Electricity in the Adirondacks

Widespread electrification came to the Adirondacks in the 1930s. Before then, if a business or private estate wanted electricity, it would need to install its own isolated system.

Great Camp Sagamore, historically called Sagamore Lodge, was an Adirondack get-away built in 1897 by William West Durant and sold to Alfred Gwynn Vanderbilt in 1901. In 1914, a hydroelectric plant was built along Sagamore Lake’s outlet to provide the Vanderbilts with electricity.

Modern Luxury and Rustic Living

Imagine visiting Sagamore Lodge in 1914 as a member of American Society. The main lodge might have looked like a trapper’s cabin compared to the typical Vanderbilt home.

Considering the rustic exterior, the modern amenities inside would be a surprise. Imagine Alfred Vanderbilt leading a tour and at the flip of a switch, dazzling electric lights illuminate his brand new open-air bowling alley.

Management

Every day W.C. Ryan, the electrician, would walk from camp to the powerhouse to turn on the electricity. Ten minutes prior to turning it off for the night, he would flicker the lights back at camp as a warning of the coming darkness and then walk home by lantern light.

While at the powerhouse, Ryan would keep a record of the power level and fluctuating water flow and make changes to meet demand. He also made adjustments and repairs to the hardware when needed. He usually worked alone.

W.C. Ryan

Today you can hike the Powerhouse Trail and use the diagram on the back to see how the system worked. We do not advise entering the Powerhouse for your own safety. For more information on the natural history of this trail see The Powerhouse Trail Guide.
FOLLOW THE FLOW:
HOW THE HYDROELECTRIC SYSTEM WORKS
(DIAGRAM NOT TO SCALE)