

It's God's country on Upper Saranac

Sitting on a mound of rock - an island barely an acre in size - is a sacred site. A tiny brown chapel, hugged by pine trees, seems to float off a holy barge anchored in the azure waters of Upper Saranac Lake.

With sunlight glittering in the ripples, a loon wailing in the distance, pine needles baking in the summer heat and a soft breeze cooling speckles of sweat on your neck, it soon hits.

This is God's country.

The Island Chapel - a bona fide place of spirit - serves residents and visitors with non-denominational services every Sunday morning in the summer. It is an Upper Saranac Lake institution, a tourist destination and a popular wedding venue. Instead of a neon sign, a 12-foot-tall birch tree cross lures boaters to its rocky shore, strewn with green lichen, amber pine needles and driftwood. For many people, it is heaven on earth or at least a symbol of it.

"This chapel is featured in the 'Places of Spirit: Sacred Sites of the Adirondacks' traveling exhibit on display at the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake. The show and accompanying book, produced by the Lake Placid Institute for the Arts and Humanities, is designed to look 'deeply, through the lenses of four contemporary photographers, at structures and landscapes in the Adirondack region of New York that signify or once signified spiritual use and meaning."

Romaine Orthwein's photo "Chapel Island" captures the essence of this site. The viewer's eye is drawn to the contrast of a woman in a white dress walking toward the brown-stained chapel (we see her back side). To the right is the birch log cross. Under her bare feet is solid rock. To the left are blueberry bushes, shrubs and a white pine sapling at the foot of a towering Scotch pine tree. Above are cirrocumulus clouds flying high in a blue sky. The woman in the white dress is the photographer.

Orthwein has another Chapel Island photo in the "Places of Spirit" book; this time, her camera, placed inside the chapel, looks through large glass windows to the rocky shore of the island, the light gray waters of Upper Saranac Lake and the forested western shoreline. Again, the photographer is dressed in white in the



Chapel Island, Upper Saranac Lake

PHOTO BY ROMAINE ORTHWEIN

photograph, squatting on the lakeshore, dipping her fingers in the cool water.

The first chapel on the island was built in 1889 in the Victorian style. In 1892, the same year New York state formed the Adirondack Park, three Plattsburgh attorneys gave the island to the Champlain Presbytery. Lumberjack sky pilot Aaron Maddox served as the first minister for this chapel and the Indian Carry Chapel. After the original structure was razed by fire in 1956, it was rebuilt in 1958 with Adirondack siding and a foundation of stone masonry.

Access to Chapel Island is limited to boaters. A party boat transports parishioners from nearby Indian Carry to the island. Lake residents drive their motorboats to the island and anchor them in a floating parking lot; they are taken to shore by a designated chauffeur. People in guideboats and canoes may tie their craft to the dock, though it can get crowded when the shuttle arrives.

The "Places of Spirit" exhibit includes framed images from Orthwein, Shellburne Thurber, Barry Loddell and Heather McLeod. The Lake Placid Institute commissioned them to shoot photographs of their own choosing that conveyed a sense of the spiritual or sacred.

"In many instances, the structures remain a vital part of Adirondack communities and are used regularly sites of worship or village life," said Jennifer Carlo,

executive director of the Lake Placid Institute.

The exhibit includes pictures of St. Brendan's Roman Catholic Church in Keene, the Beth-Joseph Synagogue in Tupper Lake and St. Christopher's Church in North Creek.

Some of these sacred buildings have been adapted to new uses. The Essex Senior Center was formerly the Methodist-Episcopal Church in Essex, built in 1835. An Orvis store in Wevertown had once been the Methodist Church.

"Other special places where the spiritual resides are the private chapels or personal religious spaces that Adirondackers have built into their home or camps," Carlo said. "And lastly, there is the landscape itself - pieces of hillsides that have been made into graveyards and cemeteries and then the larger landscape - the mountaintops and slopes and the waters of Adirondack lakes and rivers."

Mara Miller, an independent curator from New York, is in charge of the "Places of the Spirit" exhibit. It will be on display in Blue Mountain Lake through Oct. 13 and will then travel to the Housatonic Museum of Art in Bridgeport, Conn. The book is available in regional bookstores or by calling the Lake Placid Institute at 523-1312.

For more information about the Adirondack Museum, visit it on-line at www.adirondack-museum.org or call 352-7311.



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