

HISTORIC ROOTS

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Neshobe Island.

NEW YORK SUMMERS IN VERMONT: THE ROUND TABLE AT NESHOBE ISLAND

By BRETT C. MILLIER

People like to go on vacation. Whether they go to deer camp, to Florida, or somewhere else, they look forward to a rest, a change of scenery, and a different way of doing things. Many come to Vermont.

For a few years in the 1920s, a group of New York writers, actors, and entertainers found their perfect getaway on a tiny island in the middle of Lake Bomoseen, just north of Castleton, Vermont. Lake Bomoseen is the largest lake that is wholly within the state. Its name comes from an Abenaki word meaning “keeper of the ceremonial fire.”

The people who came to Neshobe Island were all famous themselves. But they were also famous as a group. They were called “The Algonquin Round Table” because they had lunch every day at a round table at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City. They were witty and smart, sometimes off-color, and sometimes



The Algonquin Hotel

The Algonquin Hotel in New York City.

nasty. Because of their witty remarks and wild antics, the group was also called the “Vicious Circle” by both its friends and its enemies. The group became famous because some of the things they said at lunch appeared in the newspapers, thanks to

the journalists who belonged.

The leader of the group was Alexander Woollcott. He was a journalist, broadcaster, and theater critic. Some other members were Franklin P. Adams, a newspaper columnist; the comic writer and actor Robert Benchley; Harold Ross, who founded *The New Yorker* magazine; playwright Robert Sherwood; writer Ring Lardner; Harpo Marx of the Marx Brothers; and Dorothy Parker, poet, critic, and short story writer.

Dorothy Parker was the funniest member of the group, and what she said was often quoted. She once said about a book she hadn’t liked, “This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.”

“*The House Beautiful*,” she wrote about a Broadway play, “is the play lousy.” She was the author of the famous lines: “Men seldom make passes/ At girls who wear glasses,” and of many others that can’t be printed here.

Woollcott thought that the group needed a place to get together outside of New York in the summer. There they could work, and their daily jokes and games could last beyond the lunch hour.

In 1925 Woollcott rented Neshobe Island, seven acres in the middle of Lake Bomoseen. He later bought it and built a beautiful lake-



The Algonquin Hotel

This cartoon by Al Hirschfeld shows members of the Round Table at lunch at the Algonquin Hotel. Dorothy Parker is at the left. To her left is Robert Benchley, followed by Alexander Woollcott, Heywood Brown, Marc Connelly, Franklin P. Adams, Edna Ferber, George Kaufman, and Robert Sherwood.



The house where members of the Round Table stayed when they visited Neshobe Island.

stone house. Each member of the group paid \$1,000 to stay there in the summer. But Woollcott was the leader and host, the group's "keeper of the ceremonial fire."

The first summer, Woollcott drew up a list of rules to make the island a quiet place to work. Breakfast was to be at 7 a.m. There would be no drinking. There were to be set hours for work and swimming. And there would be games of croquet whenever Woollcott decided.

It didn't work that way. Little work was done. Despite the fact that it was the era of Prohibition, when it was forbidden to make, sell, or drink alcoholic beverages, there was a lot of drinking. People tended to drink more in those days anyway, and the fact that it was illegal made drinking more attractive to some. There were croquet games at all hours. Guests

dressed up in costumes. They played practical jokes. Harpo Marx, more than once, rushed from bush to bush, wearing only a hat and a coat of blue paint. He jumped out from time to time, startling people who were nearby.

But just as in New York, most of what the members of the group did on Neshobe Island was talk. They talked about politics and literature, about plays and music. They told jokes and played games. They gossiped and invented clever insults. When Dorothy Parker was told that former President Calvin Coolidge

(a Vermonter, who was known to speak very little) had died, she quipped, "How can they tell?" When one of her friends had a baby, Parker sent a telegram that said "Congratulations.... We knew you had it in you."

The Round Table came to Neshobe Island for only a few summers. But



Richard E. Myers

Alexander Woollcott and Gerald Murphy on Neshobe Island. Murphy is dressed up as an Amish farmer. His nickname for Woollcott was "Prince Alexis."

until Woollcott's death in 1943, other famous guests came and went from the island. Life there was probably never again as crazy as it was in the 1920s, however.

In the early 1960s, a Vermont family bought the island, and for more than thirty years it was their summer home. All of the family's children got married there. But the family always remembered Woollcott and his rowdy guests.

In February 1998, Neshobe Island was again sold. Its new owners have promised to keep the house, the original camp, and the barn—which still contains one of Woollcott's croquet sets and the rickshaw he used to drive around the island—as close to their original condition as they can.

Rooting Around

It's fun to try to imagine these glamorous people playing their games and tricks in Vermont. Here are some ways to get a sense of who they were.

Dorothy Parker, Ring Lardner, and Robert Benchley wrote stories that are still read today. Your library probably has some of their books.

You may be able to find videos of movies with the Marx Brothers and group members Helen Hayes and Tallulah Bankhead at your local library or video store.