

A photograph of a rustic cabin with a red door and a wooden deck, nestled in a forest with vibrant autumn foliage. A German Shepherd dog is sitting in the grassy foreground. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light.

# FOUR PEAKS

REMEMBERING MY  
FAVORITE PLACE ON EARTH—  
*and* MY LONG AND COMPLICATED  
RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS OWNER

*by* MARK OBBIE

## IN THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

after moving my family back to my native New York after a long out-of-state exile, I wandered the Adirondacks searching in vain for the perfect vacation rental. Perhaps my criteria were unrealistic—stunning natural beauty and absolute solitude on a budget, anyone?—but, for whatever reason, nothing I found seemed to deserve a second visit. When I discovered a place with backwoods cabins lacking running water and electricity, I almost didn't give it another look. My wife and our two teens had never been keen on my backpacking exploits. Could pretty views compensate for a week of latrines and cowboy showers?

Our first visit resolved all doubts. The property's original camp, one mile off-road near Jay in the northeastern Adirondacks, was built as a World War II combat veteran's refuge. After the next owners bought it and its 90 acres, they purchased several more adjoining parcels and built six more camps scattered across more than 600 acres of forest and fields. The original structure, which they named the Cabin, occupied one of the prettiest spots. On the fringe of a grove of towering white pines, it overlooked an expansive meadow framed by two of the four mountains that gave the place its name: Four Peaks.

This was love at first sight. Over the years, it would mature into something deeper. This was also the start of a long and complicated relationship with an Adirondack original, the owner Martin Schwalbaum.

WE STAYED AT FOUR PEAKS 13 MORE times over the next 11 years. The Cabin was our family spot. It had two outbuildings, one with two bedrooms and another a screened porch. Like all the camps, it was stuffed with vintage furniture and boasted a well-equipped kitchen, a woodstove, and propane-powered lanterns, cooktop and refrigerator. When my wife and I stole away for a romantic weekend, and then after our children had outgrown us, we rotated between four of the other camps, including two accessible only on foot via steep climbs (Schwalbaum hauled renters' gear in his off-road Jeep).

In the basin formed by the four peaks—Rattlesnake Knob and Bassett, Wainwright and Ebenezer Mountains—stands

a mature hardwood forest dotted with the remains of farm fields preserved by Schwalbaum's brush hogs and chain-saws. Twenty miles of hiking trails reserved for the use of the tiny number of Four Peaks guests crisscrossed the property. Except for the occasional car on the one-lane dirt driveway leading to a maintenance barn, it was possible—likely, even—to spend entire days anywhere on the property without seeing or hearing other people.

These surroundings and accommodations didn't come cheap. In fact, Schwalbaum bragged to me that he kept jacking up the rates to discourage all but the hardest Four Peaks devotees—the people who, in his view, understood that luxury doesn't always include light switches and hot water from a spigot. When we first visited, the Cabin and the more remote camps already cost as much as \$900 per week, prices that climbed over the years to more than \$1,300 per week.

Four Peaks staked an unconventional middle ground between primitive camping and glamping that appealed to everyone in my family. Our teens willingly exchanged screens and gadgets for stargazing and rock-hounding in the Ausable River's east branch. Four Peaks made wilderness feel accessible, packing great natural variety—hilltops and valleys, deep

woods, sandy eskers, streams, meadows—into a manageably small preserve. Its cabins' shabby-chic decor, furnished to Schwalbaum's exacting standards to replicate 19th-century farm living, outclassed more ordinary rentals.

At first, that was enough to keep us happy—with one glaring exception. The giddy first moments of our vacations as we unpacked our gear invariably lost their magic with Schwalbaum's unceremonious arrivals. Barging in the front door and racing past us with his head down, Schwalbaum set to his maintenance tasks with an air of urgency tinged with annoyance.

"Hello, Martin," I would greet him with a smile and an outstretched hand.

"Listen, here's the thing," he'd blurt out as though interrupted in mid-conversation. Allergic to small talk, he would launch into instructions about operating a pitcher pump or a new lamp, answering my questions with a sigh and eye roll that felt like preemptive scoldings for whatever user errors he assumed I was about to commit. This was his way of hazing guests he suspected were too soft or clueless to appreciate the rugged amenities he provided. And so it went, year after year, as we tried without success to warm up to him.

Schwalbaum seemed spectacularly unsuited to the second career he had chosen in the hospitality business, and his contradictions didn't stop there. He escaped to the mountains from the pressures of the printing business he ran in Manhattan, only to invite strangers into his refuge. His look was pure backwoodsman, gaunt and disheveled, and he fancied himself a latter-day hermit. Then he would open his mouth, releasing a torrent of words laced with

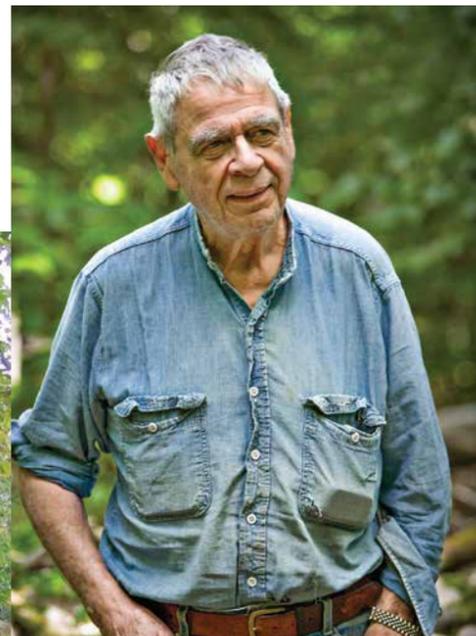
high-culture references and obscenities in a honking Brooklyn accent.

His eccentricities flourished once his wife kicked him out of a grand stone house on the main road—which would be sold in their divorce—and sent him up the hill to live off the grid in a dank hovel in the maintenance barn, which he sardonically nicknamed the Hideout.

Schwalbaum enchanted many of his guests with erudite conversations about history, the arts, religion and food. One, Dennis Barnicle, recalled for me his impression of Schwalbaum as a captivating personality "full of ideas and thought, almost a person you'd expect from another age."

Another guest, Jeremy Lucas, converted a typically Schwalbaumian tongue-lashing over lighting a pilot flame ("I am convinced that you have absolutely no f&\$@ing idea what you are doing") into a recurring sermon on humility in his work as an Episcopal priest ("minus the expletives," he said). Lucas called the incident life-changing for him and

FOUR PEAKS MADE WILDERNESS FEEL ACCESSIBLE, PACKING GREAT NATURAL VARIETY—HILLTOPS AND VALLEYS, DEEP WOODS, SANDY ESKERS, STREAMS, MEADOWS—INTO A MANAGEABLY SMALL PRESERVE.



Martin Schwalbaum, above, shared his wilderness refuge with guests for more than 40 years, starting with the first cabin he built, New Camp (left). Facing page, left to right: The "lightning tree" on Ebenezer Mountain, one of the quartet of peaks that gave the property its name. The author on Rattlesnake Knob.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED. MARTIN SCHWALBAUM PHOTOGRAPH BY DENNIS BARNICLE





Clockwise from left: **The Field at Four Peaks** by the author's wife, Nancy Lane. Four Peaks' cabins, furnished to Schwalbaum's exacting standards, were stuffed with vintage decor.

the wisdom imparted by Schwalbaum priceless. Everything about the place, thanks to Schwalbaum, "felt very deeply spiritual," he told me.

For years, I wondered why we didn't strike similar chords with Schwalbaum. But mostly I laughed off his brusque treatment of us and believed that Four Peaks' value accrued in spite of, not because of, him. At least the unpleasant encounters were brief. For most of each weeklong stay, he left us alone as we fell into a comfortable routine.

I STARTED EACH DAY ON THE CABIN'S front porch with a steaming cup of coffee to watch the sunrise color in the eastern shoulder of Ebenezer, cross its summit and move on to light the slopes of Rattlesnake as it burned off the morning mist.

After breakfast, I'd lace up my boots and head out to ogle spectacular views—Whiteface to the west, Jay Mountain to the east, and the High Peaks visible down the Ausable River Valley. Along the trails at random points, homemade benches and tables furnished "contemplation spots" that Schwalbaum deemed essential to a woods walk. The atmo-

sphere served as a silent rebuke to the car-clogged High Peaks trailheads a few miles away.

Hiking at Four Peaks was not all bliss. My first outings devolved into confused frustration, as I tried to decipher Schwalbaum's crazily sketched diagrams and obscure trail descriptions. His longtime property caretaker, Willie Lincoln, who joked that he was "probably the only person in the North Country" to get along with Schwalbaum, spent hours redrawing the trail map to make it something "a normal person could understand." Schwalbaum rejected it out of hand. It didn't help that every trail, no matter how it intersected others, was blazed with the same turquoise paint. "That's what color he had," Lincoln explained. "He had cases of that paint." With practice, and thanks to the installation of hand-lettered signs, I learned the trails and kept the maps stashed in my daypack.

It wasn't just the trails that felt more comfortable with repetition. Though I knew of many other places inside the Blue Line with comparable or greater pristine beauty, I no longer felt the urge to keep searching for them, at least with a family in tow. Over time, the comfortable familiarity of Four Peaks ripened into a proprietary sense. This place

was truly ours.

Had we found what wilderness poet and philosopher Terry Tempest Williams calls "the spirit of place," something in the land that fills a void in us? It certainly seemed so. Melancholy weighed on us when it was time to go. Schwalbaum's evocative email newsletters documenting the changing seasons at Four Peaks—poetic missives about how he would "tell time by flowers" and marvel at the sense of renewal each spring—filled me with longing. I usually read those emails at my desk at work in Manhattan, where I also kept a bowl of physical reminders of the place: tiny spruce cones, a scrap of paper birch and my favorite Four Peaks memory trigger, turquoise-painted pine bark. Like a woody version of a stress ball, they helped distract from a job and a city that no longer suited me.

As time went on, we sensed a thaw between us and Schwalbaum. Then, thanks to his appreciation for the watercolor landscapes my wife painted during our visits, we ascended to Schwalbaum's inner circle of guests with invitations to dine at the Hideout. Over two meals, the free-flowing gin and wine loosened up our host enough to

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PAINTING BY NANCY LANE. CABIN INTERIOR PHOTOGRAPHS BY DENNIS BARNICLE (2)

talk about his Asperger's diagnosis—"I'm a textbook case," he announced—and to admit how weary he was of hauling water and firewood. This was hardly surprising, considering he was 82 when he said this in 2012. He hoped his son would one day keep the rental business going, but sounded resigned to the possibility that wouldn't happen.

That was our last visit to Four Peaks. The cabins' cleanliness had deteriorated, as had Schwalbaum's grasp on the finer details of running the place (during one dinner, he took a call from guests who'd just arrived at one of the camps, a booking he admitted to us he didn't remember making). We didn't say we were leaving. We just disappeared, which made us feel even guiltier. Now and then I Googled Schwalbaum's name, expecting to find a death notice. Our daughter's calls and emails to make a reservation met only silence.

Last fall, during a thru-hike on the Northville-Placid Trail, I met a couple taking a lunch break in a lean-to. Hearing they live in Jay, I told them about my history at Four Peaks. Their response stunned me. They own the only house on Stonehouse Road, the gravel path to Four Peaks. What about Martin, I asked? They glanced at each other, then told me

what I already suspected. After I got off the trail, I pieced together more details.

On a warm, sunny day in late April 2015, at the dawn of another spring, Schwalbaum drove himself 20 miles to the Lake Placid hospital suffering chest pains. Within hours of departing Four Peaks, he died, at age 85.

WHEN I SOUGHT PERMISSION FROM the lawyer for Schwalbaum's estate, Jack Piller, to make one last visit before the property changed hands, he agreed and volunteered to tag along. The sale closing was set to occur in mud season, so I liked Piller's suggestion of a winter hike. On the appointed day last January, snow blew horizontally and the thermometer plunged to single digits as Piller and his wife and fellow lawyer Susanna followed my vehicle up the unplowed Stonehouse Road, buried in a foot of fresh powder. A winter hike it would be.

After peeking in on the Cabin, which had been stripped of its contents but otherwise appeared unchanged, we broke trail in snowshoes up my old daily-workout path, occasionally spotting Schwalbaum's signs, turquoise blazes and sturdily built benches. As we passed the meadow Schwalbaum called Three Birches, I glanced toward the spot where I had been told his ashes lay and silently thanked this unlikely woodsman for overcoming his own nature to share his land with others.

Uphill from there, great swaths of forest had disappeared. As logging sites go, this one appeared to have been done selectively. Still, it was hard to view familiar surroundings scarred by skid paths and piles of gnarled debris. I felt disoriented at times, searching for junction signs and paint blazes that had been swept away. But my many hikes there had stamped the land's contours into muscle memory, keeping us on track for the four-hour hike.

Schwalbaum's hope to continue Four Peaks unchanged had died with him. But Plan B was one that he had pondered while he was still alive: selling the land to the Adirondack Land Trust.

The sale was completed last April, three days shy of the third anniversary of Schwalbaum's death. The bad news is that all the cabins will be removed and, for now, the property is closed to the public. But after biologists scope out the best trail routes, it will eventually be opened to hikers and mountain bikers. Best of all, it will be preserved forever. The Land Trust plans to sell Four Peaks to the state as part of a package deal of properties it has been acquiring at the state's request.

The Land Trust's Mike Carr praised Four Peaks for views that can be had with relatively modest effort. But the chief attraction for the state and the Land Trust was the property's proximity to the popular Hardy Road bike trails in the adjoining Wilmington Wild Forest. By extending those trails throughout Four Peaks, the state and the towns of Jay and Wilmington can advance their goal of attracting more summer tourists to this corner of the park. "Now they have a thriving mountain-biking community," (Continued on page 58)

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Carr said, “and this clearly will just provide more mileage and opportunities for the public.”

Biking was far from my mind on my snowy January hike. As we continued to ascend, we left behind the last signs of logging. Ridge Camp, the most scenic and remote of the cabins, came into view. The Pillers gasped at its beauty as we took a welcome rest. After another trail-breaking slog, we summited Rattlesnake Knob, where I had spent many solitary hours staring down the valley to the High Peaks, luxuriating in the silence. The day’s snow squalls eased up in time to reveal the view that had inspired me to ask my wife to scatter my ashes here one day. “This is my favorite place on earth,” I said aloud. I turned to the Pillers and pointed with a trekking pole at a stubby red pine. “That’s where my dog liked to rest.” The remainder of the story went unsaid as I choked with emotion, flooded with memories. We all fell silent.

I had one more stop to make. Just past the Ebenezer summit had stood the burned-out shell of a tree evidently struck by lightning, its blackened trunk barely supported at its stump. Year after year I would make a point of visiting to confirm its miraculous survival. I wondered if it could still be upright.

The Pillers were game, so off we went. Deeper snow on a sharper incline left me exhausted by the time we found the scramble to the summit. A rope that once dangled there was gone. None of us carried crampons. When Susanna declared us crazy for considering it, we had our excuse to turn back.

We began the steep descent. Behind us, the Four Peaks lightning tree could remain fixed in my memory, fragile but resilient. ▲

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