

LOON LAKE

FRANKLIN COUNTY, NEW YORK

2001

AN INTRODUCTION - BY KARL BECKWITH SMITH III

LOON LAKE HISTORY CENTERS AROUND THE STORY OF THE LOON LAKE HOUSE.. ALTHOUGH THAT STORY IS INTERWOVEN WITH LOCAL REGIONAL AND NATIONAL HISTORY, WHAT WE WILL BE LOOKING AT TODAY IS PRIMARILY RELATED TO THE HOTEL. THE DEVELOPMENT AND SUCCESS, THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE OF THE HOTEL WILL BE SEEN THROUGH ITS ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE . WE WILL WALK AROUND AND THROUGH SOME OF THE BUILDINGS THAT SURVIVE FROM A ONCE FAMOUS AND NOW ALMOST FORGOTTEN VICTORIAN SUMMER RESORT HOTEL.

AT ITS PEAK, 1883 THROUGH 1915, THE LOON LAKE HOUSE WAS ONE OF THE GRANDEST, MOST UP TO DATE AND SOCIALLY PROMINENT OF THE ADK RESORTS. THREE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS STAYED HERE DURING THE SUMMER WHILE THEY WERE IN OFFICE.

MARY HOWE AND FERDINAND CHASE WERE THE CREATORS AND DEVELOPERS OF THE HOTEL. FROM ITS FIRST CONSTRUCTION IN 1878 TO THE BEGINNING OF ITS DEMISE AFTER THE CRASH OF 1929 MARY AND FERD OWNED AND MANAGED THE HOTEL THEMSELVES. THE RESORT WAS THEIR ALL CONSUMMING PASSION. FERD WAS A CIVIL WAR VETERAN AND HAD SOME EXPERIENCE WORKING FOR A RAILROAD. MARY WAS WELL EDUCATED AND MUSICAL. THEY MET AND MARRIED IN VERMONT IN 1874. FOR SEVERAL YEARS THEY HELPED RUN A HOTEL IN ESSEX JUNCTION, VT. AND WHEN TIME PERMITTED, WENT ON HUNTING AND FISHING TRIPS TO THE LOON LAKE AREA. THE PORT KENT TO HOPKINTON TURNPIKE , COMPLETED IN 1833, WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE OPENING UP OF THIS REMOTE WILDERNESS AREA. MARY'S FATHER HAD PURCHASED LAND IN LOON LAKE FROM WILLIS HODGES WHO HAD TRIED UNSUCCESSFULLY TO ESTABLISH BLACKSVILLE IN LOON LAKE ON HODGES BAY IN 1848. BLACKSVILLE WAS A AN EXPERIMENTAL COMMUNITY ON TWO HUNDRED ACRES OF ABOUT TEN FAMILIES OF FREED BLACK SLAVES WHO WERE GIVEN LAND TO SETTLE THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF

GERRITT SMITH, THE ABOLITIONIST. IT ONLY TOOK TWO SHORT WINTERS TO DISCOURAGE THIS GROUP FROM PERMANENT SETTLEMENT..

IN 1878, THE CHASES PURCHASED 10 ACRES ON A BLUFF OVERLOOKING THE SOUTH END OF LOON LAKE. THE AREA WAS ALREADY RENOWNED FOR ITS BEAUTY AND EXCELLENT HUNTING AND FISHING. PAUL SMITH HAD COME YEARS BEFORE, STAYING BOTH AT THE MERRILLSVILLE INN AND THE LOVERIN TAVERN IN LOON LAKE BEFORE BUILDING HIS OWN PLACE, HUNTER'S HOME, ON THE NORTH BRANCH OF THE SARANAC BELOW LOON LAKE, IN 1852. PAUL SMITH WAS A LEGENDARY ADK CHARACTER: GUIDE, RACONTEUR, HOTELIER, FINANCIER, RAILROAD BUILDER, AND FOUNDER OF THE POWER GENERATING COMPANY. AFTER HUNTER'S HOME BURNED IN 1858, PAUL MOVED HIS OPERATIONS TO THE ST. REGIS AREA WHERE HE BUILT A LARGE HOTEL COMPLEX.

DURING THE WINTER OF 1878, MARY AND FERD CONSTRUCTED A 31 ROOM, 3 STORY LOG STRUCTURE WHICH WAS OPEN FOR THE BUSINESS OF LODGING HUNTERS AND FISHERMAN THE FOLLOWING SPRING'S BUSINESS. MARY'S ABILITIES AS COOK AND HOSTESS WERE IMMEDIATELY EVIDENT; AND FERD'S COMRADERY WITH THE MEN ALSO MADE THEM FEEL WELCOME. THE PLACE WAS AN OVERNIGHT SUCCESS. ALTHOUGH THE SUCCESS ALMOST OVERCAME THEM AT FIRST, THEY WERE EQUAL TO THE CHALLENGE. MARY AND FERD WERE VERY INDUSRIOUS, INGENIOUS AND DEVOTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR VENTURE. EVERY YEAR THE PROFITS FROM THE HOTEL WERE REINVESTED IN THE IMPROVEMENT AND EXPANSION OF THE OPERATION.

FOUR YEARS AFTER THE OPENING OF THE FIRST HOUSE, THEY COMPLETED A NEW MAIN BUILDING WHICH EVENTUALLY BECAME KNOWN AS THE OLD OR MAIN HOUSE. IT CONTAINED 100 ROOMS IN FIVE STORIES, LARGE SITTING AND DINING ROOMS AND EXTENSIVE PORCHES OVERLOOKING THE LAKE. (IT REMAINED THE CENTRAL HUB OF ACTIVITY AT LOON LAKE UNTIL IT BURNED IN SEPTEMBER 1956.)

10 YEARS LATER, IN 1893, THE CHASES HAD ERECTED AN EVEN LARGER BUILDING WHICH WAS CALLED THE ANNEX. THIS BROUGHT THE CAPACITY OF THE HOTEL UP TO 500 GUESTS. OBVIOUSLY, THERE WAS A CORRESPONDING EXPANSION OF ALL THE SERVICES AND

STAFF THAT WENT ALONG WITH THE CARE AND HANDLING OF SUCH A CROWD, AND ESPECIALLY SO SINCE THE MRS. INSISTED THAT EVERYTHING BE OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY GIVEN HER NORTHWOODS LOCATION. THE NUMBER OF STAFF THAT WAS NEEDED TO PROVIDE ALL THIS WAS ALMOST EQUAL TO THE NUMBER OF GUESTS. MANY FAMILIES CAME NORTH AND STAYED FOR THE SUMMER SEASON. SOME GUESTS WOULD LEASE LAND FROM THE CHASES AND BUILD INDEPENDANT LIVING QUARTERS FOR THEIR FAMILIES TO OCCUPY. THESE HOUSES VARIED FROM SUBSTANTIAL TO ELABORATE, BUT NONE WERE ALLOWED TO CONTAIN KITCHEN FACILITIES AS THE MRS. INSISTED THAT ALL TAKE THEIR MEALS IN, OR FROM, THE HOTEL'S DINING ROOMS. AT ITS ZENITH LOON LAKE HOUSE COULD ACCOMODATE 800. EVENTUALLY THE COTTAGES OR CAMPS NUMBERED ABOUT 60, NOT INCLUDING THE REGULAR HOTEL STRUCTURES. MOST WERE SPREAD OUT AROUND THE SOUTHERN HALF OF LOON LAKE AND THE GOLF COURSE. WHEN THESE FAMILIES NO LONGER WISHED TO KEEP THEIR CAMPS THE MRS. WOULD PURCHASE THEM AND ADD THEM TO THE HOTEL'S ASSETS .

MANY OTHER STRUCTURES WERE BUILT. BARNs, WORKSHOPS, LAUNDRIES, HOUSES FOR THE STAFF, AND MUCH MORE. THE HOTEL PROPERTY GREW TO OVER 3000 ACRES. AN EXTENSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE WAS DEVELOPED THAT PROVIDED EVERY UP TO DATE AMENITY FOR THE GUESTS. TWO WATER SYSTEMS, ONE STILL WORKING, PROVIDED PURE, FILTERED MOUNTAIN SPRING WATER. AN UNDERGROUND SEWER SYSTEM WAS DUG FROM THE LAKESHORE UNDER THE MOUNTAIN TO A DRAINAGE FIELD ALMOST A MILE AWAY. (IT IS ALSO STILL IN OPERATION). GAS, AND LATER, AN EARLY ELECTRIC LIGHTING SYSTEM, VEGETABLE AND FLOWER GARDENS, A DAIRY WITH SPECIALLY REGISTERED HOLSTEIN- FREISEN COWS, EVERY TYPE OF PASTTIME, AMUSEMENT, AND SPORT WAS PROVIDED. THERE WAS A LARGE BOATHOUSE FILLED WITH BOATS OF ALL KINDS, AND STAFFED WITH THE BEST LOCAL GUIDES. THERE WERE BOWLING ALLEYS, BILLIARDS, AND ONE OF THE VERY EARLIEST GOLF COURSES IN THE ADKS WHICH FIRST OPENED IN 1895 WITH 9 HOLES ON THE SCOTTISH STYLE OF LINKS. (THE SECOND, OR FRONT, NINE WAS COMPLETED IN 1922). AS YOU CAN SEE THE GOLF COURSE IS STILL

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VERY MUCH IN OPERATION. IT'S A BEAUTIFUL MOUNTAIN COURSE WITH A VIEW OF WHITEFACE MOUNTAIN FROM THE 9TH GREEN THAT IS NOT TO BE MISSED. THERE WAS ALSO A GENERAL STORE AND POST OFFICE AND LATER GARAGES AND APTS. FOR CHAUFFEURS. IT WAS PRACTICALLY A COMPLETE SMALL VILLAGE. ONE COULD NOT CALL IT SELF SUFFICIENT, HOWEVER, SINCE MOST OF THE HOTEL SUPPLIES HAD TO BE BROUGHT IN FROM NEAR AND FAR AWAY. ALSO, THE VERY LARGE NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES CAME FROM ALL OVER FRANKLIN AND CLINTON COUNTIES, ESPECIALLY FROM THE MALONE AREA.

1886 WAS A BANNER YEAR FOR LOON LAKE AS THAT YEAR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHATEAUGAY RAILROAD (LATER THE DELAWARE AND HUDSON) CAME TO INMAN AT THE NORTH END OF THE LAKE. A LARGE AND ELEGANT STATION WAS BUILT THERE. THIS MEANT THAT VISITORS NO LONGER HAD TO MAKE THE ARDUOUS STAGE COACH JOURNEY UP FROM LAKE CHAMPLAIN THROUGH AUSABLE AND FRANKLIN FALLS ETC. BUT COULD ARRIVE BY "CAR" IN STYLE, LUXURY AND COMFORT. IN 1892 THE N.Y. CENTRAL RAILROAD COMPLETED THEIR LINE TO INMAN AND BUILT THEIR OWN DEPOT. THIS BROUGHT PEOPLE MORE DIRECTLY UPSTATE FROM THE UTICA AREA

THESE DEVELOPMENTS WERE, OF COURSE, A BOON FOR THE CHASES AND LOON LAKE HOTEL. MRS. CHASE TURNED TO THE CULTIVATION OF HER GUEST LIST, ALWAYS ONE OF HER CHIEF CONCERNS AND SOURCE OF GREAT PRIDE. AS EARLY AS 1892 THE QUICK AND THE FAMOUS WERE SEEKING HER OUT. THAT YEAR OSCAR WILDE STAYED AT THE HOTEL ON HIS FAMOUS AMERICAN TOUR. THE HIGH QUALITY OF THE ACCOMODATIONS, FAMILY ATMOSPHERE, EXCELLENT FOOD AND SERVICE BROUGHT PEOPLE BACK YEAR AFTER YEAR. ACTUALLY, THEY WERE INVITED BACK (OR NOT) BY THE MRS. WHO FOLLOWED THEIR ACTIVITIES IN THE NYC PAPERS.

IN THE SPRING OF 1892, AS CONSTRUCTION OF THE N.Y. CENTRAL WAS NEARING LOON, LAKE PRESIDENT BENJAMIN HARRISON DECIDED TO BRING HIS AILING WIFE NORTH FOR A CURE. (THE ADK CLIMATE WAS WORLD FAMOUS AT THAT TIME AS A PLACE FOR REGAINING ONE'S HEALTH , ESPECIALLY FOR THE CURE OF TUBERCULOSIS). A MILE OF RAILROAD TRACK WAS COMPLETED IN 24 HOURS IN ORDER

TO BRING THE PRESIDENTS PRIVATE CAR INTO LOON LAKE. MRS. CHASE PROVIDED SPECIAL CARE AND ATTENTION FOR PRESIDENT AND MRS. HARRISON WHILE THEY STAYED AT SUNSET, A CAMP THAT CAME TO BE KNOWN AS THE PRESIDENT'S COTTAGE. THIS VISIT WAS FOLLOWED A FEW YEARS LATER BY ONE FROM PRESIDENT GROVER CLEVELAND DURING HIS SECOND TERM AND BY VISITS FROM PRESIDENT WILLIAM MCKINLEY, WHO ALSO CAME TO SPEND PART OF THE SUMMER HERE AT LOON LAKE. MANY OTHER FAMOUS OR IMPORTANT PEOPLE INCLUDED: SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, IRVING BERLIN, THE GERSHWIN BROTHERS, THEODORE DRIESER AMONG THE LITERARY TYPES OF THE EARLY YEARS. VANDERBILTS, WHITNEYS, ROTHCHILDS, ROCKEFELLARS, GÜGGENHEIMS, FARGOS ARE AMONG THE MANY WHO VIED FOR PLACES AT MRS. CHASES TABLES. THE HOTEL REGISTERS, WHICH ARE AT THE THE ADK MUSEUM IN BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE MAKE INTERESTING READING. DIAMONDS AND FURS WERE REGULAR GEAR AT THESE DINNERS WHICH WERE SERVED BY BLACK WAITERS IN LIVERY. THOSE WERE TRULY THE HEYDAYS OF THE ADKS. (FOR MORE ON THAT BE SURE TO READ CHAPTER 4 IN THE BOOK OF THAT NAME BY MAITLAND DESORMO.)

AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL PERIOD ,THE LOON LAKE HOUSE CONTINUED TO THRIVE AND GROW WITH NEW AND IMPROVED BUILDINGS BEING ADDED AND UPGRADED CONSTANTLY. EVEN AFTER FERD'S DEATH IN 1916 MRS. CHASE CONTINUED TO ADD TO HER EMPIRE. SHE HAD BEEN RUNNING THE HOTEL HERSELF FOR SOME TIME. MRS. CHASE WAS A COLORFUL CHARACTER: IRONWILLED, TIRELESS, DETAIL ORIENTED, A LOYAL EMPLOYER AND PHILANTHROPIST, SHE HELPED PUT MANY LOCAL, YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH COLLEGE. SHE ADORED ANIMALS, ALMOST LOVING THEM MORE THAN PEOPLE. SHE HAD A FAVORITE PARROT NAMED DREXIE THAT USED TO TERRORIZE THE STAFF. SHE WORE BLACK DRESSES AND A RED WIG. SHE DESERVES A BIOGRAPHY. ALSO IN 1916, SHE ACQUIRED THE NEARBY CAMP BUILT BY WILLIAM ZIEGLER (LATER KNOWN AS 7 KEYS LODGE) WHICH HAD REPORTEDLY COST \$300.000. AND ADDED IT TO THE HOTEL. THAT YEAR SHE ALSO BOUGHT BACK HALF OF FERD'S INTEREST IN THE HOTEL FROM A YOUNG MAN WHOM FERD HAD LEFT IT TO IN HIS WILL. (THERE'S AN INTERESTING STORY IN THAT SOMEWHERE.)

IT WAS THE STOCK MARKET CRASH OF 1929 THAT STARTED THE DOWNWARD SLOPE FOR LOON LAKE HOUSE. THE MRS. WAS CAUGHT LAND RICH AND CASH POOR. (IN HER LATER YEARS THAT SAME YOUNG MAN, C.P. STEVENS, HAD BEEN GIVING HER FINANCIAL ADVICE, NOT ALL OF IT SOUND.) THE HOTEL WENT INTO RECEIVERSHIP AND MARY HAD TO RELINQUISH CONTROL. SHE WAS ALLOWED TO STAY AT THE HOTEL, BUT SHE BECAME ILL AND DIED TWO YEARS LATER. IT WAS A SAD DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE HOTEL.

THERE WERE OTHER REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF BUSINESS. CHANGE IN LIFESTYLE, LARGELY THE RESULT OF THE POPULARITY OF THE AUTOMOBILE, CONTRIBUTED. WHICH MEANT THAT PEOPLE NO LONGER CAME TO SPEND THE WHOLE SUMMER IN ONE PLACE. THE HOTEL WENT THROUGH A SERIES OF MANAGERS. IT CLOSED DURING WWII, AND REOPENED WITH LIMITED SUCCESS. MANY GUESTS, ENTERTAINERS, GOLF PROS, AND OTHERS STILL CAME UP FROM NYC. THE LOON LAKE SYNGOGUE WAS FOUNDED IN 1950.

AN ACCIDENTAL FIRE IN SEPTEMBER 1956 DESTROYED THE MAIN HOUSE IN A MATTER OF HOURS. THERE WAS NO LOSS OF LIFE, BUT THE LIFE OF THE HOTEL CONTINUED TO GO UP IN FLAMES. IN 1957 AND 1958 THE HOTEL FIXTURES AND MANY OF THE COTTAGES WERE AUCTIONED AND BOUGHT BY INDIVIDUALS FROM CANADA AND THE US. SOME HOTEL ACTIVITY CONTINUED, ALTHOUGH THE DECLINE INTO OBSCURITY CONTINUED, AS DID THE FIRES. IN ONLY A FEW SHORT YEARS THE PLACE WAS VIRTUALLY FORGOTTEN EXCEPT BY A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE. (INCIDENTALLY THE MOST RECENT BUILDING WAS LOST TO FIRE ONLY THREE YEARS AGO. A CHARMING AND ALMOST COMPLETELY ORIGINAL CONDITION COTTAGE, PINE GIRL. BRINGING THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SURVIVING BUILDINGS DOWN TO ABOUT 45.)

ANTHONY D'ELIA ARRIVED ON THE SCENE IN THE 1970'S AND ATTEMPTED TO REVITALIZE THE AREA. HE IS KNOWN FOR HIS ANTI APA STANCE AND HIS BOOK, "ADK REBELLION". ALTHOUGH D'ELIA PLANNED TO DEVELOP LOON LAKE ESTATES WITH HUNDREDS OF HOUSES, HE FAILED TO DO IT. THE END RESULT WAS A KIND OF REBIRTH OF INTEREST IN THE PLACE. IN THE 1980'S, THIS MANIFESTED ITSELF IN WIDESPREAD RENOVATION AND CARE TAKING OF PROPERTIES AND SOME NEW OWNERS.

THE 1990'S SAW A CONTINUATION OF THIS TREND AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE LOON LAKE HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION- A GROUP THAT IS CURRENTLY ATTEMPTING TO GRAPPLE WITH THE PRESENT DAY PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPMENT, WATER QUALITY ETC. (TODAY THE GOLF COURSE IS UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT) THE ONLY HOTEL ACTIVITY IS THE (INN AT LOON LAKE) A B+B. THE LAKE, ITSELF, IS IN GOOD HEALTH. EVEN THOUGH ALL OF THE MAIN, IMPORTANT BUILDINGS THAT WERE A PART OF THE HOTEL ARE GONE, MOST OF THE ORIGINAL BUILDINGS THAT ARE LEFT HAVE BEEN PRESERVED WITH VARYING DEGREES OF RESPECT TO THE PRESERVATION OF THEIR ORIGINAL DESIGNS. ALSO OF INTEREST, IS THE RECENT ESTABLISHMENT OF APRILL, THE ASSOCIATION FOR PRESERVATION AND REVITALIZATION IN LOON LAKE, A GROUP THAT IS DEDICATED TO PROMOTING, PRESERVING AND PROTECTING THE ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE AND HISTORY OF LOON LAKE. APRILL HELD THE FIRST LOON LAKE HISTORY DAY IN JULY 2000.

2005
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FOR MORE DETAILS OF LOON LAKE HISTORY REFER TO:
THE LOON LAKE 2000 TIMELINE, ALSO BY KARL BECKWITH SMITH III.

THIS IS A WORK IN PROGRESS AND ANY CORRECTIONS OR COMMENTS ARE WELCOME.

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