

SECRET SCRATCHINGS

The cryptic written language of
Noah John Rondeau—the hermit of Cold River.

By Jenna Kerwin

“Quack’s Pants.” “Bickford is bloody bugger.”

When I first read these phrases, I couldn’t possibly imagine them being any more than a silly collection of words. I assumed they were meaningless, or maybe not my business to understand.

It seems that is precisely what the author of these phrases intended.

These and many other notes were written in a strange code in journals belonging to the mayor of “Cold River City (Population One).” This “mayor” is better known as Noah John Rondeau, the hermit who lived at Cold River in the Adirondacks for more than 30 years.

Noah was born in July of 1883 near Au Sable Forks. As he grew up, he quickly realized schooling and the working man’s life were not for him. Instead, he became a guide to hunting and fishing parties for a hotel near where he lived in Coreys. In 1928, Noah decided the solitude of the Adirondacks was what he sought, and settled at an abandoned river driver’s camp deep in the mountains overlooking Cold River. Over the years, he built Cold River City, a small camp with two tiny cabin-style abodes and several wigwam-style wood structures. He wrote poems, collected

firewood, worked on his camp, entertained visitors—those covered with fur, feathers or skin—and was on the whole, content and busy in his solitary neck of the woods. He also busily kept a journal in which he wrote daily observations of animal movements, weather, and excursions. It was a way to keep track of date and time, especially during the winter months when visitors were sparse.

Not your typical hermit, Noah was actually quite sociable and his camp was a favorite stop for many hikers, hunters

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and anglers. For instance, Noah had been friends with Richard “Red” Smith’s family before moving from Lake Placid to Coreys in 1913. Red was in his teens when he reconnected with Noah, and the two quickly developed a deep friendship. Noah became Richard’s mentor and, more than that, lifelong friend.

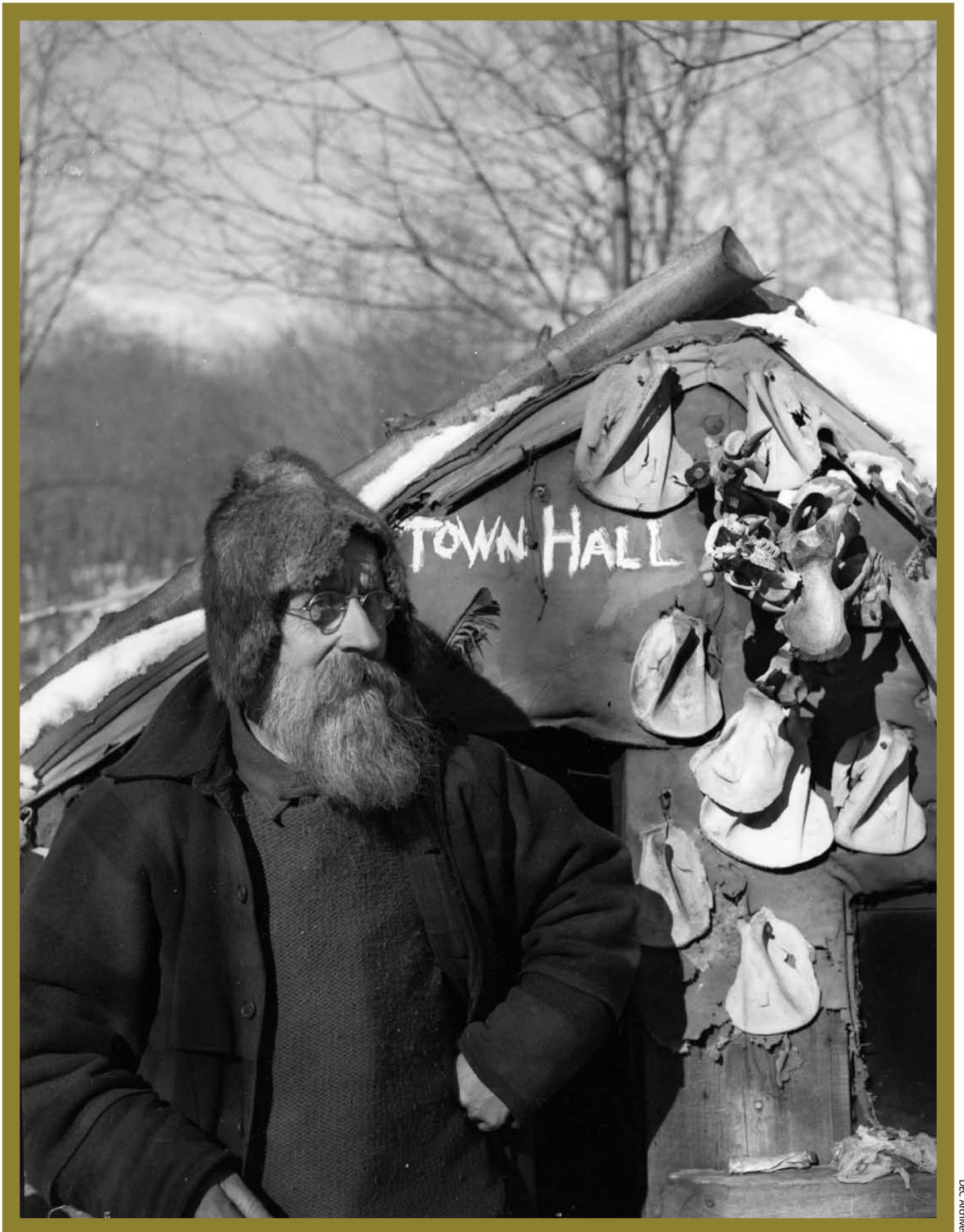
Noah always held strong opinions about government, and was never on good terms with New York’s then-Conservation (or “Consternation,” as Noah called it) Department. He had run-ins with the Department concerning his

illegal hunting, and with the exception of a few environmental officers he befriended over the years, he cared little for the organization.

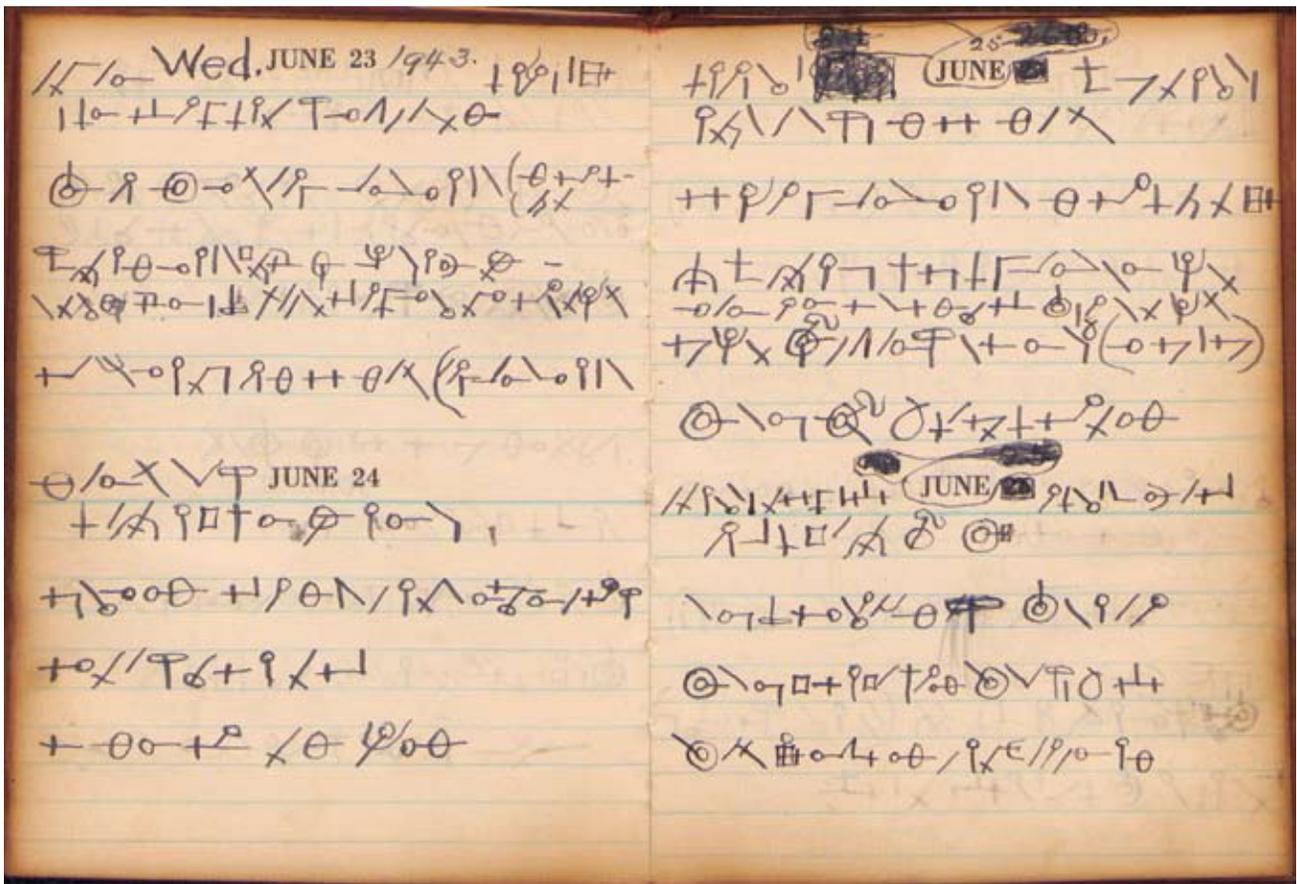
Noah often worried his journals would end up in the hands of the Conservation Department. So to ensure the contents of his journals couldn’t be used against him, he developed a code. The code also ensured his privacy from other prying eyes, an important thing to Noah who felt that some visitors asked too many questions about his journals.

Although Noah had already been using an unsophisticated code when he was in Coreys, he developed and perfected an impressive new code during his stay at Cold River. Adolph D. “Ditt” Dittmar, a close friend of Noah’s, remarked the code resembled the “scratchings of an inebriated hen.” His observation was a good comparison; Noah’s code looks like a barnyard bird stepped in paint and walked across the page!

Following his move from Cold River in 1950, Noah continued his long-held practice of code-writing. When he died



Not your typical hermit, Rondeau was always happy to entertain visitors at his home at Cold River. Here he poses for a photo near Cold River Town Hall, a wood structure he used as his living quarters.



Adirondack Museum/New York State Archives

Noah often wrote in his journals using a highly sophisticated code he developed to keep "Official Busy-bodies" from snooping around his business.

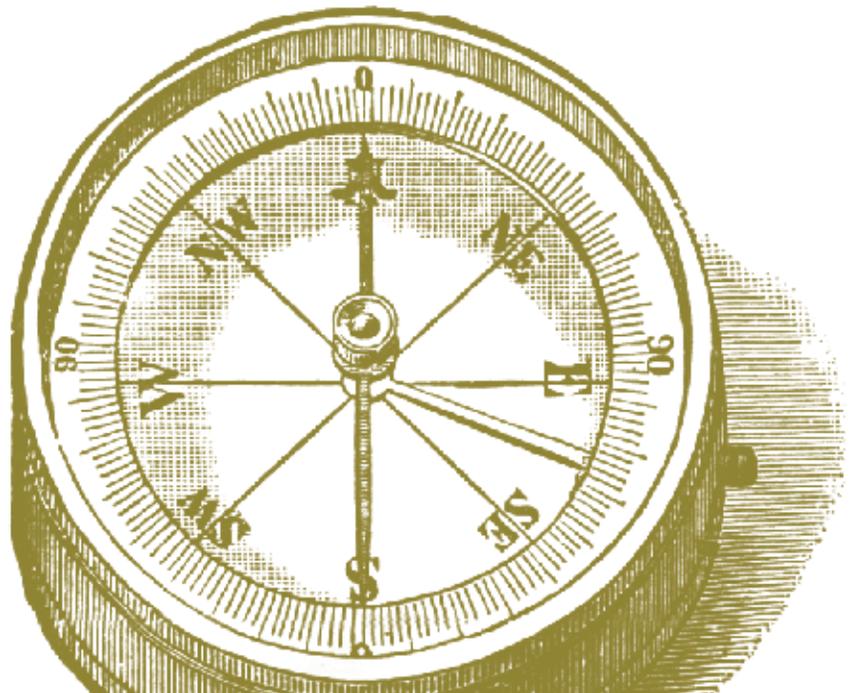
in 1967, so did the secret to his journals. Locked in their coded language, the journals seemed to fade away from public memory, destined to be forgotten. And that might have happened if it wasn't for David Greene.

David had been interested in Noah and his journals since he was a small child. David's mother Evelyn (daughter of Adirondack legend, Paul Schaefer) and her family had visited Noah's hermitage when she was younger, and she shared her hand-written experiences with her son. This further intrigued him and prompted him to try to decipher Noah's code. To help, his mother got a few photocopied pages of Noah's journal from the Adirondack Museum, and so David began decoding Noah's system. But it wasn't until the early 1990s that his work paid off.

After years of trying to crack the code, David finally discovered that a compass rose was the key to Noah's mysterious characters. All the letters of the alphabet—plus the numbers 0 to 9—fit on

the compass rose. Squiggly lines, crosses, lines, etc. formed the characters. The breakthrough came about when David discovered that the symbols for "north," "south," "east" and "west" also stood for the letters n, s, e and w. Another find was that Noah added extra lines or "arms" to the symbols of his alphabet to indicate repetition. For example, two arms added to any symbol meant to read that character twice.

What made Noah's code even more difficult to decipher was that he added elements to throw off would-be cryptanalysts. Writing "J" instead of "K," including words and phrases in his own personal rendition of the French language, writing upside-down, not using spaces, and inserting random stick figures and symbols were all clever ploys Noah used to keep "Official Busy-bodies" out of his personal business.



In his book, *Noah John Rondeau's Adirondack Wilderness Days*, William J. "Jay" O'Hern describes some other tricks Noah used:

"...perhaps the meanest two tricks of all were these. When Noah used a stick figure with its arms up in the air it meant the next line of code was upside down. This would be easy to spot in codes using a normal alphabet, but if you inverted a symbol in Rondeau's cipher, it became another valid symbol. To make it even harder, he sometimes combined words in an 'every-other-letter' technique, so that the jumbled string of characters 'CTOOLWDRNHIAVLELR' actually says 'Cold River Town Hall!'"

With such convoluted code, it was an amazing feat that David solved Noah's cryptics. Despite the astounding accomplishment, though, the deciphered words and phrases (like "Quack's Pants") didn't make any sense. Enter Jay O'Hern. At about the same time David was deciphering Noah's code, Jay was working on a new book about the hermit of Cold River, and establishing a relationship with a now

much-older Richard Smith. Noah's friend had shared some of Noah's old letters, scrapbooks, poems, diaries, and other trinkets and paraphernalia with Jay. However, they were both stumped when it came to Noah's coded diaries. That's when Jay heard of David, and got in touch with him.

Soon, the three once-strangers began a journey to uncover an old hermit's language. Richard was particularly important because he helped to put context to the cryptic phrases. As Jay said, "To put it simply, Richard brought Noah's journals to life."

With Richard's memories, the group was able to put meaning to David's interpretation of the hermit's mysterious writing. The phrase "Quack's pants," for instance, was relatively simple in meaning. According to Richard, "Quack" was Noah's nickname for him based on the location of Richard's Adirondack camp close to Duck Hole and the Preston Ponds. "Pants" referred to a pair of pants Noah helped Richard make out of deerskin. Richard (no doubt amused by the memory) remarked how

During his life at Cold River, Rondeau became quite a celebrity among the public, often making guest appearances at a variety of sportsmen shows across New York. Here he has been helicoptered to Saranac field for a stop en route to New York City to be a "live display" at the 1947 National Sportsmen's Show.



A snapshot of Clayt Seagers's 1946 *Conservationist* article "The Hermit of Cold River Flow."

tight they were, and that he waddled around in them "like a duck that had slivers in its web feet."

Another curious phrase was "Jonah in verse is percolating." This alluded to a poem called "Jonah and the whale" that

Noah was writing. “Bickford is bloody bugger” was an amusing, but altogether confusing phrase that actually hinted at the hunting ability of one of Richard’s friends. His level of hunting was what Noah considered “bloody bugger.”

Probably some of the strangest phrases found in Noah’s journals involved the nature and wildlife around him. “Blue Jay trapped on little guts at Caboose door” might seem a little ridiculous and even gro-

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tesque, but it actually referred to something as simple as a future meal. “Caboose Door” is a reference to one of the several structures in his hermitage; guts were often used as bait to attract birds for Noah’s famous “everlasting stew.”

Though his health was deteriorating, reminiscing about Noah with Jay and David seemed to lift Richard’s spirits, if only for a little while. In a letter to Jay, he echoed the same words Noah

said to him, years before: “Old father time keeps picking my pocket, and I can’t make him stop!” He died a short time later in 1993, but for a time he felt renewed and uplifted.

Those are the feelings you get when you read one of Noah’s journals. His entries aren’t long or detailed by any means, but they are a glimpse into a devoted and peaceful life in nature, apart from modern day distractions. Noah’s words

about his surroundings, his travels, his daily activities—all paint a picture of a life in which men and women are able to not only survive, but truly live in a world which inspires them. It’s with his words that many people have—and continue to have—a love for nature and the outdoors.

In reference to Noah and other legends like Clarence Petty and Paul Schaefer, Jay once told me I had missed meeting

some truly great people. Though, thanks to his sleuthing, the dedication and commitment of David Greene, and the memories of Richard Smith, I am able to at least catch a glimpse into Noah’s world. If it wasn’t for these three strangers, none of us would be able to share in the world and life of the Mayor of Cold River City (Population One).

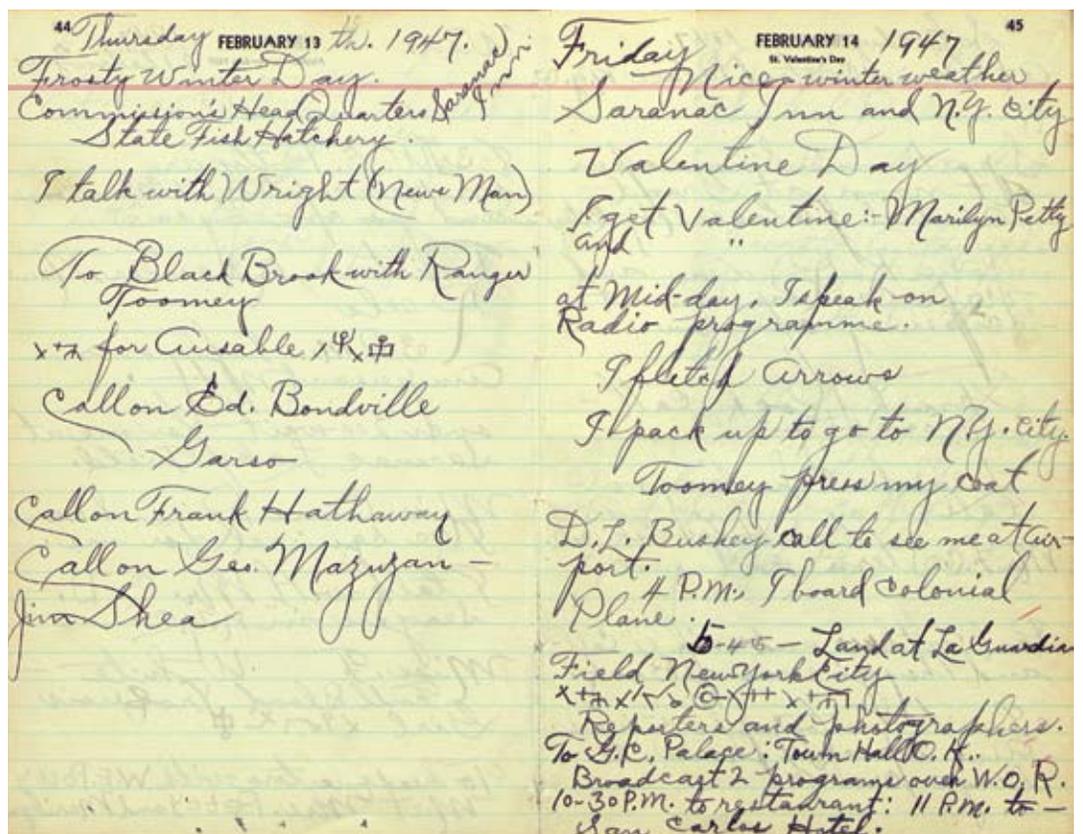
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The author would like to thank William J. O’Hern for his help, guidance and wisdom on the above article.

Right: An aerial view of Noah John Rondeau’s camp by Cold River shows the various wig-wam-style and cabin-like structures that made up his home in the Adirondacks.

Inset: A popular figure of the times, Noah was often interviewed by visitors to his camp. He made sure not to give too much away, though, and was sure to let passersby know when they were asking too many questions!

Many of Rondeau’s journals are written in both regular handwriting and code. In this way, he was able to keep his secrets from wandering eyes.





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Most of Noah John Rondeau's journals have not been lost to the passage of time. The Lake Placid/North Elba Historical Society holds diaries, photographs, poems and letters by the Adirondack hermit. Visit its website at <http://lakeplacidhistory.com> for hours and directions. You can view some of this memorabilia digitally via the New York State Archives at www.archives.nysed.gov; just type "Noah John Rondeau" in the search box. In addition, the Adirondack Museum has a Noah John Rondeau collection. Its website is www.adkmuseum.org; click on the "Discover & Learn" tab on the main page and then "library & research" to explore.

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There are a variety of works on Noah John Rondeau and his journals. Some published works that might be of interest include William J. O'Hern's *Life With Noah: Stories and Adventures of Richard Smith with Noah John Rondeau and Adirondack Wilds*, and the 1946 *Conservationist* article by Clayt Seagers entitled "The Hermit of Cold River Flow" (see page 19). Maitland de Sormo's *Noah John Rondeau: Adirondack Hermit* also contains interesting and engaging information, though some do not consider it an accurate representation of Noah's character.