



David Lidstone, 81, sits for a photograph near the Merrimack River, Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2021, in Boscawen, N.H. Lidstone, an off-the-grid New Hampshire hermit known to locals as "River Dave," had been living in a cabin in the woods along the Merrimack River, in Canterbury, N.H., for nearly three decades. He was jailed July 15, 2021 on a civil contempt sanction and was told he'd be released if he agreed to leave the cabin, that has since burnt down. Credit: AP Photo/Steven Senne

CONCORD, New Hampshire — Dave Lidstone's rise from wanderer to folk hero living on the banks of a New Hampshire river captured the imaginations of those who dream of a simpler life. It also made some family members wish he had never been found.

Lidstone, 81, a native of Wilton, Maine, gained notoriety this summer after a judge jailed him for contempt for failing to heed a 2017 warning to leave the 73 acres where he set up camp in Canterbury, New Hampshire. Lidstone claimed he had a prior agreement to stay. The landowner disagreed. Attention turned to fame when the camp mysteriously burned in August.

The story of "River Dave" took off. New England has a history of figures who capture the attention of a public that often dreams of leaving the grid but would not try it. Unlike Christopher Knight, the reclusive "North Pond Hermit" who hid for 27 years in the Belgrade Lakes area of Maine before he was finally

caught stealing from camps in 2013, Lidstone's story relies on charisma, not mystery. Media have noted his upbeat attitude and spritey nature.



This composite image shows Dave Lidstone's camp on the Merrimack River before and after it was burned down in August. Credit: Photos by Jodie Gedeon and the Canterbury Fire Department via AP

But being a hermit means leaving something behind. For Shiloh Lidstone, Dave's son, his father's new persona shrouded a man known for a fierce temper who alienated most of his family members. Dave was once ousted from a town, has clashed with the law, tried to leave society after his mother died, and constantly alleges that officials are conspiring against him.



This 1963 photo shows the Lidstone farmhouse on Walker Hill Road in Wilton, where David Lidstone grew up. The farm was later sold and is currently grown over. Credit: Copyright Vintage Aerial, www.vintageaerial.com

It may not be surprising that such a figure has a complex past. The prospect of a kind old man living out his days by the river inspired more than \$200,000 in donations. Despite many attempts by the media to contact family members, few have taken a closer look at Dave's past.

Dave pushed back against his son's characterization of him, accusing Shiloh, who died in September, of having a substance use disorder. He chalked family problems up to jealousy and resentment in an interview and attributed legal troubles to friction with local police.

"It's lying, cheating corrupt judges like you that are stepping on little people like me," **Dave told a New Hampshire judge**. "But I'm telling you, sir, you step on me, I'm going to bite your ankle."

Early life

Dave was the oldest of five children in the Lidstone family. Their working farm on Walker Hill Road in Wilton was passed down through the family of his mother, Janette Lidstone. The children came home from

school, did chores, then cut firewood.

Horace Clark, Dave's cousin, remembers him showing an affinity for the woods even then, hunting and fishing when he had free time. Life on the farm was tough, and so was Dave, he said.

"If you pushed him, he would probably push back," he said, "and you would probably be the loser if you pushed him."

The tight-knit family was wary of outsiders. The patriarch was Theredon Lidstone – an infantryman in World War II – sent home after tripping a land mine in Italy that filled the right side of his face with shrapnel, he often disappeared and spent the family's scant money on alcohol.

Dave had to go to work after eighth grade to make ends meet for the family. He described his father as a verbally abusive alcoholic who terrorized his mother, Janette, a schoolteacher. According to family members, it was not uncommon for the husband and wife to get into screaming matches, especially when Theredon was drunk.

Father and son had a tense relationship that came to a head one evening when Dave was 17, when the family was living in the Wilton village of Dryden. Dave said he and his father began to argue about Dave not wanting to go out and get milk. The fight escalated and Theredon fell down the stairs, his face a bloody mess. He was hospitalized.

The sight of his father's face has stayed with Mel Lidstone, of Unity, Dave's younger brother, all these years.

"It's one of those things you never get out of your mind," he said.

Dave Lidstone said fights were not uncommon for him. Although he said he never started them, he boasted that back then, he could "whip anyone in the state of Maine." Before Shiloh died in September, he reached out to the Bangor Daily News, frustrated that the public was given a skewed view of his father. While other family members remembered Dave as having a fierce temper, his other children did not respond to requests for comment.

"I'm tired of the dishonesty," Shiloh Lidstone said about how his father was being represented.

Both Shiloh and Mel Lidstone said Dave's fight with his father was pivotal because authorities gave him a choice: go to jail or join the military. Dave remembered it differently, saying a local doctor suggested he enlist because others he fought might come after him with weapons.

About three months after the fight, Dave enrolled in the Air Force. It was there he met his wife, Barbara Lidstone. The two moved back to Wilton after Dave left the military in 1962. They are still married despite being estranged for years. Dave said they never developed a real closeness, but he never felt the need to divorce her. Barbara declined to be interviewed through a family member.



Dave Lidstone's childhood home on Walker Hill Road in Wilton, which is now vacant and overtaken by trees, is pictured on Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021. Credit: Michael Shepherd / BDN

They moved around, with Dave often taking up logging jobs, a career that allowed him to spend most of his time outdoors. They eventually landed in Merrimack County, New Hampshire. Dave Lidstone's first brush with fame happened in 1982, when a Concord Monitor article described his quest to run the Boston Marathon after breaking his neck in a logging accident four years prior. There is no record of him running the race.

His relationship with his family appeared to be better then, with Dave telling the reporter that he enjoyed people immensely and often felt so lonely in the woods that he did not want people who stopped to talk with

him to leave.

"Maybe that's why I love my family so much," he said. "Some people come home and take out their frustrations. I'm just glad to see them."

A traveling man

Much of Dave's story takes place in New Hampshire, but it was at the University of Maine at Farmington that he heard a talk about a logging opportunity in Israel. The family moved there in 1989, staying for about five years. He said his work visa was not renewed.

The family landed back in New England, moving to Merrimack County, New Hampshire, in the 1990s. Dave's legal troubles began then with a string of arrests. The details are unclear because nearly all case files have been destroyed under a court records retention policy.

One incident stood out clearly to Shiloh, who left the state shortly after returning from Israel and had not been in contact with his father before he died.

In 2002, Dave pleaded guilty to criminal trespassing, prowling and jumping bail after being discovered in someone's backyard. Lt. Phil Mitchell, a 21-year veteran of the Webster police department, said that incident rallied townspeople who wanted him out of town.

"He was a rebel back then, too," Mitchell said.

Dave moved back to Concord, New Hampshire, after that. He said he has been arrested six times, but denied any wrongdoing, blaming police for his trouble.

"There are some crooked police officers in New Hampshire, and they will do anything to make themselves look good and to get their money," he said.



The Lidstone family is pictured in 1989, according to Shiloh Lidstone, the son of David Lidstone, pictured on the far right. Credit: Contributed

Dave's friction with police was apparent in August 2007, when police responded to the Concord Gardens apartment complex for a report of a possible drunk driver in a red van. The driver, Dave, was arrested for driving while intoxicated, according to police records.

When a Concord police officer tried to pat Dave down in the holding cell, Dave struck him on the left side of the head with his elbow, and resisted attempts to subdue him. The strike was strong enough to cause the officer's ear to swell, according to police documents.

That officer called for backup, and another grabbed Dave and put him on the ground. Police then transported him to Concord Hospital for a blood draw, where he punched an officer's hand who was restraining him. He was handcuffed for the rest of his time at the hospital and later charged with simple assault.

Throughout all of this, Dave was spending time on the Merrimack River at his camp, which he discovered in 1973 while working a nearby woodlot. He built a lean-to on the property, the legality of which has been disputed in court.

His wife, Barbara, lived at the Concord Gardens complex in the 1990s and early 2000s. Dave said he lived mostly at the camp, stopping by the apartment occasionally to do laundry and take a bath once a week. He would also periodically visit his mother there.

Things changed in 2004, when Janette, Lidstone's mother, died after being moved from her apartment in Concord to a retirement home in Vassalboro, Maine. Lidstone said he was "disgusted" by the move and that his mother did not want to leave her apartment.

But Vincent Lidstone, one of Dave's brothers who now lives in Georgia, said his mother was severely ill with untreated diabetes, and could not live on her own, something he said Dave should have helped her with. It fell to him to tell Dave the news. He said Dave unleashed a profanity-laced tirade against him and accused his siblings of killing their mother.

The two have not spoken since. As Dave's star rose, Vincent worried about speaking out against him, remembering Dave's violent fight with his father and their last conversation. He feared that Dave, with his newfound funds, might drive to Georgia to confront him.

"We have no reason to ever talk to each other again," he said.

Lidstone's wife, Barbara, left the area more than a decade ago. The two also do not talk. After that, Dave's full-time life on the river began, he said.

River Dave

Dave does not talk much with his children. One exception, he said, is his son Salem. He said the family was never close, which he attributed to his working a lot and not seeing much affection from family growing up. He had never really loved anyone before he started gaining support, he told [The Associated Press](#).

Despite his disagreements with Shiloh, Lidstone said he was devastated this fall when another son informed him of his death, saying he could not speak after it happened. Friends said he wanted to reconcile with his son before he died. Nonetheless, Shiloh said he felt his father was trying to garner public sympathy instead of living an honest life.

"He's been trying to live a free life his entire life and now it's being handed to him on a silver platter," he said.

Some family members said they had not talked to Dave for several years since Janette had died. Horace Lidstone, Dave's cousin, said he had not spoken to Dave for almost 20 years until they reconnected three years ago. They saw each other this October, went out and about in New Hampshire and sometimes people recognized his cousin in public, Horace said.



David Lidstone, left, stands for a photograph with his friend Jodie Gedeon, Aug. 10, 2021, in Boscawen, N.H. Credit: Steven Senne / AP

Absent his immediate family, Dave embraced a network of river recreationalists who became his support group. They helped raise money for him and sometimes treated him to celebrity-like status, holding meet-and-greets in nearby towns and buoying his hermit image. They launched multiple fundraisers, which raised nearly \$40,000 to keep Dave on the river, and social media pages dedicated to updates. A tech billionaire donated \$180,000 for a new home.

The viral attention strained local government. Ken Folsom, the Canterbury town manager, said the town was falsely accused of spurring the landowner's push to have Dave removed so it could collect more taxes on the property. Supporters near and far encouraged the town to allow Lidstone to stay, even though he had no right to the land.

It was a level of attention Dave said he does not like, although he participated in the events and said he was grateful for the support.

Chief among his supporters has been Jodie Gedeon, a Boscawen resident who met Lidstone while kayaking on the river several years ago. She estimated there are about 20 people close to Dave working to support him, but Gedeon has become his de-facto spokesperson, often appearing with him in photos and interviews and updating a Facebook page on his adventures.

"It was very eye-opening for him to understand how many people cared about him and went out of their way to help him," Gedeon said.

Gedeon said Dave had shared some elements of his past with her, but she declined to talk about specifics. She said Lidstone had always been kind to her. She believed Shiloh was jealous of the attention his father was getting. People, she said, should be allowed to have skeletons in their closets.



David Lidstone, 81, sits near the Merrimack River, Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2021, in Boscawen, N.H. Credit: Steven Senne / AP

For now, it looks like Lidstone is headed toward hermit retirement. Because of the attention focused on him, he said it was unlikely he could return to hermit life. For now, he is staying with various friends until he can get a house built.

"I want to see him resting and thriving," said Gedeon, who coined the "River Dave" nickname. "I think he's earned it."

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