

The ADIRONDACK SPIRIT



Mohican chapter member William J. “Jay” O’Hern is one of the most prolific regional authors active today, although he will protest when identified as a writer. He has published a dozen books since 1997—half of them since 2012—and has three more lined up for 2015, with yet another in the wings for 2016. O’Hern deals not with mainstream political history, but with mostly little-known old-time guides, remote lumber camps, and sporting adventures, along with a healthy dose of the iconic hermit Noah John Rondeau. We asked him to talk a little about himself and his devotion to writing about Adirondack history, quirky happenings, and backwoods “characters.”

ADK Author Jay O’Hern Talks to *Adirondack*

Books by Jay O'Hern

Adirondac: First, tell us a little bit about your life.

Jay O'Hern: I grew up in what used to be rural farm country in the Fairmount-Camillus, N.Y., area. Nobody would know it today, but in my youth I roamed cow pastures and vast woodlots and enjoyed a thoroughly country life. I married in 1964, and we moved to Camden for the rural setting and close proximity to the Adirondacks. After working at a saw mill and in retail and manufacturing and losing some toes and fingers, I decided college would be a good decision. I attended SUNY Oswego, did almost three years of graduate work, and taught for thirty-five years at Camden Central School, but also operated a craft business and worked as a carpenter, doing restoration and new construction. Bette and I have five children, 13 grandchildren, and a great-grandchild.

Adirondac: What or who first got you interested in the out-of-doors, and when? What did you like about it?

Jay O'Hern: Vacationing at my grandparents' riverfront camp, enjoying the independence and freedom on the water and land that they allowed, as did my parents, and my parents' frequent camping trips to the central Adirondacks.

Adirondac: What inspired you to start writing about the Adirondacks?

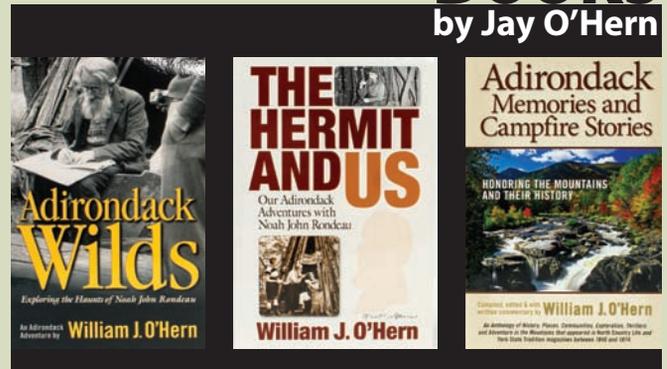
Jay O'Hern: I enjoy history and I like listening to people talk—the dialects and the rural heritage. All those years-ago stories come to life through memories, old photos, diaries, journals, and letters. That's Adirondack history to me. My stories are about the Adirondack way, the Adirondack spirit. I don't think I'll ever run low on material.

Adirondac: You have particular interests in the southwest Adirondacks—the "headwaters" region, and in historic "characters" from that region. What attracts you to that area and its history?

Jay O'Hern: It's a rich, untapped source of history and fascinating people whose memories are a source of joy for them and for me. Beyond the personal aspect, there is plenty of state-owned land to travel through, mostly by bushwhacking. Being where I generally don't see a single other soul is to my liking.

Adirondac: You also have done a lot of writing about Noah Rondeau and "Cold River Country," with four books on him. What appeals to you about him and his locale?

Jay O'Hern: It is very much in the romantic tradition to picture a solitary figure and his wigwam "village" atop a hillock overlooking the Cold River, picking up a few crumbs of information about the outside world from passing mountain climbers, hikers and anglers, communing mostly with chipmunks, raccoons, black bears, river otters and deer. And in the idyllic, picturesque valley between the Seward and Santanoni ranges this is a pretty accurate picture—except that over the years this



Life with Noah, North Country Books, Inc., 1997

Anyplace Wild in the Adirondacks (a postcard book),
In the Adirondacks, 2000

Adirondack Stories of the Black River Country,
North Country Books, Inc., 2003

Adirondack Characters and Campfire Yarns,
The Forager Press, 2005

Under an Adirondack Influence, The Forager Press, 2008

Noah John Rondeau's Adirondack Wilderness Days,
The Forager Press, 2009

Life in a North Woods Lumber Camp,
The Forager Press, 2012

Adirondack Adventures, The Forager Press, 2012

Adirondack Kaleidoscope, In the Adirondacks, 2013

Adirondack Memories and Campfire Stories,
In the Adirondacks, 2014

*Adirondack Wilds: Exploring the Haunts of
Noah John Rondeau*, In the Adirondacks, 2014

*The Hermit and Us: Our Adventures with
Noah John Rondeau*, In the Adirondacks, 2014

Scheduled for Release in 2015

*Adirondack Spring Trout and Strawberry Pancakes:
Borrowed Tales, Quirky Cures, Camp Recipes and the
Adirondack Characters Who Cooked Them Up
At Our Adirondack Table: Stories, Memories and Recipes
from Mountain Homes and Camps
Flapjacks for Lumberjacks: Historical Stories, Logging
Memories and Recipes from Adirondack Lumber Camps*

Planned for Release in 2016

*Adirondack Family Pastimes: Family Camping and Sporting
Adventures in the Mountains 1913-1950*

Rondeau Books



Available at Special Price to ADK Members

Noah John Rondeau admitted hundreds of backpackers and mountain climbers into his Cold River hermitage from the mid-1930s through 1950. He was immensely popular with ADKers—so popular that they made him an honorary member in 1938. He rarely failed to record ADKers' visits in his diligently kept journals:

May 30, 1942: I climb Couchsachraga with Ruth Prince, Mary Colyer [Dittmar], Helen [Colyer] Menz.

July 31, 1944: Today 13 Adirondack Mountain Club members mostly from Schenectady arrive. They camp south of Cold River.

Two new books about the Cold River hermit take readers on a journey through Rondeau's beloved Cold River country, introducing his High Peaks mountain home life and myriad early ADK members who shared experiences with Rondeau in camp as well as on bushwhacks to nearby summits. *Adirondack Wilds: Exploring the Haunts of Noah John Rondeau* and *The Hermit and Us: Our Adventures with Noah John Rondeau*, two very different story-driven books, present the wide variety of happenings at Mayor Rondeau's Cold River City, Population 1. Much of the material in these volumes has never before been shared or published: handwritten letters to friends, memories and stories, and scores of vintage photographs.

AS A TRIBUTE TO ADK MEMBERS who share the feeling that it is important to chronicle this wilderness setting, its remarkable person and its history, ADKers may purchase the books at a special discount when they order through www.adkwilds.com/adk.—Jay O'Hern

so-called hermit entertained and delighted hundreds of visitors. I wanted to tell the story of the *real* Noah Rondeau.

Noah was sort of like the Queen Bee for the early ADKers and 46ers who climbed the mountains too. His personality, his unique nature and character as well as his talents and skills drew me in. His friends' and family members' stories allowed me to "eavesdrop" on Noah. I had no script, no agenda in the beginning.

I love the Cold River country for its history and its atmosphere. If you look long enough you'll find bits and pieces of the territory's former self—a small barrel of traps, logging paraphernalia, sections of winding corduroy roads, remnants of hunting camps, a mason jar with sugar Noah stashed.

Adirondac: When you head for the backcountry yourself, where do you like to go, and why there?

Jay O'Hern: I seek out trailless areas to explore, places people don't normally go to. I also love to be on the water. I'm getting into kayak camping as I age. It's not as easy anymore to cart around a heavy backpack.

Adirondac: Finally, why do you do all this writing? What's your motivation? What triggers a story?

Jay O'Hern: I do it for the love of history and to honor and respect those who have taken the time to share their stories with me. These plain-spoken, honest, down-to-earth people won't be with us much longer, and they'll take their memories with them if someone doesn't preserve them.

My stories have their beginnings in so many ways. An artifact in the ruins of a former logging shanty, a suggestion from an old-timer, or a chance remark will lead me down the road to a story.

Life in a North Woods Lumber Camp (2012) and *Flapjacks for Lumberjacks* (to be released in 2015) were born out of my experience of being unemployed and living on assistance until I landed a job at Crockett's saw mill. I gained a lot of respect for the people involved in the logging industry. That in turn fed my interest in loggers and life in the old-time lumber camps, and sharpened my desire to locate as many of the former Gould Paper Company campsites as possible. The search also provided some great bushwhacks and artifacts that turned up.

When natives and longtime inhabitants—folks whose roots mingled with the culture and lore of the mountains—share their personal stories, diaries and family pictures with me, I am genuinely touched. I am impressed at their honesty and openness. Their love of the woods and waters, mountains, meadows, and all sorts of flora and fauna from dragonflies to black bears, spring flowers to the colors of autumn, is obvious. I've vowed to honor their willingness to share their stories by developing interesting books on the people of the mountains. 🌿