
“Wilhelm Reich, M.D. in Rangeley”

**A Presentation by
The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust
to the
Rangeley Lakes Historical Society**

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In July 1940 a renowned Austrian psychiatrist, research physician and scientist named Wilhelm Reich arrived completely by accident in the Rangeley Lakes Region for the first time.

He and his wife Ilse drove into Oquossoc during a rainstorm that had essentially drowned out their camping trip in the White Mountains of New Hampshire where they had traveled to several days earlier from Reich’s home and laboratory in New York City. Seeking shelter from the storm, they found a small cabin for rent far down on the Bald Mountain Road on the shoreline of Mooselookmeguntic Lake. The rain ended a short time later.

And there, over the next few days, in the dry and unhumid atmosphere of the area Dr. Reich made several significant scientific observations regarding his particular field of research. These observations convinced him that the Rangeley Lakes Region would be an ideal location for his research during the summer months, as opposed to the heat and humidity of his home and laboratory in New York City.

Reich’s unintended arrival here in the summer of 1940 was the beginning of what would be a nearly seventeen-year presence in this rural community: first as one of the summer folks and later, starting in 1950, as a year-round resident. Seventeen years marked by pioneering discoveries in medicine and science, great personal drama, and ultimately profound tragedy.

In the 1950s, Wilhelm Reich’s published books, research journals and bulletins—comprising thousands of pages—were banned and burned by order of a United States Federal Court, with the burning of this literature taking place here in Rangeley and in New York City in 1956. This destruction of what turned out to be several tons of Reich’s publications about psychiatry, biology, medicine, biophysics and sociology constitutes one of the most heinous examples of censorship in this country.

And all of this is a part of Rangeley history.

Unfortunately, although perhaps understandably, this is not a part of Rangeley history that many people are comfortable with, or aware of, or even interested in. The story of Wilhelm Reich as a part of local lore is plagued by widespread misunderstandings, blatant distortions, sheer indifference and outright gossip.

And at first glance, Reich's life and legacy certainly doesn't seem to be a natural fit with the more commonplace traditions of Rangeley history that are preserved and celebrated by all of you in the Historical Society, and by the Logging Museum, the public library and other community organizations.

And it's certainly not my goal this evening to belabor these points. But rather I will try to illustrate what I believe is a commonality between Reich's reasons for being in Rangeley and *our* reasons for being here. And *our* reasons, after all, are what inspire each of us to preserve and honor and celebrate the diverse history of the Rangeley Lakes Region.

I've been coming to Rangeley since I was an infant in the 1950s. My family used to stay out at Rangeley Manor when Curt and Alice Mercer owned it, prior to Paul and Phyllis Johnson's purchase in late 1972. And later I owned my own small camp for thirteen years. And like all of you, I was always fascinated by everything about Rangeley history: its two railroads, its old hotels and sporting camps, its legacy of trout fishing, its logging heritage and all of the colorful personalities who have been a part of this rich past.

I was an eighteen-year old college student camping out at the old Cold Spring Campground north of town when I first visited The Wilhelm Reich Museum at Orgonon in August 1972. I knew absolutely nothing about Wilhelm Reich, his name meant nothing to me. The only reason I visited Orgonon was because it was a museum located in Rangeley and so it was obviously some part of the community's history. And since I've always been an avid student of all kinds of history, at the Museum I quickly became intrigued by the chronology and the muscular storyline of Wilhelm Reich's life:

- Born in 1897, he was raised on a farm in the easternmost reaches of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now the Ukraine, where he grew up hunting, fishing, hiking and becoming familiar with the rhythms of the natural world around him.
- He served as a lieutenant in the Austrian Army during World War I, where he saw action on the Italian Front.
- After the war, he graduated from the University of Vienna Medical School, studied psychoanalysis under Sigmund Freud and quickly became one of Freud's most promising students.
- As with any psychoanalyst, the study of human neuroses and sexuality became a focal point of his clinical work. And it's precisely the misunderstandings and distortions of some of his work and theories in this area that would form the basis of later rumors, slanders and inaccuracies, many of which we still hear to this day.
- First in Vienna and later in Berlin, Reich was a renowned and widely published physician, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. And a very controversial one. Much of the controversy surrounding him was due

to his pioneering theories about neuroses, health and human sexuality. Equally controversial was his anti-fascism and political activism which openly challenged the repressive authoritarian regimes of Austria and Germany in the 1920s and 30s.

- When Hitler consolidated his power in February and March 1933, Reich had to immediately flee from Germany to avoid arrest.
- He relocated to Norway and taught at the University of Oslo. There he set up a scientific laboratory for the study of energy functions in the human body and in other living substances such as protozoa, blood, foodstuffs, soil and sand, and living cancer cells. In fact, Reich was one of the early proponents of using time-lapse filming of microscopic cultures to capture the development of biological processes in living substances over long periods of time.
- It was during these laboratory experiments in the 1930s that Reich discovered a powerful unknown biological energy in specific micro-organisms, a biological energy that exhibited visible radiation phenomena, that immobilized and destroyed cancer cells and invigorated blood and tissue.

Reich called this biological energy “orgone energy” and he would devote the next two decades of his life to the investigation of its laws, properties and uses, starting with experimental medical research and later moving into other applications.

- In August 1939, Reich emigrated to America, disembarking from a ship in New York on August 28th, four days before the outbreak of World War Two. Had he remained in Norway it is unlikely that Reich would have survived the imminent Nazi occupation of that country.

Now from an intellectual standpoint—as an eighteen-year old college student touring the Museum—I found all of this quite compelling, especially Reich’s laboratory research, especially his discovery of a physical, biological energy in microscopic cultures with all kinds of medical and scientific applications.

But I kept asking myself, as I’m sure all of you are doing now, “What does a man’s discovery of an energy radiation in a test-tube culture have to do with Rangeley, Maine?” And the answer was not long in coming. Nor will it be for you this evening.

Reich settled down in the Forest Hills section of Queens in New York City, and for three semesters he taught at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. At the time, the New School faculty included many intellectual and political refugees from foreign countries. Reich also set up his own private press to publish his numerous European books in English and he trained physicians in his innovative psychiatric techniques.

And perhaps most important, he re-established his laboratory in his home to continue his orgone energy research.

In early 1940, in order to isolate, observe and study orgone radiation from test-tube cultures, Reich constructed small containers of alternating layers of metallic and organic material which would accumulate and concentrate this energy. Essentially these were modified Faraday cages which were the first “orgone energy accumulators.” Initially they were used to observe visual manifestations of orgone emanating from test-tube cultures within the enclosure.

Which brings us up to July 1940, with Wilhelm Reich in that rental cabin down on the Bald Mountain Road.

Reich’s observations of the clear, dry atmosphere over Mooselookmeguntic Lake revealed similar visual phenomena to that which he was observing in those small orgone energy accumulators, leading him to conclude that the same energy he had discovered in specific micro-organisms also exists in the atmosphere all around us, *everywhere*. And that, in fact, the orgone energy that exists in living matter, including the human body, exists in the atmosphere as a primordial cosmic energy. Furthermore, these small orgone accumulators—built of alternating layers of metallic and organic materials—could attract, accumulate and concentrate atmospheric orgone energy for a variety of applications.

After discovering atmospheric orgone energy, one of Reich’s uses for these small orgone accumulators was testing their effects on cancer mice. The results were very promising in terms of dissolving tumors.

Now to anyone unfamiliar with Reich’s scientific and medical publications, all of this obviously sounds fantastical. But in his published research journals, bulletins and books, Reich and his co-workers would painstakingly document all of their medical and scientific findings

The significance, then, of Reich’s first visit to the Rangeley region in July 1940 is this: With Reich’s discovery of atmospheric orgone energy, he realized that he could no longer confine his research to the study of this energy in micro-organisms in his New York laboratory. To observe and study and harness atmospheric orgone energy in its most natural and pristine state required a clean, dry, unhumid atmosphere, together with an unspoiled natural landscape that could provide large and uninterrupted vistas of mountains, lakes and big skies.

And so, like all of us drawn to the natural beauty of the Rangeley Lakes Region, like all of us who are continually nourished and inspired by these unspoiled natural surroundings, so too was Reich drawn to Rangeley’s natural environment, and deeply inspired by it for the profound opportunities it afforded him to scientifically investigate orgone energy in the atmosphere and in living matter.

As Gary Priest documents in his wonderful new book, *The Gilded Age of Rangeley, Maine*, in the fall of 1940 Reich purchased a nearby cabin on the Bald Mountain Road, built by Herman Templeton who became Reich's friend and the first caretaker of his property. And during the next few summers, Reich spent several weeks at this cabin, combining family vacation time with his scientific research.

Back in New York, this research was taking him into new areas of experimental medicine involving newer applications of the orgone energy accumulator. Because his results using small orgone accumulators on cancer mice were so promising, in March of 1941 Reich began using large orgone accumulators for the experimental treatment of terminal cancer patients. In many cases the patient's pain was alleviated and cancer tumors dissolved, yet the patients still died. This led Reich to conclude that the tumor itself was not the cancer, but merely a local manifestation of a deeper systemic disorder in one's body.

And contrary to widespread rumors that persist to this day, Wilhelm Reich never promoted the orgone accumulator as a cancer cure. In patient affidavits and in his publications Reich clearly states that despite many promising results, orgone radiation via the accumulator is not a cure.

The other common misconception about the orgone accumulator is that it is some sort of sexual device for enhancing one's performance, a salacious allegation first printed by a journalist in 1947 and repeated ad nauseum ever since. Similarly, Reich clearly refutes this in print, emphasizing that the orgone accumulator is an experimental scientific and medical tool.

In November 1942, Reich purchased a 160-acre farm on Dodge Pond Road from Mrs. Effie Love—a granddaughter of Jesse Ross, the property's first owner—for what he felt was the inflated price of \$4000. This was Reich's first step toward fulfilling his dream of establishing a permanent home for his work: a laboratory and research center devoted to scientific and medical applications of orgone energy. And on a personal note, Reich had grown up on a farm in eastern Europe and always said he wanted to return to a farm some day. Now he was a step closer to realizing that dream, as well.

In his diary, he wrote this about the property on Dodge Pond Road:

“A hundred and sixty acres of land on a soft incline facing south and east, six hundred meters above sea level, covered with a young pine forest, a lake in front, and mountains on the horizon. Here truth shall be sought and protected from the plague, here sickness and misery shall be understood and ways discovered for conquering them. The name of the home of life research shall be Orgonon.”

The design and location of the buildings at Orgonon are one of the most visible manifestations of the integration of Reich's research with the surrounding natural environment.

For example, in 1945 the Student Laboratory was built, using original timbers from the barn which stood on the property when Reich purchased it. Today this is our Conference & Office building, and is clearly visible from Dodge Pond Road.

It was purposely built with oversized windows—one after another—facing east, southeast and south to take advantage of the panorama of open skies, open fields, distant mountains and what was then an unobstructed view of Dodge Pond.

Here in this laboratory Reich's students and co-workers conducted orgone energy research using microscopes, telescopes, orgone accumulators of varying sizes and strengths, electroscopes, Geiger counters, oscillographs and other equipment. This building was the venue of numerous seminars, classes and conferences. In 1949, Reich gave his first course in orgone biophysics, with an emphasis on cancer research, to a group of physicians.

The other major building on the property is the Orgone Energy Observatory, high on a hill and not visible from the road. This building now houses The Wilhelm Reich Museum. It's listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and some say its architecture resembles a design by Frank Lloyd Wright. In one of his published research bulletins in 1950, Reich wrote this about the building:

“The layout for the orgone energy observatory was planned in March 1948. In the beginning of May, 1948, plans had been finished by architect James. J. Bell of New York City.

In the beginning of June, 1948, the firm of S.A. Collins & Sons in Rangeley, Maine began the construction. The construction went on from June 10th until October 15th, 1948, and from May 12th until September 19th 1949, altogether approximately eight months.

The outer walls were constructed of field stones, 24 inches at the foundation and 20 inches at the walls proper. The field stones were gathered from the property of the Institute at Orgonon.

The Observatory includes a hall on the first floor, approximately 54 x 34 ft. mainly for physical experimentation. A library and conference room on the second floor with an observation deck.

An observatory tower on the third floor with a cement base arranged for the future installment of an eight or ten-inch refractor telescope. It will mainly serve for the observation of the rotating orgone envelope of the earth.

The western wing has a flat roof suitable as a deck for observation of the western sky. The roof of the main building is flat and also usable for observation.

The deck overlooks the whole region above the surrounding hills. The White Mountains 100 miles away to the south, Saddleback Mountain to the east, and Mt. Bigelow to the northeast form important points of observation.

Two lakes, Dodge Pond to the east and Rangeley Lake to the south, provide excellent areas for observations of the pulsatory movement of the atmospheric orgone energy.”

Reich also planned to build a hospital at Orgonon, going so far as to explore the State of Maine’s legal and licensing requirements and having an architect draw up a rendition of the building. Over the years, Reich’s research center at Orgonon became the site for numerous pioneering experiments, including:

- applications of the Reich Blood Test as a diagnostic tool for the early detection of diseases
- testing the effects of orgone energy on radium needles in 1951, in search of a possible antidote to nuclear radiation sickness
- using an invention called the cloudbuster to alter orgone energy movements in the atmosphere for weather experimentation
- successfully operating a small motor propelled by atmospheric orgone energy

Regrettably, Reich’s medical and scientific research was disrupted because of the Food and Drug Administration’s determination to put an end his work. The FDA’s seven-year campaign against Reich was ignited by an inaccurate article about him in *New Republic* magazine in May 1947, claiming that the orgone accumulators were being rented and sold as sexual devices and cure-alls, and casting aspersions on Reich’s cancer research and other aspects of his work.

In fact, in the mid-1940s, Reich’s Orgone Institute Research Laboratories—a non-profit organization that supported his work—had begun to rent and sell orgone accumulators to patients as prescribed by physicians. Herman Templeton’s daughter, Clista, down on the Bald Mountain Road, was in charge of building and shipping these accumulators. Later, S.A. Collins & Sons in Rangeley would assume these responsibilities.

The FDA was convinced, despite Reich’s extensive published research, that orgone energy does not exist and, consequently, that the orgone accumulators were fraudulent devices. This opinion was shared by the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychoanalytic Association, all of whom supported and cooperated with the FDA’s efforts.

The complexities of this legal case would require an entirely separate presentation.

Suffice it to say that in 1954 a Federal Court issued an Injunction forbidding the interstate shipment of orgone accumulators as well as Reich's books, research journals and bulletins which the FDA considered labeling for fraudulent devices.

The Injunction also ordered the destruction of these accumulators and much of Reich's literature. These orders were carried out both here in Rangeley and in New York City. Reich was eventually convicted of contempt of court and he died in the Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg Pennsylvania on November 3, 1957 at the age of 60.

Several days prior to his incarceration, Reich signed his Last Will & Testament which created a Trust in his name and designated it as his principal beneficiary: The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Fund. Reich directed that this Trust protect his legacy from distortion and falsification, preserve his property at Orgonon and safeguard his Archives.

The word "infant" in the Trust's title represents Reich's love of infants and children, and his belief that the knowledge accrued from his research would ultimately benefit them. Meanwhile, he wanted the Trust to help children and adolescents in need and specified that the cabin where he had lived at Orgonon should be used "as a summer home for children." For many years the Trust has run a summer program for Maine foster and adoptive children.

Today, The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust, of which I am one of the Directors, is a non-profit Maine Corporation that owns and operates The Wilhelm Reich Museum. The Museum itself and our annual conferences attract visitors from across the country and across the world to the Rangeley Lakes Region.

The Trust also manages Reich's Archives which are located at the Countway Library of Medicine at Harvard University, one of the world's premier medical libraries. And since 1959, the Trust has worked with New York publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux to bring all of Reich's books back into print, in addition to publishing eight new titles, for a total of twenty-one books.

My background is in film and writing, and we now have two film projects in various stages of development: (1) a completed feature-length screenplay about Reich that I've written which covers twenty-five years of his life from 1933 to 1957, and (2) a proposal for a documentary film. These two film projects, like everything we do, are consistent with the Trust's mission to preserve and protect Reich's scientific legacy from distortion and falsification.

And so if anything I've said this evening has piqued your curiosity, we hope you'll come visit us at Orgonon as just another way of deepening your appreciation of the richness and diversity of Rangeley history. Thank you for listening and thank you for this opportunity to be here.

*Kevin Hinchey
The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust*