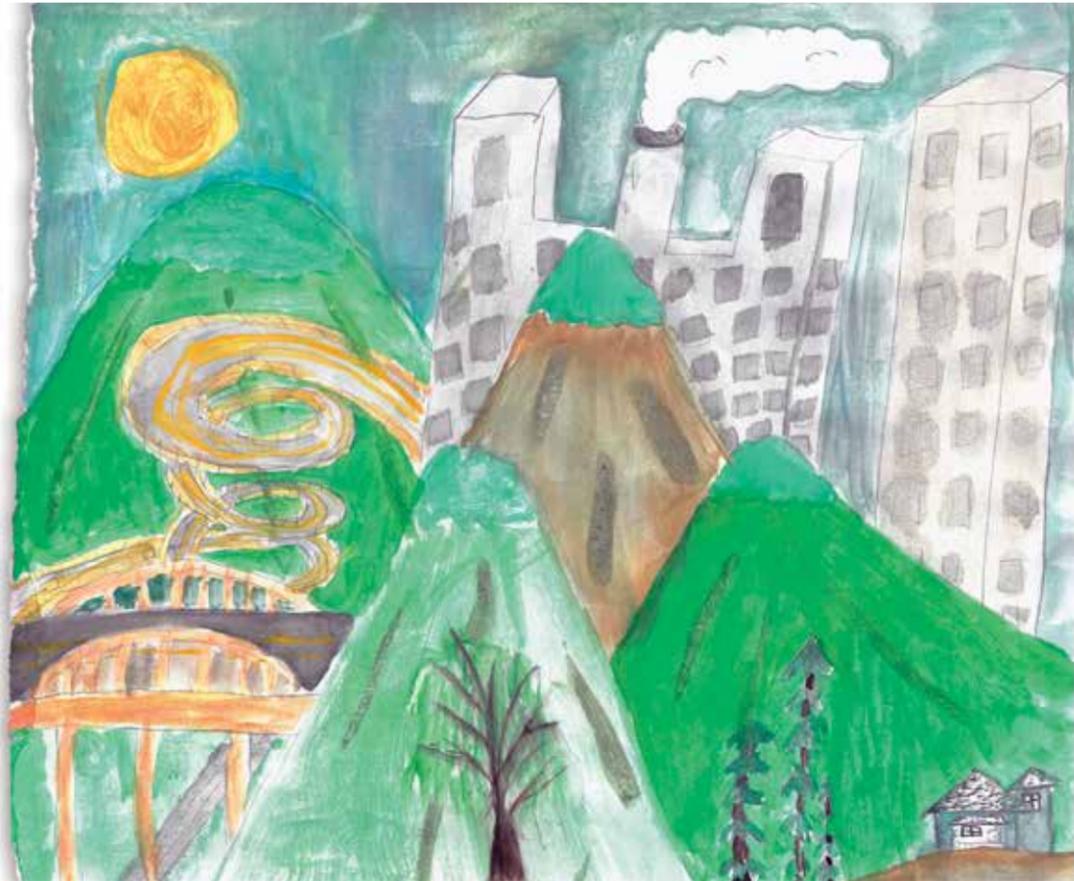


# Short Carries



## Seeing Clearly

An urban vs. rural reality check

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

**T**en o'clock on a Friday night we rode the escalator up, out of Pennsylvania Station in New York City. We'd made the two and a half-hour drive from our home in the Adirondacks to the Amtrak station outside of Albany, then another two-plus hours into Manhattan. We'd hurried from our train, packs on our backs, my daughter clutching my arm as we wove through the crush of people, many of them hockey fans in their teams' jerseys, amped up after a game in Madison Square Garden.

This trip was part of an early birthday celebration—Big Apple-style—for my nine-year-old. We were on our way to a friend's apartment, our weekend base camp for excursions around the city.

On the escalator, just as the chaos of 34th Street came into view, the man standing in front of us leaned over and threw up. We moved past him and jumped over his puddle,

onto the sidewalk. "Welcome to New York," I said to my daughter as I pulled her, horrified, away from the station.

That weekend we brunched, saw a show, counted the dogs in Central Park, shopped, gawked and walked—and walked some more. It was an incredible getaway. We took it all in—the city's aromas, its honking horns and sirens. We explored Hudson Yards, where, when I lived in the city more than 20 years ago, it was anything but what it is now—New York's newest luxury neighborhood. There, we climbed The Vessel, an Escher-esque beehive sculpture with stairs that circle into the sky, overlooking the Hudson River.

The next morning on the train home, I read in the newspaper that a teenager had jumped to his death from the top of The Vessel. He'd done it just after we'd left the sculpture the day before. I did not tell my daughter.

What I did tell her, as the questions

came, about the people sleeping in cardboard boxes; the man pleading for money on the subway; the woman who screamed at us from across the street; and the two boys, likely my daughter's age, slumped against the doors to Neiman Marcus—shoe-less, toes exposed through dirty socks—was that, sadly, people suffer everywhere. In the city we observed hardship in real time, life unfolding before us. In the Adirondacks, I told her, there were also people without food or shelter or who struggle with addiction or mental illness. But there, too often, it happens in the shadow of the forests and mountains. Our region's rural remoteness and its seasons—blankets of snow, erasing the truth—can keep us from seeing reality.

There is no perfect place.

My suburban and city friends visit me in the Adirondacks and, when the weather is best—sunny and blue, the bugs barely biting—they might say something about what a great place this is to raise kids or to pass the time. They're charmed by the clean air, our river swims, campfire-smoked sweaters and starry nights. I can sense their longing—maybe a cabin in the hills away from commutes, traffic and, right now, threats like Coronavirus.

I get it. And I love this place.

But I do dream of living among people of all cultures and religions and colors, of trips to doctors, grocery stores or sports practices that don't involve more than an hour-long drive.

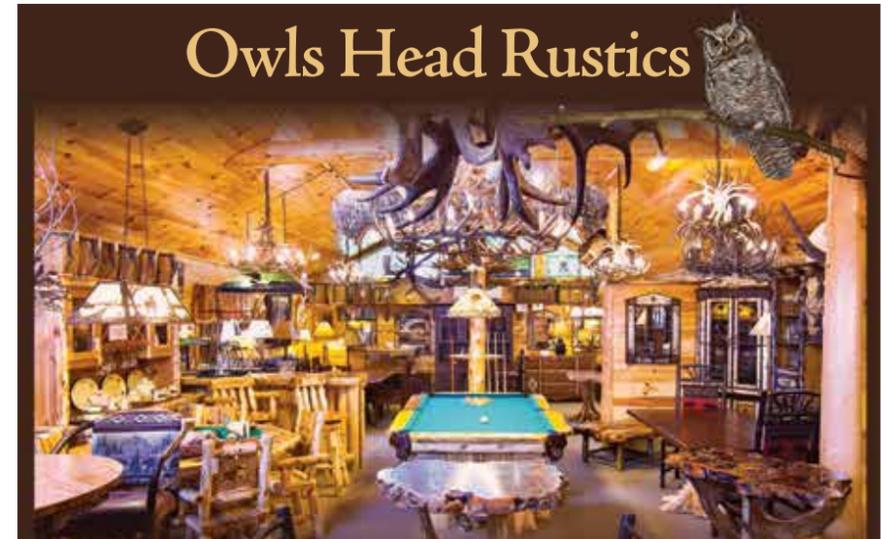
While those "Entering the Adirondack Park" signs along the Blue Line are my comfort, I leave here when time allows so I can trust my perspective when I look out the window. There is so much beyond my little hamlet—a lesson I try to share with my children.

On the train toward home, after I'd read about the tragedy on The Vessel, I looked at my daughter, hunched over her sketchbook. All that we had witnessed in the city and what we know of our lives in the mountains had morphed onto her page in a colorful skyscraper-meets-pointy-peak mash-up.

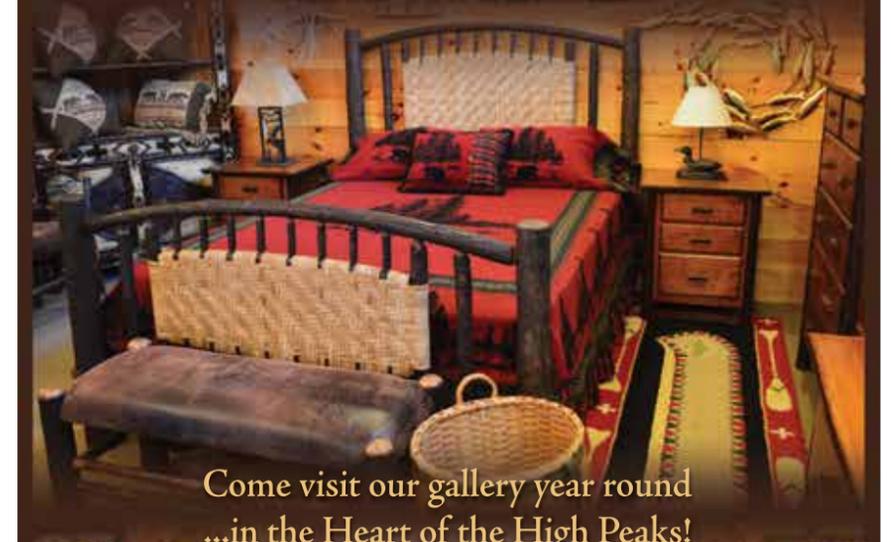
It was a masterpiece to tack on my wall. ▲

Artwork courtesy of the author

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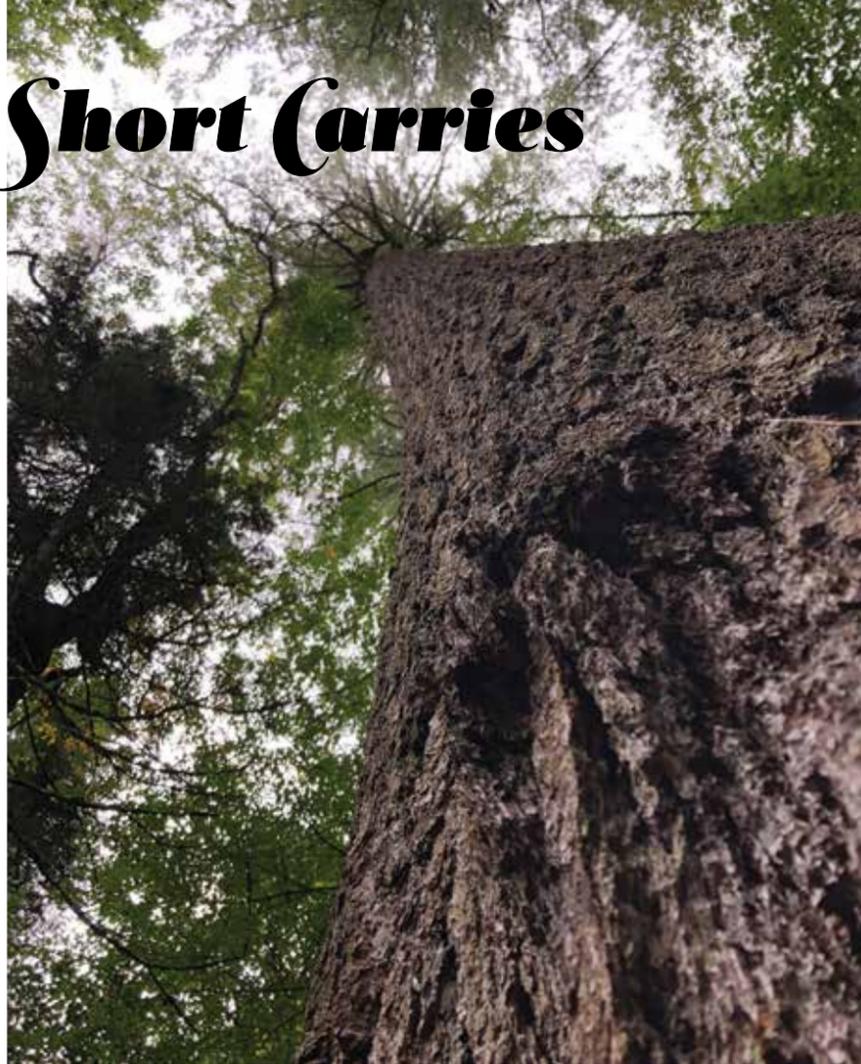


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# Short Carries



## Looking Up

On the hunt for  
New York's tallest tree

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

It's Erik Danielson's 30th birthday. He strides purposefully, pack on his back, along a shoulder of Route 3 near Ampersand Mountain. He's doing one of the things that makes him happiest. Six other people trail behind him as cars and trucks blow past. After a glance at his GPS, Danielson leads the group into the woods, punching into what feels wild and untouched after the slog along the highway.

Today Danielson will measure what he and this crew believe to be New York State's tallest tree. He estimates the trip to and from the giant to be a five-hour bushwhack through the Saranac Lakes Wild Forest. He came here a few years ago to measure the same white pine he'll measure today.

Danielson, who lives in Fredonia, is an ecologist with the Western New York Land Conservancy. He, like Howard Stoner, who now follows along, climbing over downed limbs and tucking beneath branches, is a member of the Native Tree Society. The organization was founded to celebrate trees and forests. Seventy-eight-year-old Stoner started measuring trees at age 50 because, he says, "I didn't know oaks from maples." So he got involved, incorporating his skills as a professional mathematician.

In 2017 he measured the state's previous record-breaker—a 163.9-foot pine near today's destination.

Stoner brought four of his Hoel Pond neighbors on this trek. Also along are Rob Leverett and his teenage son, Devin. (Rob's father, Bob, is a founding member of the Native Tree Society.) Rob originally discovered this white pine while scouting the area. Now, he and his son ricochet through old-growth stands, Rob a tree paparazzo, snapping photographs of sugar maples, hemlocks, red spruce and yellow birch. The Leveretts sometimes disappear into the forest, Rob's voice breaking the silence with a, "The spruce guys are gonna jump up and down!" and the occasional, "Whoa!" or "Holy crap!" or "It's a mammoth!"

Hanging out with tree people is humbling. They know their stuff. But they don't shame the uninitiated, they educate. Black cherry bark looks like burnt potato chips, explains Danielson, as he points to a trunk. And when it comes to trees, says Rob, height doesn't always correlate with age. He believes there are 1,000-year-old northern white cedars on a sideburn of Whiteface Mountain—stunted and twisted, "like a bonsai." Also part of the group today is a retired park naturalist, one of Stoner's neighbors. He points out what looks like a dusty disco ball hanging from a branch—a bald-faced hornet nest, he says, the perfect piñata after the hive's abandoned it. He identifies a deadly destroying angel mushroom, its smooth, pale form poking from pine needles, and later, an old man of the woods mushroom—the fungus equivalent of an elderly troll.

The group follows the contour of a glacial esker, a prehistoric snake that winds along the earth. This topographic feature, with Google Earth imaging that revealed huge tree crowns, is what caught Rob's attention. He says there are likely hundreds of sites like this across the Adirondacks.

Danielson leads the group over a bog speared with tamaracks—a protective moat around the sandy-soiled island where the monster awaits.

And there it is.

The tree is too tall and standing too

close to its fellow pines—also giants—to take in from a distance. Looking up from its base, though, the tree soars, its fingers on the top-most branches reaching to the sky. Danielson measures its circumference: 13.6 feet. This pine is relatively young and still growing; he estimates it was a sapling during George Washington's presidency. (The oldest white pine ever dated is 535 years old, in Cicero Swamp in central New York.)

Howard Stoner has prepared a ceremony. He reads the poem "IX" by Wendell Berry and gifts Danielson a forestry tape measure wrapped in ribbon. It's a thoughtful gesture. "All tree people are sweet," says one of Stoner's neighbors.

Danielson sets up a hypsometer and measures. The tree is 164.74 feet, the tallest in the Empire State, even higher than the Brooklyn Bridge.

Everyone's smiling. Someone wishes they'd brought Danielson a birthday cake. He says, "A tree's new growth is referred to as that year's growth candle."

Before the trek back to pavement, it's observed that today there's been a lot of tree love, but not yet a tree hug. "It's more a psychic act," laughs Danielson.

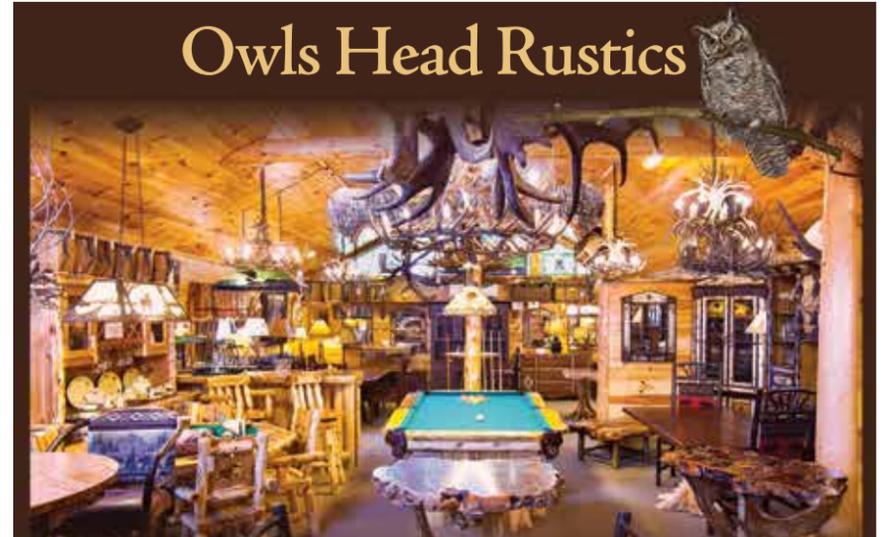
Old-growth trees deserve care and respect, which is why these people do what they do—it's not just about breaking records. There are applications for the data they collect, says Danielson, leading to "the most beneficial use of forests." The Native Tree Society's work supports proforestation—keeping existing forests intact. "An old-growth tree like this white pine might be sequestering several hundred pounds of carbon from the atmosphere each year," he explains. In addition, older forests protect biological diversity and reduce flooding and soil erosion.

Tree-measuring also allows "another layer of vision," says Danielson. "Everything has already been discovered, but forestry wasn't practiced scientifically until the 19th century. There's a lot to know, a lot to revise."

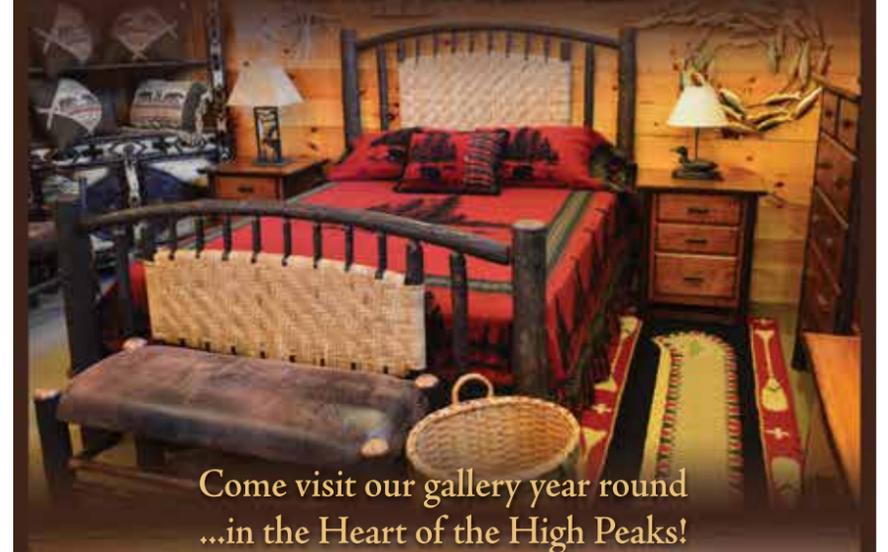
What happened today—finding this giant, deep in the forest, surrounded by six million acres of parkland—feels important. This tree, and others like it, just might save us. ▲

Tallest tree in New York State photograph by the author

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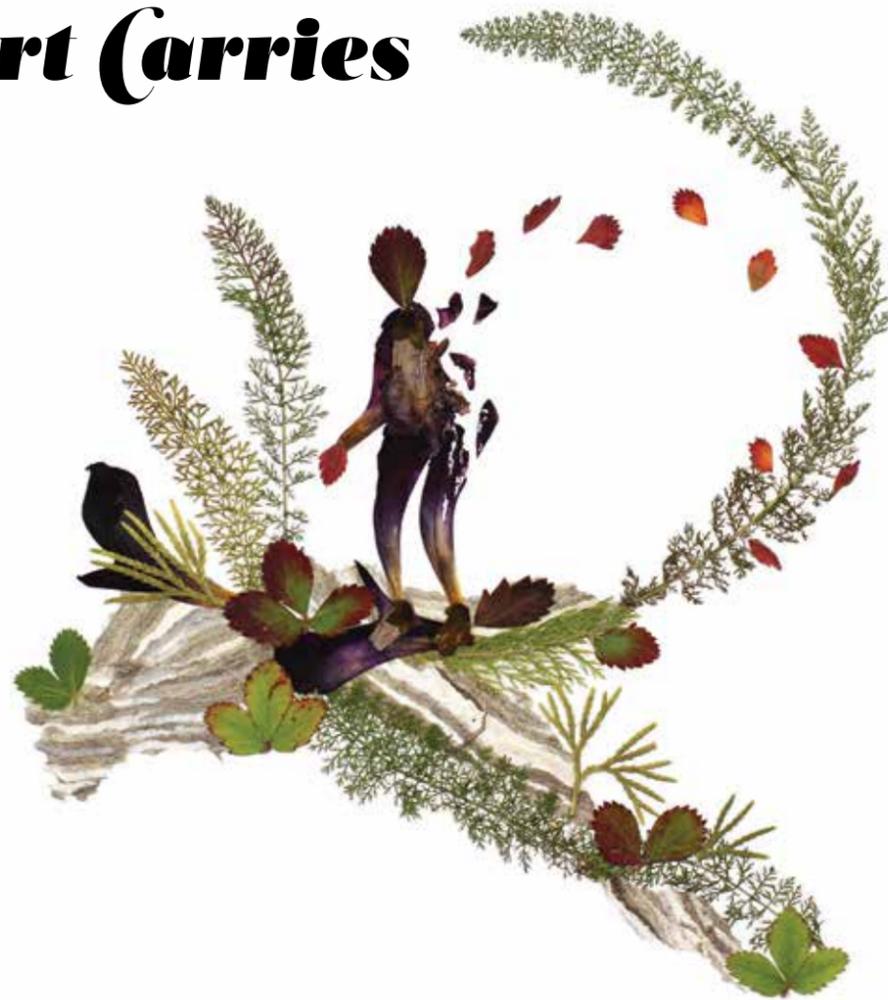
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## In Limbo

The continued—and heartbreaking—  
search for the missing

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

I hate nature.”

He said it as we sat in a college classroom, our desks pushed into a circle. I had just explained that our semester would focus on reading and writing about the natural world. Nature, he said, had killed someone he knew. He immediately dropped my class.

I would later learn that the person this student knew was 22-year-old Wesley Wamsganz, who on November 20, 2010, had left his job at a Lake Placid diner, walked—with just the clothes on his back—to the Adirondack Loj trailhead and continued into the mountains. That evening he was spotted near Avalanche Pass. Police found his Carhartt jacket, but Wamsganz was never seen again.

In this magazine we celebrate the Adirondack Park because it's a place like no other, where we're awed, recharged and challenged by a wild landscape. But for every stunning peak, every sublime lake, there's the inverse—treacherous summits and tangled forests. People die on these mountains. They drown in these rivers. And some of them disappear without a trace.

That's what happened to Colin Gillis on March 11, 2012. The 18-year-old Tupper

Laker, home from college on winter break, left a party, alone and on foot. A motorist was the last to report seeing Gillis, walking west along the shoulder of Route 3, where the woods meet the pavement. Today a missing-person poster still hangs by the front door of the Tupper Lake post office.

A lean-to on the Indian Pass trail was where Tom Carleton was last seen on October 9, 1993. The 44-year-old from Skaneateles was on a hiking trip—a solo getaway from his job as a psychologist at a state prison. Carleton left behind a wife and a young daughter.

On April 12, 1976, 19-year-old Steve Thomas made a cup of Darjeeling tea at a lean-to on the trail to Mount Marcy, told his hiking party he was taking a walk, then vanished. Thomas's brother, Bob, climbed Marcy hundreds of times looking for Steve. On one of those searches he helped discover the remains of Buddy Atkinson, who had disappeared in 1973. But he never found his brother.

Third-grader Douglas Legg, vacation-

ing at Santanoni Great Camp with his family in July 1971, turned back during a hike to put on long pants. He was gone without a trace. (See page 46.) Almost a half-century later one of Douglas's cousins, among the last to see the boy, visited the Newcomb Historical Museum for an exhibit dedicated to Legg and the thousands who searched for him. The cousin, who had come with his son, told a museum assistant that the visit was an attempt at closure.

There are others still missing in the Adirondacks: George LaForest and Jack Coloney both disappeared in 2006. In April of that year LaForest's truck was found by the Cedar River near Indian Lake, where he liked to fish. In June, Coloney signed the trail register at Wakely Dam, then hiked into the Moose River Plains. In 2007, only Irene Horne's abandoned campsite was found in the West Canada Lakes—her whereabouts are unknown. And on November 12, 2015, 82-year-old Tom Messick was hunting in the Lake George Wild Forest when he vanished.

Did they get lost or hurt? Were they swallowed by unforgiving conditions? Did they want to disappear? Was there foul play?

There's agony in not knowing. Even writing about these people feels wrong, another emotional blow to those who must wait and wonder. But New York State Police's Jennifer Fleishman, Public Information Officer, Troop B, says that keeping the names, dates and circumstances of the missing in the public eye could trigger a reader's memory, maybe even shake loose a clue. “All of these unsolved cases remain open,” she says, “and we're continually following up on leads and tips. We ask that anyone with information about these cases contact us at (518) 873-2750.”

Back in that college classroom, in another ring of desks with another group of students, a hometown friend of Colin Gillis's did not drop my class. But throughout the semester his essays explored the loneliness of the dark woods, the tragedy of unseen sunrises and sunsets, and the heartbreak of words left unsaid. ▲

Illustration by Alison Haas

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