

# Route



By Wendy Ungar

**T**here it is; I see it!" Helen proclaimed. "Finally, the turn-off to Route 99."

My friend Helen and I had been driving for close to three hours on our way from Ottawa, looking for the short-cut to our summer haven of Loon Lake, where our families had cottages. A left turn off Route 30 and in a few miles we would be on Route 99, the road that would lead us through the "back door" wilderness and directly into the hamlet of Loon Lake.

It was about 6 p.m. We had been enjoying an easy drive; it was a beautiful, sunny, early summer day. The sun still shone strongly through the tops of the tall white pines.

"Slow down, Wendy!" Helen cried. "You'll miss the turn!"

I saw the right turn for 99, but was surprised at its sharpness and how easily I might have driven past it. The car swerved as I veered suddenly. We barely stayed on the road.

"That's funny; it doesn't look like it should be such a sharp turn," I commented, attempting to understand how I could misjudge it.

We looked ahead. A short, steep hill climbed up and curved off to the left. Near the top of the hill stood the Route 99 sign, slightly tilted, its twin 9's carving out two gleaming eyes that beckoned us forward. That first glimpse of number 99 at the start of a new summer season has always made me glad. Ninety-nine—the keeper of the forest, the gateway to the wonder and beauty that lies ahead.

Just beyond stood another sign, "ROUGH ROAD NEXT 12 MILES," and then another, "NOT A GOOD ROUTE TO NYS 3." Helen and I looked at each other and laughed, amused that the state Department of Transportation would actually make an official road sign that said "not a good route" to someplace.

"Why not just hang a skull and crossbones?" I joked.

Helen hadn't wanted to take this part of 99. Earlier in the day she had suggested that we go the

long way around, without explaining her reticence. But I told her, "No way. That'll add forty-five minutes to the drive. Besides, this road is so picturesque."

We started forward on Route 99. The road quickly narrowed to one lane—one very rough lane. Although only minutes ago the sun had been shining brightly in a cloudless sky, now the light appeared to wane. The trees closed in on us, draping a canopy of branches above our heads.

"Can you believe how dark it's become? I'm going to have to use my headlights!" I said to Helen. The road veered sharply right and left, endlessly twisting around corners while climbing and descending short, steep grades. Whoever posted the speed limit at 35 miles per hour had a macabre sense of humor, I thought to myself. With the angle of the turns on this winding road, one would have to slow down to 15 miles an hour just to keep from going off the side. Anyone daring to "speed" along at 35 would find a branch crashing through the windshield in no time.

It grew darker.

"Is that fog?" Helen asked with disbelief, staring at the mist illuminated by the headlights.

"It looks like it, doesn't it? How can that be?" I asked.

Helen squirmed a bit in her seat. "Don't worry, Helen," I said. "I've driven this road lots of times and have never had a problem."

"Well, I don't like it. In my family, we call it 'Dead Man's Drive,'" she said somberly, without offering to elaborate.

I looked at her with amusement. "Don't be silly!" I said, trying to hide a growing sense of foreboding.

We continued on. It was dark except for the gleam of headlights pointing the way from one sharp bend to another. All we could hear was the wear of the tires against the rough asphalt.

"Why don't you turn on the radio?" I said, hoping that some music or chatter might provide a soothing distraction.

She switched it on. Static. She moved it up and down the dial. Nothing but static.

"It's no good," she said. "You can't get any stations here. The trees and mountains block everything." Just as she was about to switch off the radio, there

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*In a former life, Wendy Ungar was a regular summer resident of Loon Lake House. In her present life, she is a member of the North Woods Chapter of ADK and has never missed a summer in Loon Lake.*

was a loud crackle and a voice started coming through, muffled and strangely intoned. After some playing with the dial, Helen was able to get a clearer signal.

“... And we now continue with Orson Welles starring in ‘The Thin Man, the Continuing Adventures of Harry Lime,’” spoke the radio announcer.

“Oh. It’s one of those old-fashioned radio plays,” I said. “That should keep us amused.” We listened to the drama; it was a murder mystery.

The road wound on; the fog thickened. It was getting harder to see. The radio play was interrupted for a commercial. A funny voice that sounded more like Bugs Bunny than a radio announcer said, “Just arrived on the lot . . . brand new 1949 Town Cars! See them here!”

How strange, we thought. Maybe the old commercials were taped along with the radio show. Then we heard another commercial, a jingle singing the praises of “Clarke’s New Miraculous Salve—the perfect treatment for inveterate ulcers, bad legs and sore heads, patented 1942!”

We were amused but bewildered by the retro advertising. Then suddenly the play stopped and the news came on: “Good evening. It is six p.m., June 27, 1931.”

“What?? 1931?” Helen and I looked at each other, completely puzzled.

“What is going on?” I said aloud. “The radio play was from the 1950s, the commercials from the ‘40s and the news from the ‘30s? This is so bizarre!”

At that moment the radio went dead. Silence. Not even a crackle or whisper of static. Just silence. I slowed down to 10 miles an hour. “This is too eerie,” Helen said. “When are we going to get there?” she asked anxiously.

“It can’t be much longer.” I tried to reassure her as I felt my own anxiety growing stronger. “We should be arriving soon at those tattered old abutments on either side of the road. You know, where the railroad tracks used to pass overhead in the olden days, carrying rich folks to their summer retreat at the Loon Lake hotel.”

“Oh yeah,” said Helen. “We have one of the original 1889 Chateaugay Railroad tickets for the trip from New York City to Loon Lake.”

Our imaginations began to wander to visions of the old railway and the posh private cars loaded with steamer trunks and personal servants. Every day during the summer seasons following the turn of the century, trainloads of vacationers would arrive at Loon Lake Station, where the local stage-coach would meet them and carry them along Route 99, the historic turnpike from Port Kent to Hopkinton. The stage would drop them off at Loon Lake House, one of the earliest and greatest of the Adirondack hotels. Under the proprietorship of Mary Chase and her ne’er-do-well husband, Ferd, Loon Lake House began in 1879 as a cabin for hunters and anglers on 10 acres of land on a small bluff overlooking Loon Lake. By the 1920s, it had grown into a resort spanning 4,000 acres and included 53 cottages that housed 800 guests, among them U.S.

presidents, film stars and the Manhattan elite.

Our daydreaming was suddenly interrupted by a faint noise off in the distance.

“Did you hear that?” I asked Helen.

“It sounded like,” Helen began— “A TRAIN WHISTLE!” we both exclaimed at the same moment.

I stopped the car. We held our breath. Sure enough, in the distance ahead of us a long, mournful train whistle blew in the darkness.

“But there are no trains around Loon Lake,” I protested. “There haven’t been for 50 years!”

“There are no trains anywhere near this part of the Adirondacks,” Helen added. Now we were completely baffled. Our apprehension grew.

“Well, we have to press on,” I said. “Maybe we’ll find an explanation when we get to Loon Lake.” I started the car and we moved slowly forward, following the unending curves that brought us closer to our destination. I concentrated hard to stay on the road while I increased my speed to 30 miles per hour. We turned a corner and about 50 feet ahead in the distance we saw what appeared to be walls on both sides of the road—the railroad abutments.

We drew closer. The abutments were bleached bright white. The familiar graffiti that had for the last few decades adorned the crumbling walls were not there. In place of cracked plaster and decaying concrete were tall, smooth walls. The structure looked as if it had been built yesterday.

As we got close enough to drive between the abutments, we noticed an unfamiliar silhouette in the twilight above.

“Oh, my God!” shouted Helen as she pointed straight ahead above the car. “Look at that!” Spanning the road from one abutment to the other was a wooden trestle holding a single track of railroad.

“Where did that come from?” Helen asked in utter amazement.

I looked at Helen. “A better question,” I began in a slow whisper, “is where are we going?”

We had to have an answer. We passed beneath the trestle and drove on. Soon the trees abated briefly on either side of the road. Ahead on the left was the old ticket office. It gleamed like a white ghost in the approaching nightfall.

We drove by slowly. As we passed, we noticed lights inside. Smoke streamed from the chimney.

“Does anyone live in that old ticket office now?” Helen asked.

“Not that I know of,” I replied, afraid to tell her that last summer I had heard that the ticket office was slated to be torn down since it was derelict and considered a fire hazard.

Mixed with trepidation and relief, we soon arrived at the outskirts of Loon Lake. A few familiar-looking camps dotted its shoreline. Part of the old hotel complex, they had long since been purchased by private owners who had converted them into summer homes, just as our families had done in the mid-’50s when the hotel properties were sold off.

By now darkness had fallen and a full moon had risen, casting a grey glow over the shadowy waters of the lake. The road meandered along, close to the



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shore, high above the water.

We came around a turn and the headlights illuminated a strange moving shape in the distance ahead. The large object appeared to be moving slowly forward in the same direction as we were.

We caught up to it. The high beams cast spotlights on two white wagon wheels and the back of a wooden stagecoach. We were aghast. I had never seen a real stagecoach, except in museums. The wheels were huge—higher than the car.

The road was two lanes wide now, for we were close to town. I pulled over to the left to pass. I couldn't see any people on top of or inside the coach, but a dim light came from within. I had to stay over on the left-hand side of the road long enough to pass the team of six horses that steadily climbed Route 99, bringing their load ever closer to our common destination.

By now Helen and I were completely mystified. Everything around us had seemingly reverted to

how it had been a century ago. Yet the trees, the mountains, the lake, and most importantly, Route 99, lit up by the bright moonlight, looked exactly the same.

We reached the sharp left turn that demarcates the center of the hamlet of Loon Lake. I turned right into the lane where the cottages belonging to our families stood on the corner. There they were, the same as always, but looking a little brighter and fresher than usual.

I parked the car by the side of the road and we got out. Both of our houses were completely dark. We looked at each other, not moving.

"Why don't we explore a little?" I suggested to Helen, unwilling to admit my fear of entering our dark house alone, not knowing what 100-year-old surprises might be waiting to greet me.

"Good idea, Wendy. Let's check out The Circle," Helen said.

The Circle is a wild and overgrown patch of brambles just down the hill from our houses. It was once a circular garden standing at the entranceway to the main building of the old hotel. After the fire that destroyed the structure in the 1950s, before we were born, little was done to keep up the appearance of the grounds. As children we used to play on a large stone statue of an Indian with a broken headdress that adorned the circle, in the days when the grass was still being mowed.

We ran down the hill and stopped suddenly in our tracks. The full circumference of The Circle gleamed in the moonlight. It had been plowed save for a few pine saplings that stood proudly, guarding the glimmering Indian chief, his stone feather headdress intact.

Helen and I approached. We stepped onto The Circle and gazed up. There, towering over our heads, was a massive four-story building topped by a large square cupola. Tall Greek columns surrounded the building, reaching up to the protruding third story. Loon Lake House stood before us in all its splendor and glory.

We could see some light coming from inside, but there was not a single sound. We could hear no voices talking or birds chirping. Not even the buzzing of the expected swarm of insects could be heard. Only the beating of our hearts and the rapid panting of our tremulous breaths broke the still night. Here we were in Loon Lake, and yet it wasn't the Loon Lake that we knew. It was as if all the ghosts dwelling in the houses of the people whose lives had created and characterized this place for so many years were suddenly given new life to return once again to their paradise—to our common paradise. If there was an answer to this mystery, I knew where we would find it.

"Follow me," I said to Helen as I strode across The Circle. We walked past the Indian, who stared knowingly into the night just as he had in our childhood. We followed a road down to the bottom of a hill then turned left onto a small boardwalk that ended on a large stone and concrete patio. We descended a few wooden steps onto a sandy beach.

In front of us, the waters of Loon Lake sparkled in the magical night. The moon cast a strong beam straight across the calm lake to the spot where we stood. It was still warm; not a breath of wind rustled the trees. I knew that the answer must lie here, in these waters.

Helen and I kicked off our shoes. Still in shorts and T-shirts, we plunged into the cold, clear water.

As my head hit the surface I felt embraced by the spirit of this place and knew that I was home. The water poured over me, washing away all connections to the past and the future. Now it was only this instant that lived.

I stood up in the lake, my feet barely touching the soft sandy surface below. I gazed across. The moonlight shone in my eyes. I became aware of the hushed sound of the breeze that blew in the whispering pines. I heard crickets jeering invisibly on the beach and low bellows of bullfrogs calling to one another. The music of the night filled my ears, and yet something was wrong; a piece was missing. I closed my eyes and waited.

Out of the wet darkness it began, a sound from far, far away on the other end of the lake. It started as a faint tremolo and then gave way to a long mournful cry, the signature song of the pair of loons that gave this place its name. The loons had been the first to call this place home, long before humans came and erected their summer temples. And long will they sing, years after the temples have burned and the trees have erased all evidence of them.

I turned around and faced the beach. I looked at the crumbling stone retaining wall and the small green saplings breaking into life between the widening cement cracks. Clumps of grass dotted the sand and daisies grew wild around the edges.

Helen and I climbed out of the water. To keep from shivering we ran barefoot up the hill back toward The Circle. It was exactly what we expected—a mass of tangled raspberry bushes, overgrown and encroaching on the road. A young birch and aspen forest swayed in the night breeze where only decades ago the monolithic Loon Lake House had stood.

We ran up the hill toward where the car was parked. Mosquitoes were swarming, hungry for an evening meal. Bats flickered by us. We reached the car, relieved, not speaking a word. Before pulling our gear out of the trunk we stopped and looked up. There on the corner of the road it stood, tall and just a little bit slanted. It gazed down at us, eyes twinkling, grinning its evil smile as it waited for the next unwitting soul to brave its mysterious path—Route 99.

*Anyone desiring to travel Route 99 will find it difficult to locate. In 1995 the New York State Department of Transportation decided to remove all the state road signs, bequeathing perpetual maintenance to Franklin County. Although the road remains, the name of 99 will live on only in the memory it evokes of stagecoaches, train whistles and hotel guests frolicking on the shores of Loon Lake.*

**ADK**

Adirondack