

## Search continues



Volunteers slog through swampy lowlands, part of the rough and varied terrain near Newcomb Lake where Douglas Legg, a third grade Baldwinsville school pupil disappeared nine days ago, mired the exhausted searchers in the

Fifty years after Douglas Legg disappeared in the Newcomb woods, the search continues

By Bret Yager

# Gone But Not Forgotten

# NOTICE MISSING PERSON



## DOUGLAS LEGG

Age - 9 years  
Height - 4 ft. 6 in.  
Coloring - Blonde hair, blue-gray eyes  
Weight - 76 lbs.

Wearing white shirt with blue horizontal stripes, navy blue shorts, black high-top sneakers.

Last seen on July 10, 1971, hiking in the Adirondack Mountains.

If found or seen, please contact parents -  
No questions asked.

MAY and WILLIAM LEGG

CALL COLLECT 1-315-635-7622

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**THE LEADS HAVE ALL ENDED THE SAME—** evaporating like smoke against a landscape that holds the promise of beauty and the threat of violent indifference for those who cross its threshold.

Douglas Legg would be 58 years old this year. He might have had children and, by now, grandchildren. His face, peering mischievously from old photographs, promises to savor life. His eyes have a knowing cast that makes you think he could find his way out of just about anything he encountered. Instead, 50 years ago on July 10, Legg disappeared from a remote, rugged trail on the Santanoni Estate near Newcomb. No trace of him has ever been found.

Legg was eight years old—a month shy of nine. A budding outdoorsman on a brief visit to the family-owned compound, he had followed his uncle on a hike around the property but was sent back to camp to put on long pants. Somewhere along the half-mile stretch between his uncle and camp, something went wrong. Legg was believed to have been spotted briefly on a nearby ridge by a brother and a cousin. If this is true, it was the last anyone would see of him.

The ensuing search was the largest in New York State history. By the time the day's hot temperatures swung to a 30s-range chill on the night of July 12, an army of multi-agency personnel and hundreds of volunteers had poured into the southwest corner of the High Peaks, calling the boy's name. Drawn by media reports, university students and tourists joined in the search. People who had only read Legg's name gave up vacation time to head to Santanoni. Media accounts from the time estimated the volunteer force at 1,000 souls.

Gary Carter, a former rescue squad leader in Newcomb, was the first person into the woods looking for the boy. He stayed late into the first night, took leave from mining work and ultimately put in a total of 40 days guiding troopers, psychics and people who didn't understand the land but wanted to help. When he could break from the groups, he went back to the ground on his own so he could concentrate, in some places crawling on hands and knees, squinting for tracks, draining and searching a beaver swamp and following bloodhounds through the peaks.

"I have five children ... and I just know what I would feel if he had been one of my own," said Carter, who now lives in Corinth.

In the unfolding days, the rotors of search helicopters flogged the air, and military aircraft equipped with new heat-detecting technology made runs over the wild stretches extending from Santanoni. Douglas Legg's family chartered a plane to fetch an elite mountain rescue team from Sierra Madre, California. These "mountain men" were daunted by the morass of bogs and choking brush, so different from what they were used to, and went away empty-handed.

"The country was rough," Carter remembered. "There were places Douglas couldn't even have gotten through."

Long past the day when Legg might have been recovered from the woods alive, searchers dragged lake bottoms and combed swamps and finally, confronted by unbending reality, they gave up. The search ended in its official capacity a month after it started.

The disappearance of Douglas Legg left a pall over Newcomb and surrounding communities. In many ways, the state at large found itself unable to shake the loss of someone

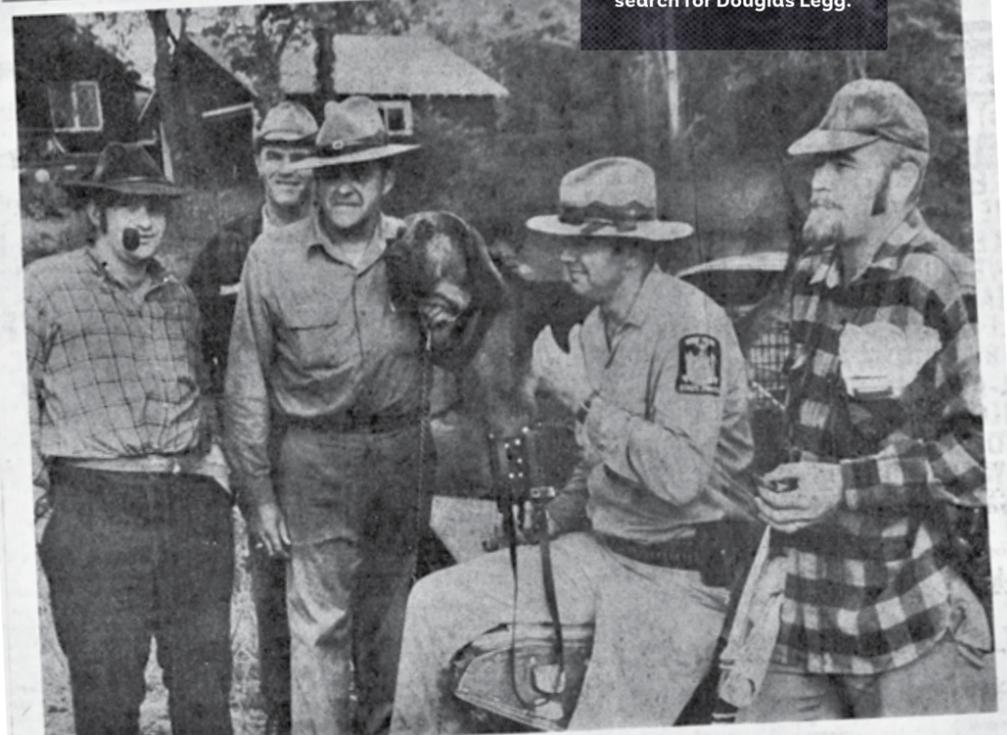
so young. Discussion boards remain scrawled with firsthand accounts of the search, memories of the roar of the planes and wide-ranging speculation about ways that Legg may have met his end, and ways the search should have been better organized and less chaotic. Legg's relatives, the wealthy Melvin family from Syracuse, sold Santanoni to the state immediately after his disappearance. Considered one of the grandest of the surviving Adirondack Great Camps, Santanoni was built at the turn of the 20th century by Robert and Anna Pruyn and acquired by the Melvins in 1951. Today the camp is managed by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and open to all.

**THE PUBLIC INTEREST**, wide-ranging effort, and ultimate failure of the monumental search led to a preeminent role for the New York State Forest Rangers in all ensuing search-and-rescue efforts. The analysis of what didn't work in the fragmented operation helped establish improved methods for the future. Due in part to Legg and to advances in technology, rescue operators today are better equipped and organized to help a person missing in the woods.

None of this made the loss easier to digest for those directly involved, nor for the millions of people following the media reports from a distance. Bart Bartholemew, from Fulton, had closely followed the case and was so upset with the outcome that, in August 1971, he formed the Oswego County Pioneer Search-and-Rescue team, a group that has since located scores of the lost in the Adirondacks. Jim Farfaglia wrote a 2016 book, *Pioneers: The Story of Oswego County's Search and Rescue Team*, in which he devoted a chapter to the formative effect of the Legg case.

The Newcomb Historical Museum's archives include newspaper clippings, missing-person posters, official correspondence, and notes on search timelines and donations to fund the search for Douglas Legg.

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Surrounded by volunteers from their search party, state police continued to search the wooded area through most of the night.

The search was the largest in New York State history. Media accounts estimated the volunteer force at 1,000 souls.

Newspaper clippings and missing person poster courtesy of the Newcomb Historical Museum

"There were no organized search teams when Douglas went missing," Farfaglia said. "It was really disorganized, and frustrating. The tragedy of Douglas's loss somehow gave birth to this really great thing that came out of it, and we're better for that."

In the decades following the disappearance, here and there new leads would trickle in, some of them appearing to hold merit but collapsing under investigation like a boot through a peat bog. Other stories were laced with the dramatic and improbable. All of them fueled an enduring hope that somehow a day would come when Legg would turn up, or his body would at least be found.

In 1993, two hopeful prospects emerged. One came from a woman who claimed her relative had kidnapped and murdered the boy and dumped his body in a Lewis County lake. Searchers combed the lake bed, only to discover the woman was a psychiatric patient affected by false memory syndrome. Then, a Montana man came forward to claim he'd been hunting in the search area at Santanoni in 1973, and stumbled across a skull and partial skeleton he believed was a child's. Because he was on leave from the military and not where he was supposed to be—and unaware at the time that Legg had disappeared—the man had failed to report his discovery for more than 20 years. A detailed search of the swampy area he described, so long after the fact, revealed no human trace.

The most recent lead came from Newcomb Lake in May 2020, in the area where Legg was last seen. Members of the New York State Police Troop B Underwater Recovery Team were conducting dive training in front of Santanoni when they located a suspected skull fragment. Police say a detailed analysis of the bone determined it was of nonhuman origin.

Nasser Malit, a forensic anthropologist at SUNY Potsdam, was one of the experts who examined the evidence. He said the vast majority of such fragments brought to light are from animals, and constitute a dead end for investigators. Still, each one must be examined, and this shard comprised the first piece of evidence that police had been able to follow in eight years.

Prior to this, a tourist happened upon bones in Newcomb Lake in July 2012 while free-diving in front of the Artist's Cabin, part of Santanoni's complex. The remains were found in shallow water about 30 feet from the shoreline. A month earlier, members of the New York State Police, forest rangers and a New Jersey search-and-rescue K-9 unit had also found several small bones in the forest close to the camp. In both cases, the remains were determined to belong to animals, according to state troopers.

Today, a half century after the disappearance, Paul Hill is the New York State Police investigator assigned to the case. Information about Douglas Legg abounds on the Internet, he said. Some of it is factual, some distorted by time and the fluid nature of memory.

"Cases that involve children always seem to be more difficult to process," Hill said. "Many of us have our own children. You can imagine how easily a young child at a camp in the Adirondacks could become disoriented, and how difficult this must have been for his family."

Adam Wheeler coordinates the wilderness education program for SUNY Potsdam. One of his first trips into the wilderness, nearly two decades ago, was with a group of students in the Santanoni Range, near where Legg disappeared.

"Once you get off the trail, it's thick brush, real tough going—tight spruce trees," Wheeler said. "It's really difficult to navigate once you get into lowlands."

Wheeler has observed firsthand how the challenges of the terrain can forge leadership and survival skills, but also ways that being lost affects the mind.

"An eight-year-old, especially a kid who was woods savvy, once knowing he was misplaced, would tend to move more quickly," Wheeler surmised. "He'd be nervous. Being smaller, he might get through the brush easier and cover more ground than anyone might have thought. It's the total opposite of what you should do. We teach our students and our group leaders: Stop. Think. Observe. Plan. The moment you think you're lost, stay put. Make noise; you will be found. Keep a good attitude; think about ways of staying warm and finding shelter."

**THE ADIRONDACKS**, with its siren's call to masses of visitors, presents a special challenge to the unwary. Dozens of people wander out of established areas each year, lose their bearings and later have to be located by ranger search teams.

"The High Peaks areas do have landmarks, but if you get under the canopy, you can't see those landmarks," Wheeler said. "Sometimes, you have nothing to go on except waterways and small elevation changes."

That Legg died alone in the forest is a prominent theory, but it's not the only explanation. He may have been abducted or subjected to some other foul play, although there is no evidence that happened. Multiple interviews with family members were conducted and failed to point to a crime. Legg's uncle, Myron Melvin, was the last person to definitively see the boy alive. He submitted to a polygraph test that concluded he had no role in his nephew's disappearance, Hall said. Over five decades, many other leads were developed, explored and shelved.

"Nothing has been ruled out," Hall said. "I cannot foresee the investigation being closed without Douglas being located or the case being solved."

Time, in this case, is no one's friend. As time passes, Hill said, it will continue to erode any remaining physical evidence.

That means we may never be any nearer to the truth about what happened to Douglas Legg than we are now. Instead, Legg may have to remain a symbol of every child we want to reach for with an open hand they can trust, so they can always find a way out of the woods—a reminder of all that is most sacred in our families and especially our children. His voice whispers "remember," so this doesn't happen again. ▲

Bret Yager is a writer for SUNY Potsdam College Communications. He has been a reporter in Hawaii and along the Oregon Coast, where he also worked as a North Pacific crab fisherman. He has witnessed and written about many search-and-rescue operations and the tragic loss of life on the open water.