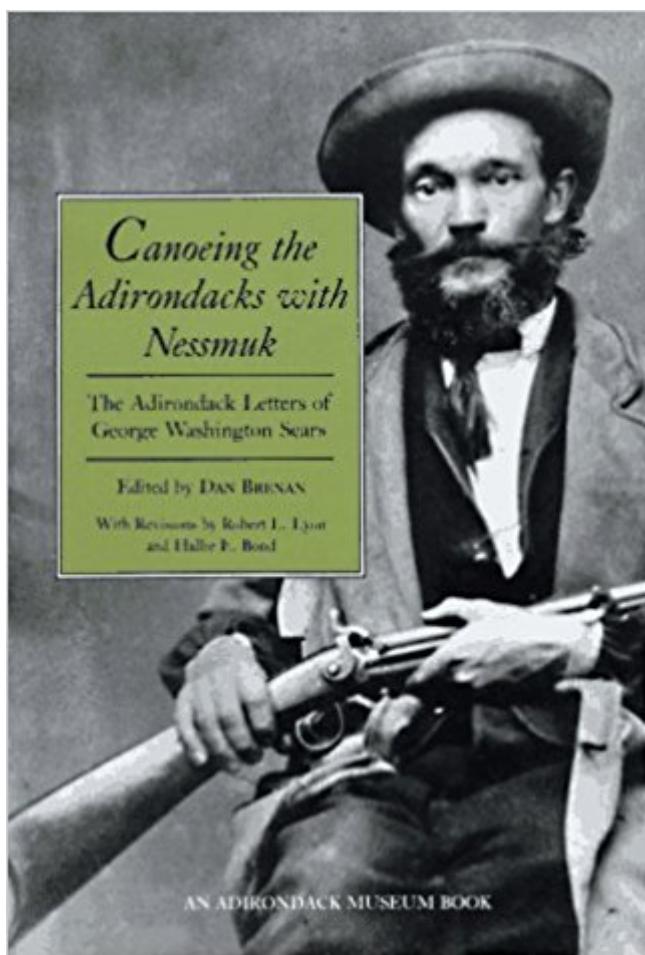


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# Canoeing The Adirondacks With Nessmuk: The Adirondack Letters Of George Washington Sears



## **Synopsis**

"She's all my fancy painted her, she's lovely, she is light. She waltzes on the waves by day and rests with me at night. But I had nothing to do with her painting. The man who built her did that. And I commence with the canoe because that is about the first thing you need on entering the Northern Wilderness." Thus opened Nessmuk's first commissioned "letter" for Forest and Stream in 1880. For years thereafter, George Washington Sears, under the penname Nessmuk, contributed a glorious series of pieces on canoeing the Adirondacks, exploring rivers and streams, climbing the many mountains and peaks, and chronicling his long relationship with one of the greatest canoe builders, J. Henry Rushton.

## **Book Information**

Paperback: 204 pages

Publisher: Adirondack Museum/Syracuse University Press; 1st edition (March 1993)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0815625944

ISBN-13: 978-0815625940

Product Dimensions: 0.5 x 5.8 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #961,330 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #30 in Books > Travel > United States > New York > Adirondacks #48 in Books > Sports & Outdoors > Outdoor Recreation > Kayaking > Whitewater Kayaking #270 in Books > Sports & Outdoors > Outdoor Recreation > Canoeing

## **Customer Reviews**

Sears traveled the byways of New York State's Adirondack region in the late 1800s, penning these "letters" for publication in Forest and Stream under the nom de plume Nessmuk. This revision of the original 1962 edition corrects some biographical errors and updates and adds new material. This is a must for outdoor as well as New York history collections. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"She's all my fancy painted her, she's lovely, she is light. She waltzes on the waves by day and rests with me at night. But I had nothing to do with her painting. The man who built her did that. And I commence with the canoe because that is about the first thing you need on entering the Northern

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I admit it: I am an addict for tales of the woods from the 19th century. Nessmuk, the pen name of George Washington Sears, was a most unlikely spokesman of the wild. Slight of build and racked with the consumption that weakened and eventually killed him, he nonetheless spent weeks and months exploring solo the waterways of both the Adirondacks and his native Pennsylvania. This tome is made up of several letters he wrote for publication in the magazine "Forest and Stream." The magazine was a very highly regarded sporting magazine of the late 19th century, including "We Seized Our Rifles," a collection of tales from the West, a number of which were taken from the magazine. Because of his small stature and weakness, Sears was an early proponent of traveling light, ordering a series of ever-lighter wooden canoes, culminating in the "Sairy Gamp," which weighed in at a scarcely believable ten and a half pounds. With rifle and fishing kit, Sears lived off the land in a way that even then was becoming less possible in the eastern wilds. This book makes an excellent winter read while you are preparing for the coming season's adventures. Also see my review of a book that was inspired by Nessmuk's adventures, "Adirondack Passage," by Christine Jerome. She and her husband followed in Sears' wake in modern boats that were also made with an eye to extreme lightness.

thx

A great piece of Adirondack history of a time long past. Very enjoyable read by George Washington Sears (Nessmuck) an outdoor writer of a past age. Paddlers especially will enjoy this.

Arrived in time. Was as Shown. Great condition and great Book. Would Recommend it. Packaging was great. Thanks!

well written enjoyed it very much. i recommend to anyone is interest in the life of a woodsman. it woth a read and a leasen can be learned.

Great books, full of stories and experiences from the 1800's. And told in a way that keeps you reading. I really enjoyed it!

This is a compilation of stories written by George Washington Sears (a.k.a. Nessmuk) for Forest and Stream Magazine in the years 1880-1883. He paddled different custom built ultralight Rushton canoes each year, starting south of present day Old Forge, through the Fulton Chain to Raquette and reaching as far as Long Lake, Little Tupper Lake and beyond. His chronicles are enjoyable, easily readable tales of life and travel in the wilderness of the 1880's Adirondacks. It is full of details which are interesting to the student of Adirondack history. For instance, he allowed me to pinpoint the year of construction of the Grove Hotel (later known as the Deerland Hotel) on Long Lake, and to give me background on it's original owner.

This slim collection of letters originally published in Field and Stream magazine is a record of canoe trips taken over several years by the plucky old woodsman George Washington Sears. Each year he used a different feather-light canoe made of thin strips of wood, mostly cedar, which were believed by their maker, J. Henry Rushton, to be so insubstantial as to afford little or no room for mishap on Sear's long journeys. Sears himself, despite his obvious pride in the delicate crafts, and despite his great pleasure in showing them off to anyone and everyone who was interested, never the less referred to them quite often as 'egg shells'. The journey's consisted of paddling and portaging hundreds of miles, mostly by himself, from lake to lake in the Adirondack wilderness, an area that is now a state park but that at the time was a booming recreation destination for hunters, fishermen, and sufferers of consumption. The letters range from a very entertaining description of a "typical" guided tour of the lakes, to straight forward descriptions of the landscape, to complaints about the hardships of wilderness travel, and to Sear's own feelings on land management. After 120 years the letters still read remarkably well. The simple prose reveals a voice old in experience and timeless in convivial honesty. It is not difficult to imagine yourself paddling alongside the slight, almost fragile, elder as he idles away his time fishing and exploring lake after lake. Some things are lacking in his reports, noticeable details omitted because of his own personal assumptions about what his readers should already know, and there is a lack of some of the conventions we now take for granted in travelogues. For instance while Nessmuk (Sear's pen name) visited numerous lodges, hotels, and rustic guide camps, he refers to almost all of them simple as 'camps', giving only scant descriptions and no details about their operations. We don't hear, for instance, a word about the beds, bathrooms, manner of lighting, or significant architectural details. We don't hear about the

customs, atmosphere, or clothing styles of the time, and we certainly don't find out anything at all about the quality of construction in the buildings, the plumbing, or if the structures had stone foundations, or outbuildings. There are not even any indications of whether the camps are cleared, have grounds, or are still rustically situated in raw forest. The included pictures fill in some of these details, but Sears himself gives nary a jot to the subject. We do hear as much as anyone could care to hear about all the trout and venison that were consumed, and we do get a good glimpse of the make up of the meals (Nessmuk confesses his culinary prowess and a well laid table is obviously of some interest to him), and we do get colourful portraits of particular guides and camp operators. On the other hand we get almost nothing about the shadowy tourists who are reported to be so numerous at the camps as to make Mary and Joseph sleep out under their canoe. It is fun to join Nessmuk in secret forays to lakes and ponds, "not on any map" and I reflected about my own 100 lakes project and how detailed and numerous are the options for locating water of interest. The freely accessible online Atlas of Canada, for example, gives me so much information on my chosen landscape that there literally are no ponds and lakes off the map. I imagine Nessmuk's eyes would bug out at the detail available from this and similar resources. I'm glad I read Nessmuk, his values of environmental preservation, his matter of fact statements on the absolute necessity of idleness to good health, and his folksy evaluation of guides and their customers felt comfortably candid. He distains dullards, braggarts, and pothunters but sings the praise's of trustworthy guides who practice courtesy and truthfulness. In so doing I felt reassured about the kind of folks who populate the wilds, felt there was hope yet if such good eggs could hold sway still. Nessmuk's pride in 'going light' and in the merits of his diminutive canoes is endearing. His fondness for his Spartan camp list and fragile craft is balanced nicely with his recommendations; well really his insistence, on comfort. Comfort and an uncomplicated schedule are to be sought only in as far as they do not violate enjoyment of remote locations to idle and fish. This balance strikes me as being rather noteworthy and hints at why the man is held up as an example to follow. His illness, and his resoluteness to soldier on in spite of his illness, makes him roundly human. I like this frankness and find it believable, partly because he is also willing to quit when his illness is too severe. This is a frail, courageous, passionate man engaged in a pursuit he loves. The qualities that I like most in him are his honesty, determination, and preference for and acceptance of people of good character. He likes the good guys, tells us why they are good, and in so doing encourages us to live in a similar manner. His enthusiasm for nature is infectious, and I could not get out of my head the idea that some day I would meet him or go on a trip with him. Of course he is long gone and only his written words carry on. Still, I know that as I paddle past a spot I think he would have liked I will smile and

imagine he is with me to enjoy it, this small man in one of his tiny canoes, a true companion in the ways that matter. Here are a few choice quotes from the book: "just under my eyes as I write, there is an island in the river some twelve rods long by six wide. It is well timbered with spruce, balsam, hemlock, cedar, pine, birch and maple. It is one of the pleasant spots that nature makes and man neglects." - Pg. 36, 37 "Now, I like to cook, can do it well, and I wanted a quiet place to lay off, paddle, fish, float and possess my soul in peace." - Pg. 56 "Yes. Let us leave the hot pavements, the baking, blistering walls and sweltering sleep, or sleepless, rooms. Let us, in God's name, take to the cool waters and calm shades of the forest." - Pg. 69 "if you have an eye for nature, the time will not be lost." - Pg. 116 "I dressed and walked down to the landing, where I made a fire against the rock used as a washing station by the House of Sbattis, lighted a pipe and resumed my favourite exercise of sitting on a log." - Pg. 122 "We, the "outers," who go to the blessed woods for rest and recreation, are prone to handicap our pleasures in the matter of overweight; guns, rods, duffle, boats, etc. We take a deal of stuff to the woods, only to wish we had left it at home, and end our trips by leaving dead loads of impedimenta in deserted camps. I should be glad to see this amended. I hope at no distant day to meet independent canoeists, with canoes weighing twenty pounds or less, at every turn in the wilderness, and with no more duffle than is absolutely necessary." - Pg. 138

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