

Song Lake History

A few comments by Walt Sykes, who asked three people to write a brief history of the Song Lake Area:

Mr. Fred Cooper – 1900 to 1920
Mr. Howard Olds – 1920 to 1930
Mr. Kenneth Collier – 1930 to 1971

The facts are drawn from memory and cannot be considered accurate in every detail.

When I came up here to live in 1951, fifty foot lots were being sold for \$1,000. Before that time, up to 1940, I understand a fifty foot lot could be purchased for \$250. Now, at the present time, a fifty foot lot on the lake would cost up to \$5,000.

There were no camps in the cove, other than one on the point; There were no camps south of Bob Thompson.

The fastest motor boat on the lake was a 7 ½ h.p. owned by Carl Bowen.

Six families lived here the year round.

Taxes ran about \$85., including school taxes.

Some brief remarks taken from the Preble Church Historical book, written by David Van Hoesen:

Church members paid 25-cents per year dues.

The John Maxon house, at the crossroads, south of John Purchase, was once a church, moved to its present location from Route 11.

Preble Flats was a dense forest.

The only road was an Indian trail, running north and south along the river.

It took nearly a week's time for a pioneer to take his grain to be ground into flour at the nearest grist mill.

On January 1, 1840, a group of boys and girls met at the tavern in Baltimore and drove to Apulia. They stopped at the tavern in Apulia then drove to Tully to get supper at the tavern in that village. On their return home, at eight o'clock in the evening, they disturbed the church fathers and the Pastor by singing worldly songs. They were charged with breach of the covenant by meeting with worldly people, partaking in worldly pleasures, visiting public taverns and other crimes. They were each asked to make public confession.

Mr. Cooper's camp site was at the Girl Scout swimming area.

My first acquaintance with this beautiful body of water was in 1900. It was called VanHoesen Lake because the early VanHoesen families owned most of the land from the north line of the Town of Homer to the north line of Preble Township, including this little lake.

When I first visited it, David VanHoesen, a lawyer and past member of the New York State Assembly, owned and occupied, as a summer home, a strip of land starting at the West Lake Road and continuing east across to the west shore of Lower Tully Lake. This included the island on which the summer home was built. There were two buildings, the main building for the family and the other smaller one for the kitchen and servants. The place was always tidy and well-kept. On the west shore, near the road, was the horse barn – in those days travelling was done by horse-drawn vehicles or "Shank's Mare."

At the south end of the lake, Mr. & Mrs. Pratt VanHoesen owned a farm and lived in the house on the north side of the East and West Road.

Ours was the first camp on the Lake, other than the VanHoesen's on the island. Farm lane and woods, beautiful and peaceful, surrounded the lake. I think it was in June of 1908, that I peddled my bicycle up the dirt road (now Route 11) to see Barnett Cummings about a site for a camp – we camped in a tent at this site, and I knew what I wanted. I arrived at Mr. Cummings house at the corner of what is now Route 11 and Song Lake Road, at the foot of School House Hill at about 11:00 AM and talked with him about the proposition. I remember what he said, "Well, young man, we will have a little something to eat and I'll hitch up the old horse and we will go over and see."

After dinner he hitched up his antique buggy, drove through the meadow up to the point I indicated. When we stopped, he said, "Young man, set your stakes and then I'll tell you what it will be." I set a stake at both ends of the open spot under a big tree that didn't take in any of the meadow land at all. "All right, I'll lease that much to you for \$8.00 per year, \$6.00 for use of the land and \$2.00 for the wood you will burn." "Use all the downed and dead wood, but don't but any live trees." This is the way we did business for fifteen years.

Mr. Cummings would never sell me any lot, although later, he offered to sell me five acres of woods to the north of the meadow for \$500.00 That was a lot of money in those days, and I would have bought it, but he didn't want to give a right-of-way from the road up to it.

I let the Girl Scouts use the camp for the leaders headquarters one summer. They undermined me and rented the whole lot from Charlie Cummings, son of Barnett, who then owned the property. Charlie told my father he was sorry to disturb us and that we could move the camp up the shore further south and still enjoy the Lake, but it wouldn't have been the same as that spot was the best place on the whole Lake to us.

When the trolley line was extended to Preble, we were in great luck as we live in VanHoesen land. We could take the Preble car at the Hospital Corner, leave it at Preble Corners, and walk only two miles to the Lake. I kept a boat at the south end of the Lake and we could make the trip down the Lake to camp easily as the mosquitoes didn't bother too much after we were out on the water. That is one thing that made the campsite so pleasant – it was more open and the prevailing winds were from the west or northwest, and kept the mosquitoes out.

My wife and I could walk the two miles from the Lake to the trolley in twenty minutes. I knew all the men on the Line and they were all very good, pleasant and accommodating. They would watch for us and hold the car, if necessary. I had a permit to carry my dog and we rode up on the front platform with the motor man. Our fare, if I remember, was twenty cents, and well worth it.

The fishing was very good – perch, pickerel, sunfish, large-mouth black bass, suckers and bullheads. I caught some of the first walleye pike from the Lake. Not knowing what they were, I showed them to Mr. VanHoesen and he told me he had stocked them five years previously. One year, there was a field of corn on the west shore, and grasshoppers were plentiful. With a west wind blowing the hoppers off the tall corn onto the water, we had fun with a light trout rod and line baited with a hopper – when a twelve or fourteen- inch bass hit, it was real pleasure and some job to land them in the boat.

I built a dock in front of the camp, didn't take it up in the fall, but found it piled up on shore the next spring. Mr. Curtin once told me the point in front of camp was the best place for suckers in the spring, so I removed the dock, posts and all, every fall so there would be no hindrance to the neighbors fishing.

Sometimes, instead of going down to the Farm barn for drinking water, we would go out in the boat, drop a weighted jug on a line in a deep place and, with another line, jerk the cork out of the jug and let it fill up with water. Sometimes, we had a little black sediment that we would let settle before using the water. Afterwards, I drove a length of 1 1/4" pipe down and put in a pump for an excellent water supply.

For our vacation time we used to take the week of the Cortland Fair, letting our help off too, as business was light during that week. I started visiting the Fair in 1919, and continued for 25 years.

How my wife and I enjoyed those days at the Lake, quiet and peaceful, with no one on the water except the VanHoesen kids. I built a canvass canoe, equipped with a Lateen Rig Sail, a rudder with leads connected to a hand control on the side to steer it and we sailed all around the Lake.

No other camps were built while we were there that I remember. I think an old street car was moved in, north of the VanHoesen barn property. It wasn't long after that a cottage was built on the bay at the northwest end. Those two farms on the west road belonged to two VanPatten families and were well cultivated. After one or two camps were built, the rush was on, helped particularly by the auto.

The height of the land that divides the St. Lawrence watershed from the Susquehanna watershed, runs north of Song and Tully Lakes, goes east around Green Lake, around the Village, south of the pond at Apulia Station, over and north of Fabius Swamp, all draining into the East Branch of Tioughnioga River.

Song Lake has no inlet or visible outlet and contains soft water. Tully Lake has hard water, and they don't connect. When Solvay Process drew water from Crooked Lake to the north, to pump water into their salt wells, it would lower VanHoesen Lake. High or low, Tully Lake made no difference with Song Lake.

I had a little two-wheeled cart I carried in my canoe. I could push my canoe over to either Lake and, in this way, visited all the lakes and ponds in that section – that is how I observed the different conditions in the waters.



House on the Island