

Anabasis

There is a vast tract of land in central Maine that is completely uninhabited. A considerable portion of the Maine woods remains in a wilderness state, and this tract has existed undisturbed for nearly a century. However, by the early 1920's hundreds of families lived here in a network of villages linked by well-maintained dirt roads that radiated from a town square. In its day, the villages and hamlets in the region all had names, but today those names are as forgotten as their residents. The departed householders had named their community Anabasis, the journey in from the sea. A meandering nine-mile boulevard connected Anabasis to the primary thoroughfares of the state.

For some forgotten reasons, during the late 1930's and '40's the people who lived in this area moved away. Perhaps there wasn't enough business, or perhaps there weren't enough opportunities. Perhaps their children were drawn to the big cities to the south and east. Perhaps it was the second great war. Or some local untoward conditions may have caused them to lose their attraction to the region.

Winters in Maine are long and difficult, and in this area weather patterns have always been exceptionally harsh, even in comparison to the rugged storm-swept coastline. Blizzards and ice in the central region are stronger and more bitter than those that sweep across the rest of the state each year.

Suffice to say that by the late 1940's the entire region was abandoned. The streets became overgrown with seedlings, bushes, and ivy. The boulevard to the outside world disappeared beneath mud slides and fallen trees, and so, at the present time, only houses remain — a few hundred still

standing, hardy Maine architecture stoutly constructed by professional carpenters and craftsmen whose fathers and grandfathers had been carpenters and craftsmen.

These houses stand, more or less, as they have for the better part of a century. Though no one lives in them, they have not yet deteriorated to the point of substantial decay. In most cases one could move in without much difficulty, make a few repairs, see to the roof and a leak here and there, replace a few dozen broken window panes, roust the squirrels, evacuate a few bird nests, and generally render the building habitable again.

Imagine climbing over the logs that block the boulevard, walking down these long quiet lanes with houses on each side, once home to chattering families and children playing. Imagine listening to the clatter of carts and horse-drawn buggies, the first wheezing and clattering motorcars. For one generation these streets sustained a lively pace of commerce and interaction among the few hundred families who lived here. In their days, such families tended toward more children and inlaws, as lifespan was less often very long. With at least six or eight members of each household, the region was home to some thousands of people.

Perhaps surprisingly, the exact population is not known because the history of the area came to such an abrupt stop. The people who so happily lived there for decades moved out, one at a time or in occasional small groups, all within just a few years. The population drained away into the surrounding regions, and the other New England states, possibly all the way across the country. They left no discernible trail, no particular history. The houses still stand, but no one sees them.

Today, this forgotten area of Maine isn't between anywhere and anyplace else. There are no roads that pass nearby, and no natural resources are currently being exploited. There are no major rivers that pass through, and no well-known hiking trails, cross-country ski routes, or summer camps. The trees continue to grow, the black flies swarm in the spring, and the summer is hot and humid at times. A few lakes dot the area, but no canoes ply their surface.

And this year, as in some 80 years prior, nothing happens. Nature lives on and the houses stand, contributing to the landscape as stones might do. These buildings are sturdy monuments slowly slipping into decay, someday to topple down and be reabsorbed by the earth. For now, their white walls

still show some glisten, their windows still sparkle in the summer light and the winter sun, their roofs still hold up the snow and shed the rain, but no smoke issues from their chimneys, no children run in their front yards, no wagons clop up the front drive toward the paddock and the barn. In short, nothing stirs but the squirrels, the blue-jays, and the crows.

As the first direct light from the sunrise swept slowly across the roof at #107 on Larch View Road, mist rose like a soft cloud above the damp scalloped shingles. The roof wasn't entirely waterproof anymore, but it still withstood the winter snow and most of the spring rain. A dormer window jutted out from the roof at #107, half open, most of its panes still intact, and a tattered lace curtain fluttered gently in the warm breeze of morning. Behind the curtain were the remnants of a girl's bedroom, a few moldering doll clothes lying on the floor, and some empty squares on the walls, delineated by rusted thumbtacks where magazine photos once hung. The peeling wallpaper showed multiple faded Alices having tea with March Hares while Dormice looked on in dismay.

At mid-day, a faint clatter and rasp of distant chainsaws echoed through the surrounding valleys.

Later in the day, an indistinct roar of heavy machinery mingled with the wind in the trees and the brightly colored punctuation of birdsong. A far-off road crew was clearing the long boulevard that wound through the forests and around the hills and ponds into Anabasis.

Around mid-afternoon the first road-grader arrived.

Just before quitting time three bulldozers and a pair of excavators, whose arms towered over the houses with buckets as big as hay bales, drove to the center square and parked. The operators shut off their clattering diesel engines and a grey van drove them away to rest until the next day's work began.