

LAKE SUNSHINE (Lake Contoocook)

Note: The newspaper articles are from the Monadnock Ledger-Transcript although the dates are not indicated except in one instance.

The old days by Long Pond

Contoocook Lake has also been known as Lake Sunshine

RINDGE — It's been known as Long Pond and Lake Sunshine, and has been the backdrop for dances, carnivals, summer vacations and religious retreats dating back to the second half of the 1800s.

Contoocook Lake has a rich history as a recreation area, starting in the 1860s when a dam was constructed on the Contoocook River, raising the water level and increasing the size of the lake, which lies in Rindge and Jaffrey. The first to take advantage of the lake's appeal to outdoor enthusiasts was M.M. Bascom, who built a rustic shelter for fishermen and hunters on the island in the Rindge section of the lake.

The first cottage built along the shores is believed to be the Red Cottage at the Jaffrey end. Soon after, the Jowders came from New Ipswich and put up three cottages at the south end of the lake, the area now known as Jowders Cove.

Improved transportation options had a huge effect of the life of Contoocook Lake. The railroad from Winchendon, Mass., through to Jaffrey and then Peterborough was completed in January 1875, and a small station was built just west of the lake and named the Woodmere Railroad Station.

"All the cottage people came by way of that station," Rindge's 1988 town history reports. "A steamer, believed to be the second on the lake, was built by a man named King who picked up and delivered people at ten cents each. The steamer held fifteen to twenty people. The luggage would be placed in the center and the passengers sat on benches surrounding the sides. On Labor Day in later years as many as one hundred people would wait at the station for the train which would have extra cars. The steamer first picked up the luggage and then went around the lake to pick up the passengers."

The lake also attracted some folks who sought more than just recreation in a beautiful setting. A corporation owned mainly by Massachusetts people purchased 80 acres on the east side of the lake, in the section now known as Woodmere.

The corporation was known as the Mediumistic Camp Meeting of the Two Worlds, and its members were part of a religious movement called Spiritualism. Spiritualists believed that the dead could contact the living through mediums.

The group put up a farmhouse, which served as the basis of operations, and divided the land into 674 small lots. They built an ornate tabernacle with stained glass windows and seating for 500. Only a small portion of the lots sold, though; some 38 were purchased between 1885 and 1888. "In 1911 the

tracts were sold to Hiram M. Clark, possibly the only native who embraced the cult," the town history reports.

Still, the place was popular with Spiritualists for a while. In 1885, some 600 attended a meeting there.

The Woodbound Inn, the most enduring of the establishments on Contoocook Lake, got its start in 1892 when the Jowders family began taking in summer boarders at what was then called Lake View Farm.

The Lakeside Inn ran successfully for many years in the area just north of Woodmere, until it burned down.

"The services provided by the lake steamboats — first the 'Phil Sheridan' and then the 'Contoocook' — and later by motorboat, from the railroad station on the lake, was a boon to the innkeeping business," the history tells us. "Incidental to this the Woodbound Inn, then known as Contoocook Inn, catered to a considerable clientele of conductors and other railroad personnel for whom a special room was set aside for poker games."

A small restaurant serving sandwiches, ice cream and drinks was established at Woodmere in 1910 by a man named Wishman. People came from all over the lake in boats to gather there.

Shortly before World War I broke out, the Sunshine Dance Pavilions was built near what had once been the Spiritualist Tabernacle. "This dance hall was very successfully run for many years by Raymond Wheeler of Winchendon, Massachusetts, until the roof collapsed under snow in the early 1960s," the history reports. The Kawl Ledge Dance Hall also operated for a short time near Woodbound Inn.

The inn hosted a summer theater from 1935 until the outbreak of World War II. "Some Hollywood stars started here, such as Ruth Roman and Lee Bowman, the latter winning a Big Apple contest in dancing at the Sunshine Pavilion," states the history.

There were few year-round residents of the lake in those days, but it was for a while the site of winter recreation as well. "For several years winter carnivals were held on the lake featuring horse racing, the Boston Brownies swimming in a section cut in the ice, loggers contending with pikes on loose logs in the water, skating races, and a meet of the New England Sled Dog Racing Association," the history reports. "The route started from the lake, going up by the inn, continuing by Bullet Pond, Hubbard Pond, and returning to the lake for the finish."

The lake got its name from the Indians, though its meaning is not clear. In colonial times, it was known primarily as Long Pond; the Spiritualists renamed it Sunshine Lake.

The state legislature, in the early part of this century, officially gave it back its original name: Lake Contoocook.

A LOOK BACK



Jane Eklund

A watery, welcoming site

Contoocook Lake has always been a favorite summer spot

Some people may bemoan New Hampshire's lack of a real coastline, but everyone agrees on one thing: Our lakes — cold and crystal clear, with plenty of shady trees and cool breezes — certainly beat the hot Cape Cod beaches, where nary a shady spot is to be found and in late August is rife with seaweed.

The Maine coast is no better: Who wants to swim in water so frigid, your teeth ache?

During the summer, New Hampshire lakes are where it's at when it comes to the social scene. Take Lake Contoocook in Rindge. Once called Lake Sunshine, this lake has a colorful history, with spiritualists, dancers, strawberry pickers, and wildcat hunters all sharing the same beautiful shoreline.

Linguists can't agree on the Indian meaning of the word Contoocook, the name the colonists used before 1733 for the river that flows into the lake. The lake was also known as Long Pond. The construction of the Red Dam in the 1860s hastened the popularity of the lake.

Built for water purposes, the dam raised the water level and the lake literally expanded. The first lakeside shelter was more or less a shack for fishermen and hunters on the Rindge side. The first house was the Red Cottage on the Jaffrey side. The railroad from Winchendon to Peterborough in the 1870s, with small Woodmere Railroad Station near the lake, provided easy access for visitors, and the lake became more popular.

All the "cottage people," as they were called, came via that station. Two steamers, the Phil Sheridan and the Contoocook, picked travelers up and delivered them for 10 cents each, holding up to 20 people, their luggage placed in the center of the boat.

Labor Day weekend, more than 100 people would line up for the steamer — quite a queue then, although it certainly pales next to the number of cars streaming across the Bourne Bridge every summer Friday night. For efficiency, the steamer would take a boatload of people first, then their luggage.

Quite different from the sun-seeking summer visitors were those that attended that Mediumistic Camp Meeting of the Two Worlds, a corporation owned by Massachusetts people, located on 80 acres purchased in 1884. A red, one-and-a-half-story building at the foot of Drag Hill was the home base of one of the owning families. The land was divided into 674 lots, 35-by-70-feet, with streets. There was also a two-acre Auditorium Park and four smaller parks.

A LOOK BACK



Kelly Stimmell

A frame house headquartered the Spiritualists, who dubbed the body of water the Sunshine Lake. An elaborate tabernacle with stained glass windows and a 500-person capacity was also erected.

In 1888, the Monadnock Land Corporation bought the remaining lots, and in 1911, the tracts were sold to Hiram Clark, who embraced the Spiritualists. At one time, it was reported that 600 people were on the grounds one Sunday. The tabernacle stood on a rise of land where once was the Sunshine Dance Pavilion.

The pavilion was later rebuilt just before World War I. Run by Winchendon resident Raymond Wheeler, it was highly successful until the roof collapsed under snow in the 1960s.

Another dance hall, the Kawl Ledge Dance Hall, had a short existence. In 1892, summer boarders were able to stay at the Lakeside Hotel, situated at the present Woodbound Inn location. It later burned down. The lake steamboats increased the hotel's business.

Years later, the Contoocook Inn, which became the Woodbound Inn, housed many conductors and other railroad employees, who spent their evenings playing poker in the special poker room set aside for them.

In 1910, a man named Wishman began to sell ice cream, sandwiches, and soft drinks. His establishment became the social gathering spot. Little girls often picked strawberries and sold them to Wishman for 10 cents a quart. Wishman also took his wares down to West Rindge in a wagon selling ice cream, perhaps Rindge's first ice cream truck.

Twelve-year-old Marion Bagley would climb aboard and ring the bell. Summer theater took place in a building later converted into a playbarn opposite the Woodbound Inn.

Ruth Roman and Lee Bowman, Hollywood stars, came. Bowman even won a dancing contest at the Sunshine Pavilion.

Summer residents also got a kick out of Buckskin Ellsworth, who lived on the west side of the lake. He was famous for shooting native wildcats and exhibiting them at the Sportsman Shows in Boston.

His days on the lake came to an abrupt end one night in 1959, when a gun went off while he was entertaining a friend and he was jailed for murder. When he was sent off, the Humane Society collected the 15 to 20 dogs and cats he owned.

Summer wasn't the only social time for Lake Contoocook. During the winter, there were winter carnivals, with horse racing, swimming (hard to believe, but true), skating races, and logger competitions. The New England Sled Dog Racing Association held its meet on the lake. The dogs ran from the lake to the inn, continuing on by Bullet and Hubbard ponds, then returning to the lake.

Today, Lake Contoocook is overseen by the Contoocook Lake Area Preservation Association, which keeps a sharp eye on the property owners as well as visitors.

Ships on Contoocook Lake

Steamships were part of a grand recreation plan

JAFFREY — It's not exactly the Mississippi, but Contoocook Lake did indeed boast a steamship at one time.

The launch of the Phil Sheridan was part of the development Contoocook Park, 30 acres of land slated for recreation on the west shore of the lake.

On May 2, 1872, a group of men purchased the land for \$500, with plans to build a seasonal boarding house, clear fields, make a "trotting park" for horse racing, and establish a boat excursion business.

"The Monadnock Railroad had been completed the previous year through East Jaffrey, and in the little hamlet there was intense business and manufacturing activity. Presumably, then, these enterprising young men envisioned like interest in recreation and they immediately embarked on extensive improvements," reports Jaffrey's 1937 town history.

Soon, the trotting course was under way. Trees were felled; using five yoke of oxen, workers pulled stumps and leveled the ground. On May 9, a baseball game between the Contoocooks of East Jaffrey and the Marines of Ashburnham, Mass., was played at the field. The Marines whopped the Contoocooks, 39-9.

"Since this was only a few years after the first organized baseball game at Cooperstown, New York, it may well be that this was the first game in town," the history states.

By the end of the month, a local paper provided this news item, as recorded in the town history:

"Messrs. Bascom, Sibley & Wheeler, proprietors of Contoocook Park, have purchased a steamer capable of carrying 125 persons which they will place upon Contoocook Lake in a few days. It was purchased in Worcester and is now on its way to its destination. When safely placed upon this beautiful sheet of water it will afford visitors a most cool and delightful ride during the hot summer days and cannot fail to prove one of the chief attractions of the place."

The boat made the trip from the central Massachusetts city by train, and apparently incurred enough damages along the way that the launching didn't take place until July 1.

The boat was 45 feet long, 17 feet wide and covered with an awning. The launch was a ceremonious occasion, with free rides for everyone — includ-

ing a stop to refuel with wood. Festivities culminated in an on-board dance July 4.

It was soon announced that the Phil Sheridan (the history does not comment on the steamer's name) would make scheduled trips on Wednesdays and Saturday, and by appointment on other days, and that the park was complete with shaded lawns, swings and croquet grounds.

"Contoocook Park and the 'Phil Sheridan' during the balance of the season of 1872 apparently lived up to the expectations of their sponsors," the historians wrote. "During the week of August 12 some 300 members of the Sunday Schools of the Congregational churches of East Jaffrey and Peterborough were found there on Wednesday, the combined round-trip rail and steamer fare from Peterborough to the Park, by way of the Landing at the railroad about half-way between West Rindge and East Jaffrey, being thirty cents and 'the two passenger cars, the express cars and two freight cars were filled.' On the following day members of the Masonic lodges of Jaffrey, Peterborough, Troy, and Winchendon repaired thither for recreation. Later the combined Baptist Sunday Schools of East Jaffrey and Peterborough followed suit, as did still later the Universalists of East Jaffrey and the Unitarians of Peterborough."

While the church folk were busy holding Sunday School outings, racing enthusiasts flocked to the trotting track.

It was a busy summer for Contoocook Park; unfortunately, it was to be the only summer for the park. In May 1873, the steamer and the park were sold at auction — the park for \$712.50 and the boat for \$400. "The cause of this debacle is shrouded in mystery, but doubtless the promoters, like others of the ilk, learned that their scheme was too ambitious," the historians speculated.

Over the next 25 years or so, the park was occasionally used for picnics and horse training. A few organizations held athletic games there. But by 1903, several cottages went up on the part of the land that abutted the lake, and after that time the area ceased to be available for public use. "Now the area within the old track is entirely covered by a beautiful growth of pine while trim cottages line the shore," the history concludes.

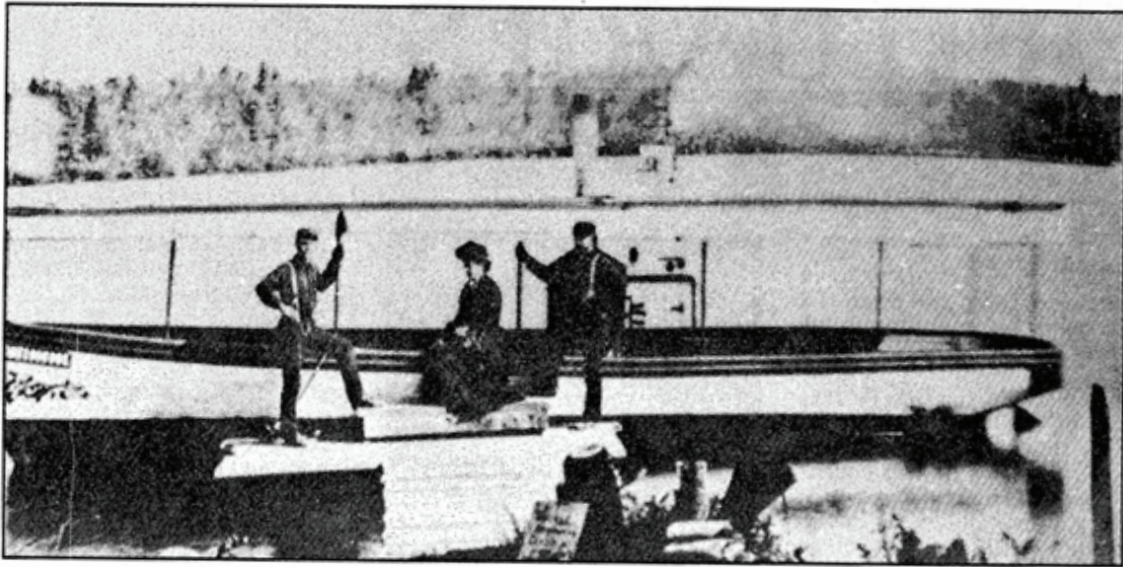
Some 12 years after the sale of the Phil Sheridan, another steamboat, the Contoocook, roamed the lake. It was smaller than the Sheridan, the history reports, "but sufficiently pretentious to attract the young people."

It ran for three or four years, but, like the earlier steamer, was not profitable and was moved to a lake in Ashburnham, Mass.

A LOOK BACK



Jane Eklund



JANE EKLUND/Monadnock Ledger Staff

The steamer Lake Contoocook, shown in a photo in the Rindge town history, carried passengers, luggage and mail at the turn of the 20th century.

Steamboats, spiritualists

Lake Contoocook has an interesting, varied history

RINDGE — Lake Contoocook has been a venue for recreation since the 1860s, when a dam erected in the Contoocook River raised the water level and increased the size of the lake.

"The earliest accommodation for visitors appears to be the building by M.M. Bascom of a rude shelter for the use of fishermen and hunters on the island located in the Rindge section of the lake which section comprises the greater part of the lake," reports the 1988 Rindge town history. "Probably the first cottage on the lake was the Red Cottage built on the sandbank at the Jaffrey end of the lake, but Marion Bagley's grandparents, the Jowders, came from New Ipswich in the 1880s and constructed three cottages at the south end."

That was just a few years after a railroad was constructed from Winchendon, Mass., to Peterborough, with a stop at the Woodmere Station on the west side of the lake.

"All the cottage people came by way of that station," the historians wrote. "A steamer, believed to be the second on the lake, was built by a man named King who picked up and delivered people at ten cents each. The steamer held fifteen to twenty people. The luggage would be placed in the center and the passengers sat on benches surrounding the sides. On Labor Day in later years as many as one hundred people would wait at the station for the train which would have extra cars. The steamer first picked up the luggage and then went around

the lake to pick up the passengers."

The shores of Contoocook have an interesting history. In 1884, in the Woodmere section, a group of spiritualists from Massachusetts purchased 80 acres and established the Mediumistic Camp Meeting of the Two Worlds." The land was broken into 674 lots, or ornate tabernacle was erected, and people came and purchased lots and built cottages.

For some events, up to 600 people reportedly showed up at the camp. If they had meetings with the other world, however, they did not record them.

The lake has long been a site for summer boarders, as well. The Jowders first took in summer guests at the location of the present Woodbound Inn. They called the place Lake View Farm. In the early 1900s, developers began building cottages on the west side of the lake. A Rindge woman identified only as Mrs. Mitchell established the Lakeside Inn north of Woodmere, and ran it for several years until it burned down.

The Woodbound, then known as the Contoocook Inn, also catered to summer guests and railroad personnel.

Lake Contoocook has also provided a backdrop for a couple of dance halls, winter carnival, logging competitions, a summer theater and a sled dog meet.

"At the onset of World War II 'Air Raid and Black Out Regulations' were issued for Rindge and during the winter of 1941-2 every cottage on the lake had a copy nailed on the outside, but there were practically no winter residents," reports the town history. "A solid steel five-foot railroad tire iron from a Boston and Maine locomotive was hung near Woodbound Inn. When notified of an alert the proprietor was supposed to go out and hit the iron with a sledge hammer, thus sounding the alarm for the lake. No serious action happened."

A LOOK BACK



Jane Eklund

STEAMBOAT EXCURSIONS.

The Medium's Camp Meetings have closed, except Sundays, but
The Steamer Contoocook
will still run to accommodate all
Pleasure, Picnic, and Fishing Parties,
until
October 1st, 1885,
at reasonable rates.

LAKE SUNSHINE,

on which this Steamer plies, near East Jaffrey, N. H., is a very pleasant place for
Camping and Picnic Parties, and
Cottages and Other Camping Facilities May be Had
by the day or week, at
SAWYER'S GROVE,
and
REFRESHMENTS and PICNIC SUPPLIES
are to be obtained there at moderate charges.

WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE MEDIUM'S CAMP MEETINGS
will be held EVERY SUNDAY, until further notice, at their grounds, and a
Cornet Band will be in attendance, and
DANCES, EVERY SATURDAY EVENING,
will be held at the Temple.

Parties coming on the trains to East Jaffrey, N. H., will be accommodated
by carriage to the Lake.
July 18, 1885.

J. F. Wilkinson,
Capt. of Steamer.

