



THE NEIGHBORS

BY KATHRYN JOYCE / PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA



PRIVATE
PROPERTY
NO
TRESPASSING

WHY IS AN
APOCALYPTIC
SECT BUYING
PROPERTY
IN THE
ADIRONDACKS?



THERE'S THE WHITE CLAPBOARD house with the big cross over the woodpile, sitting on a lonely stretch of road between tiny Willsboro and tinier Reber amid nearly 185 acres of abandoned farmland. There's the shady three-bedroom on a main street in Malone, with the peaked roof and enclosed porch, as well as the smaller one-family around the corner, at the end of a dead-end road, that's completely tax-exempt. There are the 226 acres of farmland in Churubusco, steps from a Catholic monastery on one side and less than a mile from the border crossing with Canada on the other. And there's the nearly 1,000-acre plot abutting Dry Channel Pond, an isolated fishing destination just west of Franklin County's St. Regis Canoe Area, outside the village of Tupper Lake.

A disconnected hodgepodge of the North Country, tied together by its owner: the Apostles of Infinite Love, a Quebec-based apocalyptic sect that broke away from the Catholic Church decades ago, and has left a long trail of abuse allegations from

former members ever since. And which, for some reason, has acquired a number of parcels of land in the Adirondacks in recent years.

The Apostles date back to France in the 1930s, when a Catholic priest named Michel Collin had a vision that God had mystically ordained him a bishop (although the Church itself had done no such thing). Collin established an unofficial religious order, the Apostles of Infinite Love, which fostered a number of "house communities"—small cells of believers who organized their lives around church services held in individual members' homes—in France but received no official authorization from the Church. In 1950, Collin claimed to have received another mystical vision: this time of God crowning him pope. In short order, he was defrocked and excommunicated, with the Vatican banning his order and warning Catholics to avoid his teachings.

But a decade later, in 1961, Collin traveled to Montreal, where he met Jean-Gaston Tremblay, a French-Canadian Catholic monk who'd founded a religious order of his own in Quebec's Laurentian Mountains, building a monastery on the land of an old farm he'd bought. As Church historian Magnus Lundberg has written in a history of the Apostles, the two men recognized the compatibility of their beliefs and decided to merge their orders, forming

what they called the Renewed Church of Christ, which they cast as a last remnant of the Catholic faithful amid a corrupted age. (On the group's current-day website, they describe themselves as "fighting against all the abuses that have brought about the decadence of the clergy, the religious state and Christian society. God has established [the Apostles] as 'a rampart against the almost general apostasy' that has invaded Christianity and in particular the Roman Church.") Tremblay declared that Collin was the true pope, and Collin in turn anointed Tremblay his cardinal and the superior overseeing the order. They began attracting converts: nuns and brothers wearing traditional habits and robes, lay families and, crucially, their children.

The group, which embraced extreme poverty, self-sufficiency, and eschewing modern comforts, grew quickly. They acquired more farms in Saint Jovite, Quebec, some 80 miles northwest of Montreal, with the aim of building a self-supporting monastery. And they organized another set of house church communities across North America, which served as recruitment posts. Tremblay remained in Quebec, running the compound at Saint Jovite and the mission outposts across North America, while Collin returned to France, attempting to spread the order there.

It was a time of monumental upheaval within the Church. In 1962, Catholic hierarchy had begun a three-year series of meetings known as the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, which introduced a number of reforms that revolutionized how the Church related to the modern world, including opening the door to interfaith dialogue and cooperation and shifting the Mass from the traditional Latin to local vernacular. The changes, welcomed by many, were vehemently opposed by some, and a number of traditionalist critics charged that the Church was giving in to the world. Some broke away, condemning the pope who'd presided over the council as an apostate or worse.

Michel Collin's Apostles were firmly in that camp. In 1963, he held a meeting to oppose Vatican II in Lyon, France, and charged that the Church had been infiltrated by modernists and Freema-

sons. But the Apostles also went further. In their isolation from the Church, the sect grew apocalyptic and extreme. Collin prophesied that the world would end in a nuclear holocaust in 1965, and then, that failing, in 1969. When Armageddon again failed to arrive, Collin offered the explanation that a host of benevolent extraterrestrials had staved it off. He began working those ideas into what he described as a new New Testament.

In the late '60s, Collin and Tremblay had a falling out, in part because Tremblay declared that he'd had a mystical vision of his own: God anointing him the new pope of the true Church. Tremblay, under the name Pope Gregory XVII, led the Canadian-based Apostles to become independent from Collin's group and would remain at their head until his death in 2011. And they continued to grow, establishing missions in a number of places: Guadeloupe, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and later Ecuador, South Africa and Argentina. They also opened mission homes across North America, including in New York, New Jersey, Florida and Colorado. At one point, the group claimed to have 120,000 followers worldwide. But the center of the order remained Saint Jovite, where about 300 lay and religious people farmed and raised livestock and established a number of facilities, including the means of making their own electricity, building materials and glass, and a printing press that published their books and magazines.

But almost from the start, allegations of abuse emerged from the compound. Former members who were brought to Saint Jovite as children recall their families being recruited across the US and Canada. Some families sold all their belongings and moved to the compound, handing their assets over to Tremblay. And once there, the families were separated: children segregated strictly by age and gender, and raised by the Apostles to become future nuns and priests. Some children whose families couldn't afford to relocate to Quebec were sent there alone, with promises to their parents of a devout Catholic education. But whether they came alone or with family, many report that they rarely

were allowed to see or acknowledge their parents and siblings throughout the years they were there.

Laura Chandler, a Navy veteran now in her 50s, was taken to Saint Jovite with her four siblings in 1970, when she was four years old. They'd been living in Omaha, Nebraska, when their mother—raising five kids alone after separating from an abusive husband—had been approached by missionaries of the Apostles whom she'd met through her family's church.

"They take desperate people and promise them a better life," said Chandler. "The gist of it was they told her that they would take care of us and clothe and feed us." The children were flown to Quebec and entered life in the monastery, which to Chandler felt like an orphanage, with more than 100 other children living in the Apostles' care, under conditions charitably described as

Dickensian. When, a year into their stay, the children received a letter saying their mother had been in a car accident, they mistakenly came to believe that she'd been killed—a misperception the Apostles failed to correct.

They were at a huge compound, with a towering, hospital-sized monastery at its center, in the middle of the woods. "There was no TV, no radio, no contact with the outside world. We were totally segregated from reality," said Chandler.

The Apostles, who also call themselves the Order of the Magnificat of the Mother of God, among other names, described themselves as a "begging order," going door to door for donations, selling religious calendars and other publications, or tapes of the children's choral performances, in exchange for donations. The children sent to Saint Jovite were a large part of efforts towards "self-sufficiency": working constantly on the group's farms, tending its livestock, making its clothes, chopping its wood, even making the cinder blocks the buildings were constructed with.

"We were cheap labor," said Chandler.

"I worked more as a kid than I did in 25 years in the military," agreed another former member, now in his 60s, whom I'll call Pierre. "We were working like adults as kids."

Pierre had been sent to Saint Jovite in 1968 when his parents were looking for a better schooling alternative for his developmentally disabled brother. After the boys had been there a month, their parents were allowed a two-hour visit. Pierre begged them to take him and his brother home—something was wrong with the place—but, he said, his parents were of "the generation where you didn't talk badly of priests," and told them to stay and be good. What followed, he said, was nearly a decade of inventively cruel physical and psychological abuse, and sometimes sexual abuse as well.

"Whatever stories that you've heard about the monks and all that abuse—it has happened," said Pierre. *Continued on page 70*

ONE FORMER MEMBER WHO WAS FORCED TO GO TO THE MONASTERY WHEN HE WAS A CHILD SAYS, "WHATEVER STORIES THAT YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT THE MONKS AND ALL THAT ABUSE—IT HAS HAPPENED."

Properties in Malone and, far right, Reber owned by the Apostles of Infinite Love, a Quebec-based apocalyptic sect. PAGE 52: The Apostles' 1,000-acre plot outside of Tupper Lake, abutting Dry Channel Pond. The group also owns 226 acres in Churubusco.



ADVENTURE BY DAY. **ADIRONDACK HAMLETS TO HUTS** COMFORT AT NIGHT.

BOOK A TRIP TODAY!

YOUR ADVENTURE IN THE ADIRONDACKS AWAITS.

PHOTO BY JOHN DIGIACOMO, PLACID TIMES PHOTOGRAPHY

OLD FORGE INLET CIRCUIT	FULTON CHAIN CIRCUIT	OLD FORGE BLUE MTN. LAKE PADDLE TRAVERSE	BLUE MTN. LAKE RAQUETTE LAKE GREAT CAMP PADDLE TRAVERSE
-------------------------------	-------------------------	--	--

ADIRONDACK HAMLETS TO HUTS
47 Main Street, Saranac Lake, NY 12983
315-657-1320 • 518-354-5109 • info@adkh2h.org • www.adkh2h.org

THIS ADVERTISEMENT WAS PREPARED WITH FUNDING BY THE FRANKLIN COUNTY DESTINATION COOPERATIVE MARKETING PROGRAM

ELEVATE YOUR EDUCATION

PAUL SMITH'S COLLEGE

- 1 MASTERS DEGREE PROGRAM
- 20 BACHELOR'S DEGREE PROGRAMS
- 5 ASSOCIATE DEGREE PROGRAMS
- 25+ VARSITY ATHLETIC TEAMS

LEARN MORE AT: @paulsmiths.edu @paulsmiths @smithscollege paulsmithcollege

Plattsburgh
Saranac Lake
Lake Placid
Lake George

THE NEIGHBORS
Continued from page 55

On the boys' side of the monastery, Pierre recalled, the monks terrorized the children with stories about the devil; sometimes, in the winter, they'd tell the boys that moose tracks they spotted in the snow were the devil's footsteps. On the girls' side, added Chandler, children were sometimes punished in the summer months by being left out in the woods "with the bugs and bears and skunks and all the other night noises that you can associate with the forest. For a child, it's terrifying." Once when they had a lice outbreak, the adults shaved the children's heads, telling them they were looking for "the mark of the beast." Sometimes, children just disappeared: perhaps reclaimed or returned to their parents, but never explained to those who remained.

And then there was the spiritual dimension, as the children were taught that if they ever left the monastery, they'd go to Hell. Chandler, who was often in trouble for asking questions, said she was exorcised twice in Saint Jovite for "belligerence."

There were various official attempts at intervention. In 1967, the compound was raided by Canadian police, responding to reports of child abuse and neglect, but some 80 children were swiftly moved out of the monastery and into the homes of supporters around Canada and the US, becoming known in press accounts as "the hidden children of Saint Jovite." For a time, Tremblay went into hiding and was considered among the 10 most wanted criminals in Quebec. In the late 1970s, another scandal arose amid a custody dispute between a father who'd left Saint Jovite and a mother who remained, and who concealed the location of their two children. When Tremblay refused to tell authorities where the missing children were, he was charged with kidnapping and sentenced to two years in prison, although he was released on parole within five months. In the late '90s and early 2000s, 16 young adults who'd grown up in the community filed numerous complaints of physical and sexual abuse, leading police to take 19 children into custody. One former member even sued the group, including Tremblay and other high-ranking sect officials, for \$2.5 mil-

THE NEIGHBORS

lion. But the lawsuit was dismissed. The criminal case likewise died in court, as some of the necessary evidence had been lost over the years, and other complaints had passed the statute of limitations for prosecution. Quebec did, however, pass a law targeting the Apostles, prohibiting children under the age of 16 from living in monastic communities going forward.

By then, Chandler and Pierre had already left. When she was just 13, Chandler took vows to become a nun of the Apostles. But the same year, the Canadian government refused to renew her and her siblings' visas, and their mother had to come pick them up. "That's how I found out I had parents," recalled Chandler. After nearly a decade with the Apostles, she said, when she first saw her mother, who had since remarried, Chandler told her that she was going to Hell. ("I know," Chandler recalls her mother responding. "Your brothers already told me.")

Pierre left at age 17, after he'd similarly started the process to take vows as a monk within the sect. But around Christmas that year, Tremblay had had another vision: that the world was again about to end, and the Apostles had to pray, meditate and sacrifice to stave it off. The monks covered the monastery windows with aluminum foil and paper, so that no one in Saint Jovite could see the cataclysm happening outside. But that afternoon, Pierre recalled, "I remember saying to myself, 'I want to see what the end of the world looks like.'" When he was in a room by himself, he peeled back the paper to peek outside. "It was a beautiful, sunny day. And I thought, I'm missing a nice, beautiful, sunny day. And for what?"

It would take him three attempts, but ultimately he left, though he says the scars have lasted his entire life since then. "It's been almost 50 years, and I'm still having nightmares from stuff that they've done to me. No amount of therapy is going to change that."

"The psychological damage that these people inflicted on us, you can't fix," agreed Chandler, whose life has included periods of homelessness and nearly constant therapy.

In recent years, former members have

Zobel & co. KITCHENS...

Creative designs for the heart of your Adirondack home.

www.zobelandco.com 518-588-1034

SD ATELIER ARCHITECTURE, LLC
511 BROADWAY
SARATOGA SPRINGS, NY
(518) 587-3385
www.sdatelier.com

"Studio architecture for good design"

The Furniture House

The Area's Largest Selection of Slabs



A full-service store featuring American made products you won't find anywhere else, including slabs, wall beds, game room and Amish furniture.



"... the unusual as usual."

Saratoga Lake
1254 Route 9P
Saratoga Springs, NY
518-587-9865

Queensbury
1060 Route 9
Queensbury, NY
518-798-0133



www.TheFurnitureHouseNY.com



**Arty Lady
Ms.D.com**

*Fine Art • Jewelry
Joyful Gifts*

THE NEIGHBORS

found each other online, in various social media groups and through individual testimonials, many of which read very similarly to Chandler's and Pierre's accounts. A number of former members described struggles with addiction or other self-harm after leaving the Apostles; some, say others, killed themselves.

The grim history makes both Chandler and Pierre alarmed about the Apostles' potential motives in buying land in the Adirondacks. Perhaps it was an investment, or a means of hiding or laundering money, they suggested, or a way point for Apostles traveling back and forth between the numerous properties they own in the US and the compound in Quebec, since the Apostles own a license as a transport company as well. Perhaps it's part of plans for a move, if the Canadian government was running them out, or their 100-year lease on the land in Saint Jovite was falling through. Pierre recalled that Tremblay had collected property as well, often carrying money when he traveled, so he could offer people cash for their homes or land on the spot.

"If they're buying so many properties over there in the Adirondacks," he conjectured, "they've got other things in mind."

The Apostles themselves offered no clarity. Reached by phone in Saint Jovite, a woman at the monastery said she didn't know about the group's property holdings, and that a COVID-19 outbreak at the monastery meant that no one who did know was available to speak.

The Catholic Diocese of Ogdensburg, which oversees the Church region of northern New York, said they'd been unaware of the sect's presence in the area, but that if they noticed them building any churches, they'd begin catechizing their members about what the Catholic Church actually teaches, as a means of warning them away.

Chandler suggested, alternatively, that without a pipeline of children being trained as new nuns and monks, the sect had progressively grown old; the nuns who'd haunted her childhood would now be approaching their 80s and 90s. Perhaps the order just needed a series of houses they could use as ad-hoc retirement facilities: a place for the remnant of the



SCIENCE +
STEWARDSHIP =
SOLUTIONS



ausableriver.org

**DeFRANCO
LANDSCAPING INC.**

518.543.6089

Shoreline Buffers
Rain Gardens
Native Plantings
Landscape Designs
Permeable Paver Systems
Stormwater Management

DeFrancoLandscaping.com

Specializing in stormwater solutions & sustainable landscaping within the Lake George Basin

HOLMES KING KALLQUIST
& Associates, Architects LLP

315-476-8371
www.hkkarchitects.com

Located at 575 North Salina Street, Syracuse NY 13208

come for the nature,
stay for the adventure.



Take in the thrills of North America's longest mountain coaster, savor the views of a scenic summit hike, the ease of a front-country hike, or pedal in a pristine forest with over 30 miles of trails for mountain biking. Whatever your pace, come explore the nature and find your adventure at Mt. Van Hoevenberg.



MtVanHoevenberg.com



THE NEIGHBORS

remnant, now dying out.

Town supervisors in several of the municipalities where the Apostles have bought property said that the owners rarely seem to be present. The land surrounding the Reber property, said Willsboro Town Supervisor Shaun Gilliland, is leased out to a local dairy farmer to grow feed; the house with the crucifix mostly looks empty, except for a few times a year, when clothes appear on the line—perhaps, Gilliland speculated, for a retreat or temporary housing for the Apostles' people. The houses in Malone, said Supervisor Andrea Stewart, are listed in their tax exemption paperwork as stopover points for pastors going back and forth over the Canadian border. Both homes, said Stewart, "are within our village limits, so if there was any activity going on, it wouldn't be unnoticed, as opposed to a forested parcel."

In Churubusco, said Kathleen Rego, of the Town of Clinton, there's little record of anything about the Apostles except that they own the property: on the south side, a vacant old house with a small statue of Virgin Mary, noted Rego, and on the north, just empty land.

It's not the first time that a secretive organization has turned to the Adirondacks. For years, the Albany-based cult NXIVM rented out a Lake George retreat center for a 10-day celebration of its leader, Keith Raniere. On its surface, the group was an "executive-success" training program that promised self-improvement and fulfillment; in the late 2010s, media reports, and later an explosive court trial, revealed that group leaders had engaged in sexual and physical abuse of members, including cauterizing Raniere's initials on lower-ranking women in the cult. In 2019, Raniere was convicted of racketeering and sex trafficking, but for years before that, hundreds of NXIVM members had traveled from around the world to Lake George's 700-acre Silver Bay YMCA Conference & Family Retreat Center for camp activities and tributes to Raniere. Only now do we know what was happening behind closed doors. ▲

Kathryn Joyce is a journalist and author from Saranac Lake.

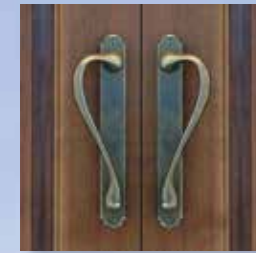


Since 1955

HARBROOK

Fine Windows, Doors & Hardware

Design Gallery



MARVIN 

47 Railroad Avenue
Albany, NY 12205
www.harbrook.com

(518) 437-0016
(800) 735-1427



1079 US ROUTE 9 SCHROON LAKE, NY 518-532-0220
WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/PINECONEMERCANTILE INSTAGRAM: PINECONEMERCANTILE