

Summertime
2001

The W.E.B.

For decades, the FBI tailed him.

But every summer, for two weeks in July, the inspirational leader disappeared... to a lake in Maine.

BY LEIGH DONALDSON

When the FBI, starting in 1933, investigated Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, they developed a file of 927 pages over 30 years, presumably because of his ties to the Communist Party. Agents carefully reproduced articles he wrote for *The Crisis*, the monthly magazine he founded and edited for the NAACP; recorded his speeches; and tracked him on international visits to Moscow, Paris, and Berlin. But each summer, the trail grew cold for two weeks in July. Du Bois had disappeared. But where?

Where else but Maine, where he came to hear himself think as a member of a unique summer retreat and gentlemen's club called The Cambridge Gun & Rod Club. Not *Rod and Gun*? Nope. Like so many things about the club, its title breezily flouts convention.

The club, which thrives today, was originally an interracial group of about 14 members. It is now a gentlemen's club of exclusively professional African-American men. The membership is 35.

"We've been around a long time," says James L. Brown IV, 63, the club's historian and a historic preservationist by profession who winters in Philadelphia. "Right now, we're trying to get the lodge on the National Register of Historic Places, because where else could a group of black intellectuals congregate and share experiences during a time when shadows of slavery itself still darkened the national experience?"

Maine has had an arduous, uphill civil rights struggle that continues to this day. But, paradoxically, the Pine Tree State has maintained a reputation as a hiatus for those in search of quiet, natural beauty and a kind of

cultural simplicity: 'the way life should be.'

The idea of Maine as a sanctuary from the chaotic demands of everyday urban life was not lost on African-Americans. In 1893, Cleve Miller of Boston summertime on a farm in West Gardiner owned by the Goodwin family. Enthralled by the rustic beauty, he approached the Goodwins (who still own the property today) about starting a retreat. He returned in the summer of 1894 with several other friends, and a tradition was established where educated, affluent, and accomplished black leaders from 'all walks of life'—doctors, lawyers, religious leaders, professors, businessmen—got together for a few weeks of absolute peace and tranquility along the shore of Lake Cobbosseecontee.

"It's not a debating team or a brainstorming session," laughs Brown. "Instead, there's

Du Bois Files

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
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NEW YORK SEP 4 1951

DR. WILLIAM EDWARD BURGHARDT DU BOIS

SECURITY MATTER - C

SYNOPSIS OF FACTS: Subject resides 409 Edgecomb Ave., NYC. Employed as Director of the Council on African Affairs, 23 W. 57th St., NYC. Married EMILY OSBORN 2/27/51, St. Albans, Long Island. Reported to be sponsor, member and sympathizer of several numerous CP fronts. Indicted 2/9/51 in 1950 for District of Columbia, Washington, D.C. for failure to register under the terms of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, along with other officers of the Peace Information Center. Trial set for 10/2/51 in Washington, D.C.

DETAILS: Residence and Employment

Investigation indicates that the subject maintained a residence at 409 Edgecomb Avenue, New York City.

advised on July 10, 1951 that the subject still maintains an office at 23 West 57th Street, New York City, in space occupied by [REDACTED]

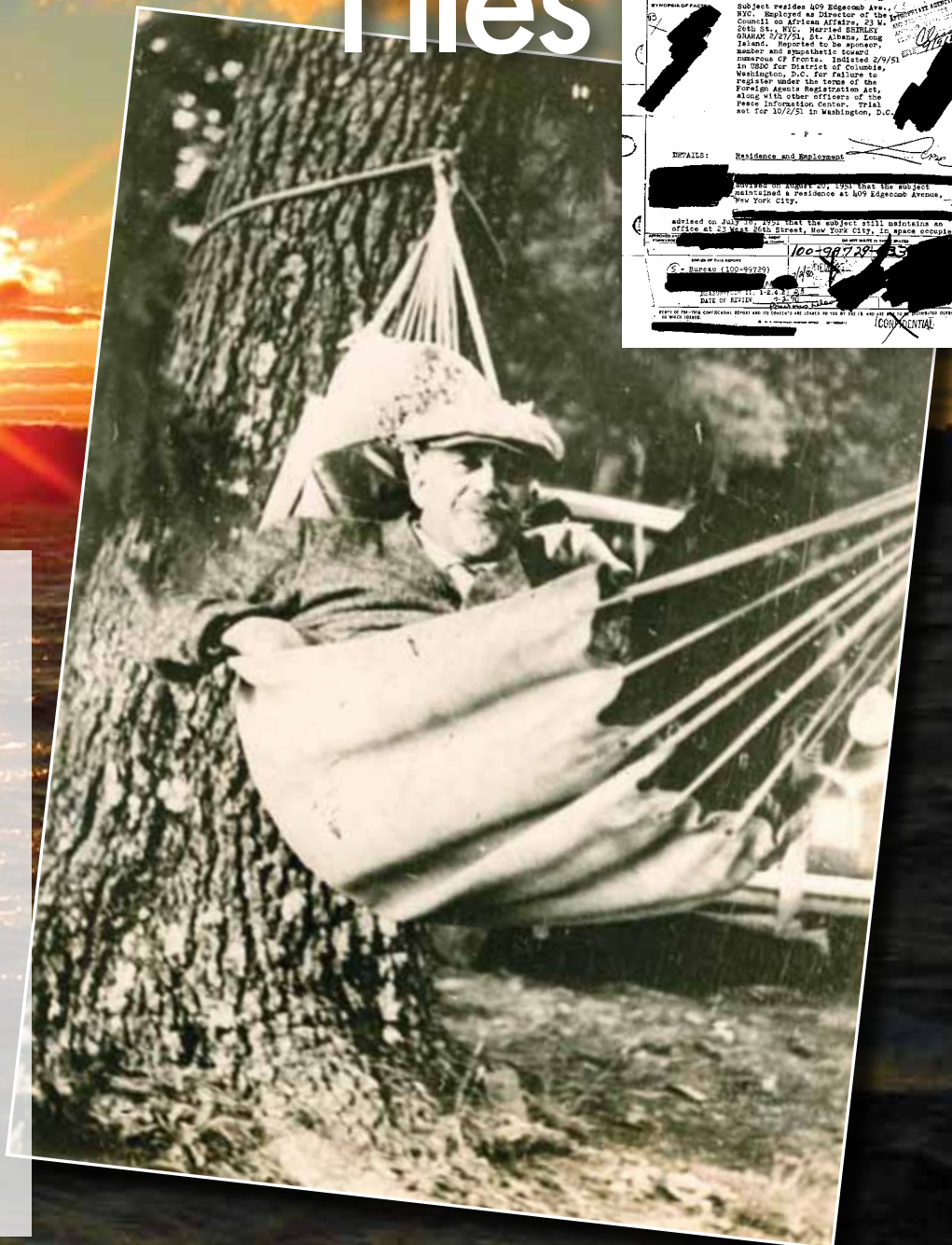
Bureau (100-99729)

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an unwritten law that we leave the outside on the outside, though discussions are relatively intellectual in nature. Naturally, out of a spirit of camaraderie, issues that affect black people were, and certainly are, discussed. It's still exclusively for men, but the camp is open to other family members for visits throughout the summer."

Among the earliest and most prestigious of these extraordinary vacationers was Dr. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Born in 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, this outstanding critic, scholar, scientist, author, and civil rights activist is widely considered to be among the most influential and controversial leaders in the 20th century. The first African-American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, where he studied under William James and George Santayana, W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the original



RUSTICATING



Du Bois (center) celebrates his 95th birthday in Accra, Ghana, with President Kwame Nkrumah and First Lady Fathia in 1963. The two men first met in Manchester, England, at a Pan-African Congress in 1945; later, both received the International Lenin Prize.

founders of the NAACP in 1909 as well as a distinguished professor at University of Pennsylvania and Atlanta University. He won a fellowship to the University of Berlin, where he was trained in Hegel's approach to philosophy. He was the first African-American to be admitted into the National Institute of Arts & Letters.

As a protean writer, he produced breakthrough works such as *The Philadelphia Negro*, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and *Black Reconstruction*.

Du Bois was also one of the first male civil rights leaders to address gender discrimination, particularly with respect to black women, and actively support the women's suffrage movement in an effort to integrate this largely white struggle. "It is important to understand that blacks were divided intellectually then as they continue to be now," notes Brown. "While others like Booker T. Washington believed in blacks learning trades as a tool toward social advancement, Du Bois insisted that blacks cultivate their own aesthetic and cultural values."

As the story goes, when Du Bois first arrived at the lodge in Maine somewhere around the early 1930s, according to surviving Goodwin family member Roger Goodwin, "there was no room for him. He graciously set up a tent on a bed of pine needles near the lodge and waited for a vacancy. He apparently never made a big deal about little things."

Perhaps it is this generosity of spirit that so

moved the very FBI agents—otherwise keeping such close tabs on his activities—that they closed their notebooks and gave him his privacy for two weeks every summer for 30 years.

Here, beside the blue mirror of Cobbosseecontee, "he may have come up with his famous concept of 'The Talented Tenth,'" speculates Brown. "Certainly he worked on it here, especially when you consider the nature of his fellow campers, who were considered part of the Talented Tenth."

As one of the most literate men of his age, Du Bois could charm one and all. Consider the following, where he identifies spirituals—"The Sorrow Songs"—as singularly powerful historical narratives of the black experience. "They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways...through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins."

Often, FBI agents would begin their assignment with prejudice and then be pro-

foundly turned around by Du Bois.

But still, the investigations continued. The summer of 1958, when he was 89, was particularly controversial, since that was the year he was presented with the International Lenin Prize along with fellow winner Nikita Krushchev (in fact, Maine artist Rockwell Kent presented the award, \$25,000). But whatever your yardstick is, Du Bois was an incredible humanist, and an even more accomplished writer.

Du Bois continued a nearly unbroken string of summer visits until his death in 1963.

"But if he were here, the first thing he'd do is introduce you to the other members of the club," says Brown, noting that a host of other notables, including boxer Joe Louis, have stayed at least a week or so. Current club members include jazz great Billy Strayhorn's nephew, doctors, dentists, and a prominent religious leader from the Boston area.

"Today a lot of history is shared, and thankfully, it's no longer a miracle for black intellectuals to find a place to express themselves as a group. Either way, Maine seems to dignify the process."

And the process seems to dignify Maine. ■

"STILL MY FAVORITE PLACE TO BE"

"I haven't been to the camp since 2008, and my dad stopped going about 10 or 12 years ago," James Brown V told us recently. He's the son of James Brown IV, who was interviewed by Leigh Donaldson for our 2001 story. "The members of the Cambridge Gun & Rod Club purchased the camp from the Goodwin family in 2008... But it's still my favorite place to be... getting the fresh strawberries and strawberry jam biscuits and talking with the Goodwin family. Mr. Goodwin told us the camp was on the Underground Railroad. There were lots of hand-me-down stories, and W.E.B. DuBois's signature in the log book is preserved there. The camp didn't start with an exclusive African-American membership; it just happens to be now.

"My father's the historian, so he always hoped to preserve the camp and turn it into an historic place. But we'd tell him, hey, come on, the guys just came to camp. Fishing and golf, mostly. Nobody really hunts anymore."

Brown, who lives in Philadelphia, says, "I'm hoping to take my own son up there in a few years. It's American history, not black history. I have a bi-racial history—it's easy to sit in a pocket and not hear the other side. But we're all Americans, and unless we're natives, we all got here on somebody's boat. It's not an argument, it's a conversation."

James L. Brown V has named his own son Julian. "We have no château in France, and no vineyards, so we don't need a Sixth. Besides, it's very challenging to be a James Brown. Just don't ask me to dance!"



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