

Di Ionno: Former Girl Scouts hope to raise \$3M to save a camp filled with memories

By [Mark Di Ionno | The Star-Ledger](#)

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Copy PhotoEagle Island Girls Scout camp in upstate New York

Some of the girls of summer are in their autumn years now. Others, still in the spring. There are over 600 of them, trying to raise a few million dollars to save a place of shared memories: their Girl Scout camp.

It is called Eagle Island, a square-mile of land in Upper Saranac Lake in New York's Adirondacks. For 70 summers, girls from Essex County came home with good memories, colored by crystal blue skies and the forest greens of spruce and hemlocks, and the smoky mist rising off a deep-water lake.

"It was a terrific place, with a beauty that is almost unreal," said Dorothy "Dart" Emerson, on the phone from the road in New England. She was 16 when Eagle Island opened in 1938, and among the first to camp there. She returned the next summer, then spent most of the 1950s as director.

The things she learned there — independence and sense of adventure — follow her still. And she follows them. Almost 90, she lives in her RV, traveling throughout the country.

"It definitely shaped my life," she said.

"Dart" is the oldest of the Eagle Island alumni who want to buy the camp from the Girls Scouts Heart of New Jersey. The youngest is Elise McGovern, 15, who went to the camp for two years before it closed in 2008. Her mother, Paula Michelson McGovern, was a camper in her day.

In between are hundreds of Eagle Island alumni who formed a campaign to raise \$3 million to buy and fix up the camp and run it as a non-profit entity.



Copy Photo: Eagle Island Girls Scout camp in upstate New York.

The goal is lofty, said Chris Hildebrand, one of the people behind Friends of Eagle Island Inc. But the army of alum are passionate. They've already raised enough money to repair camp roofs and buy a new barge to bring in supplies.

Beginning today and through June 11, they will hold benefit hikes throughout the country, in Europe and in Australia. The three in New Jersey are at South Mountain Reservation (today), Voorhees State Park (tomorrow) and the Asbury Park boardwalk (June 11).

"We want to preserve it as an outdoor youth camp," McGovern said. "It's a great chance for kids to get away from everything, to unplug from all the electronics and just escape. It won't be owned by the Girl Scouts, but we'll run it with the same values. Maybe it will be all girls. Maybe not. We have to see what's feasible."

What is certain is they want to duplicate the experiences they had there. Sleeping in platform tents. Sailing for hours on the lake. Swimming off shore. Arts and crafts. Nature walks and hikes to the peaks of the Adirondacks, like nearby Mounts Marcy, Joe and St. Regis.

And there's more to Eagle Island than nature. The camp is on the nation's historic register for its classic, Adirondack architecture. It was built as a summer retreat more than a century ago for Levi Morton, the New York governor who became vice president under Benjamin Harrison. It was sold to Henry Graves, a banker from Orange, N.J., who once had the distinction of owning the world's most intricate pocket watch called "The Supercomplication." (The watch, made in 1933, It sold for \$11 million at a Sotheby's auction 12 years ago.)



Copy Photo: 1939 campers Eagle Island Girls Scout camp in upstate New York.

This was the company kept at Eagle Island until Graves bequeathed it to the Girls Scout of Essex County in 1937. But mergers of different councils over the years have now made the treasured island an expendable resource.

And here is where the irony comes. With all the talk about green-this and green-that, summer outdoor camps are becoming an endangered species.

"There are more than 100 scout camps for sale nationwide," Hildebrand said. "Once they're gone, they're gone. Where are these kids going to learn to appreciate the great outdoors everybody says they want to protect?"

For more information go to www.friendsofeagleisland.org, write the friends at P.O. Box 245 Livingston, N.J. 07039, or call (973) 996-8306.