quoted in Potter 2011. McEntee's trip was 1851, the year after the first "Ladies Expedition."
3. Rice got a publication out of the experiment, too. His "Fifty Years in a Health Resort" appeared in 1937. Available in print in the Saranac Lake Free Library, Saranac Lake, NY.
4. She probably was referring to Miguel Serrano's 1963 work *Serpent of Paradise: Story of an Indian Pilgrimage*.

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