

The History of the Development of Highland Lake - Parts One through Five

by Dick Labich

This is the first of a five-part series of articles on the development of Highland Lake taken from historical records supplied by Milly Hudak of the Winchester Historical Society. This article concludes with the second attempt to secure a bridge across the first narrows in 1930.

The history of the development of Highland Lake as a pleasure resort is a long and interesting story. The aboriginal red man was attracted to its waters by the good fishing which he found there. To the early settlers of distant towns, its wooded slopes and banks soon became known as good hunting grounds for bear and other wild animals. David Austin, the first permanent settler on Lake Street, was attracted to the lake by the promise of unlimited water supply for his grist mill. Later, as the villages of Winsted and West Winsted grew and finally merged into one Borough of Winsted, the water from the lake, which had furnished such a large part of the power for turning the mill wheels, was called into the new service of providing fire protection and household water supply.

Caleb P. Newman, Winsted's first Chief-of-Police, or "Bailiff" as he was called, was a source of much information regarding the early history of Winsted, and to him we are indebted for the statement that in 1833, when Rockwell and Hinsdale were leading merchants and manufacturers, they used thousands of bushels of charcoal. For this purpose, they had wood cut on the shores of "Long Pond" and transported it on flat boats or scows built for the purpose. These boats were 30 by 15 feet in size and could carry from ten to fifteen cords of wood. Once, on a Fourth of July, about 40 persons were transported to Hatch's Landing at the south end of the lake, for a picnic. Mr. Newman recalled the first round bottom boat was put on the Lake in 1858 by William Seymour.

It is therefore a mistake to think there was no thought of any use of the lake for recreation and pleasure during those early days, or there were none who had visions of its use for other than utilitarian purposes. Commenting on the fact the hotels of the town were crowded with summer boarders during the hot weather, Thomas Clarke, the first editor of the Winsted Herald, suggested a summer hotel at the lake might very well become a popular and paying project and prophesied that were such a building put up, the town would then proceed to build a road around the lake. In June of the same year, 1858, he wrote an editorial proposing a community picnic on the shore of the lake, at which time a discussion should be held on the subject of giving a name to the lake which might be more appropriate than Long Pond, the name by which the lake was then generally known. He also thought it would be a good plan to make such a meeting an annual event, to be celebrated as a community project. But years passed by with no progress in the matter, although an occasional newspaper reference to a boulevard shows that some people still dreamed of such a possibility.

In his Annals of Winchester, John Boyd pays a great honor to Eliphaz Alvord, the Town's first Town Clerk, for the splendid way in which the town records were kept by him. A grandson of Eliphaz Alvord, Mr. Coridon Alvord, a book publisher in New York City, used to visit in Winsted frequently and in the October 30, 1874 number (edition) of the Herald appeared a most remarkable letter from him regarding a boulevard. Not being a resident nor a property owner, he disclaimed any financial interest in such a project but thought if anyone would do as he had done, climb up to the top of Pratt Hill and look down on the lake from that elevation, they would feel we had a wonderful beauty spot here which we were in no wise (ways) appreciating. He said, if that view failed to impress one, he would advise taking another look at the lake from Gobble Hill. "The lake is the thing," said he, "no shore resort on Long Island Sound could compare with it." Continuing, he proposed the formation of a \$60,000 corporation; the purchase of all the land about the lake in a strip a half-mile wide; and the building of a boulevard driveway 100 feet wide, "just like Central Park." A competent landscape engineer should be secured to lie out and supervise the work, and orchards and vineyards should be planted to provide fruit for the cottagers who would flock to this splendid resort. Mr. Alvord died in Hartford a few weeks after this most suggestive article. We can have little doubt the influence of this man's idea had no small part in the formation of a public sentiment of a lakeside drive.

This is the second of a series of articles on the development of Highland Lake taken from historical records supplied by Milly Hudak of the Winchester Historical Society. This article relates the presence of the first boats on the lake and the completion of the boulevard.

The first attempt to run a pleasure boat on the lake was made by Mr. Harlow Spenser, a veteran balloonist. His boat, the "Lady of the Lake," made round trips on Thursdays and Saturdays for 25 cents but was sold and removed in 1862.

A little propeller (*driven*) boat called "Aetna" with a seating capacity of fifteen was brought here from New Britain in 1876 and, under the supervision of Captain J.H.O. Batchelder, did passenger service on the lake that summer but was evidently not sufficiently patronized as it was sold to Springfield parties the next spring.

In 1881 the Howe Brothers had a passenger boat on the lake known as the "Iron Clad," and on at least one occasion, the Union Cornet Band gave a concert from this boat. The propeller was worked by hand power through a curious device, and, unlike the various other passenger boats, this one continued in use for more than fifteen years.

The next steamer to appear on the lake was the "Tunxis," which made trips to Cold Spring in second bay in 1881. An amusing story is told regarding this boat. A stranger appeared at the lake one day, took a ride on the steamer, and appeared greatly pleased with it. After some discussion as to the price, he bought the boat on the written guarantee the money would be refunded if after running it one

day the purchaser was not satisfied. The day was fine and the business was rushing all day long but after the last trip the new owner declared himself dissatisfied and demanded his money back. Although rather mystified, the original owner kept his word and bought back his boat, the stranger leaving quit hastily before the proprietor realized how he had been cleverly done out of the proceeds of a busy day's business.

On July 24, 1884, Mr. Harvey Wakefield, a retired farmer from Colebrook living at 163 Main Street, died leaving quite a sizeable estate. Mr. Henry Gay, who had been Mr. Wakefield's financial adviser and knew he had put off making his will, although he had discussed the matter with Mr. Gay several times. Upon hearing of his serious illness, Mr. Gay went to see Mr. Wakefield and induced him to complete the document. By the terms of this will, after gifts of \$1,000 each to various churches, the Borough of Winsted and the First District School, together with a few smaller bequests, the balance of his property was given to the Town of Winchester.

At the town meeting in October of that year, it was voted by a majority of five to one to use this money in the building of a lakeside drive to be known as the Wakefield Boulevard. Among those who opposed this proposition wishing to apply the money toward the reduction of the Town's indebtedness (*things haven't changed in all these years*), were such influential citizens as B.B. Rockwell, Wm. L. Gilbert, S.B. Horne and Wm. C. Phelps. Mr. Wakefield, who was a widower at the time of his death, had a housekeeper by the name of Mrs. Brazee who was reported to have been greatly disappointed in the way he left his money. She immediately put in a claim for \$4,000 for services. The administrators asked the court to appoint commissioners to judge all claims; Mr. Brazee was awarded \$3.50 and Mrs. Brazee \$321. Four days after the rendering of this decision Mrs. Brazee was found dead in her room having committed suicide by cutting her throat with a razor.

By the fourth of July 1886, the Boulevard had been completed on the west side of the lake as far as Cold Spring in Second Bay. A few weeks later, rights of way had been secured as far as Sucker Brook, and blasting was begun through the ledges between Cold Springs and Second Narrows. It was reported the receipts from the Wakefield legacy had totaled \$11,855.25, of which \$9,600 remained after paying for the first section of the drive.

Real estate operations began to take place along the shores of the lake. Wm. L. Camp secured a tract of land in third bay from Fittus Stack and offered building lots for sale. He was the first to erect a cottage on the Boulevard and take his family there for a vacation.

Work of blasting through the ledge on the west shore by second bay was delayed by the necessity of hauling the dynamite by teams from Worcester, Mass. While in charge of this work, Mr. Charles Carey was so severely injured by the premature explosion of a stick of dynamite, which he was holding in his hand, that he died soon after being removed from the home of his sister Mrs. Verschoyle. On the completion of the second section of the drive, extending the road to Sucker Brook, a bronze tablet was placed on the face of the ledge in second bay bearing the following inscription.

"A tribute of remembrance to Harvey Wakefield, a citizen of Winchester, in grateful recognition of his bequest to the Town, which has enabled it to provide for public use of this Lakeside Drive."

This tablet can still be seen in second bay and is adjacent to the bronze tablet erected on August 13, 2009 by the HLWA in recognition of the preservation of the last open space land on the lake, a project which took six years from the time of preliminary discussions to the erection of the tablet.

"It reads: Purchased by donations to the Highland Lake Watershed Association and through the State of Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program, this 7.9 acre parcel was deeded to the Winchester Land Trust on June 13, 2007."

This is the third of a series of articles on the development of Highland Lake taken from historical records supplied by Milly Hudak of the Winchester Historical Society. This article relates the controversy surrounding the naming of the lake as well as the organization of the Highland Lake Transportation Company.

The Highland Lake Transportation Company was organized in May 1889 by a group of men subscribing \$100 each, with a Mr. Bockee as manager and owner of five shares of stock. Hatch's Landing at the south end of the lake was leased and fitted up as an amusement park and picnic grounds.

One of the first Winsted men to appreciate the attractions of the Boulevard was C. K. Hunt. He built a summer home on "The Knoll" near Sucker Brook. He is given credit for securing the popular adoption of the name Highland Lake in preference to Long Pond or Long Lake, the names by which the body of water had been previously known.

In 1893 an effort was made by Rev. Arthur Goodenough to have the name changed to "Lake Winchester." The matter was brought up in a town meeting that fall, and as one person described the debate, "Enough eloquence was spilled to rival the U.S. Senate's discussion of the Silver Bill." Mr. Goodenough had also suggested calling Little Pond "Gilbert Tunnel Lake," but the voters turned down the idea, and Highland Lake and Crystal Lake continue to designate these bodies of water.

With the attempt of Rev. A. H. Goodenough and others to have the name Lake Winchester officially adopted having failed, the matter was again brought up in 1897 by Burton E. Moore, who circulated a petition asking the (State) Legislature to officially designate the name of the lake as "Lake Winchester." As the name of Highland Lake had by this time come into universal use in travel guides and in U.S. Survey and other maps, there was a storm of protest against the change, so when the matter came up for a hearing before a legislative committee, no one appeared in support of the bill, and the matter was dropped. Mr. Moore, however, was a very persistent man. What he could not secure in one way, he usually got in another, and when in later years he was instrumental in the building of a reservoir in Winchester for the Torrington Electric Light Co., he named it Lake Winchester.

By common consent, the name of Highland Lake had by this time come into quite general use, supplanting the old names of Long Lake or Long Pond, although the new name was most strenuously objected to by some who wanted a name more descriptively appropriate.

In February 1889, Lyman W. Case, owner and developer of Highland Park, in a letter to the Winsted Herald, objected strongly to the name Highland Lake as being too tame. He suggested an Indian name like Massacoe or Inoncktacut, which he declared to have been the Indian (name) for Connecticut.

During the fall of 1890, work was commenced on the east side drive of the Boulevard, commencing at East Lake Street. That summer, The (Highland Lake) Transportation Company was running two steamers on an hourly schedule on the lake, Woodland Avenue (an extension of Hubbard Street) was opened as an approach to the Boulevard from Boyd Street, and \$4,000 was subscribed for the building of a trotting park and fairgrounds at Sucker Brook.

During the winter of 1890-1891, a racecourse was laid out on the ice of the first bay of the lake, and several very exciting (horse) races were held there - but as Highland Lake water was still used for domestic consumption, the Water Commissioner was finally prevailed upon to put a stop to this sport. Small boys pointed out the inconsistency of forbidding them to swim in summer and allowing horse racing in the winter.

Several of the finest locations on the shore had already been secured and built upon. C. K. Hunt at the Knoll, Lester Strong at Strong's Island, and M. G. Wheeler at Point Comfort were among them. The popularity of the lake as a summer resort was constantly increasing, and with the final completion of the Boulevard, out-of-town people vied with residents of Winsted and Torrington in securing the choicest of the available building sites.

For several years Agricultural Fairs were held at the fairgrounds near Sucker Brook. Horse races and bicycle races were frequently held there, but, like its predecessor, the Carey racetrack on Pratt Hill and the Green Woods Park track near Elm Street, the Lakeside Trotting Park was not long lived.

The two steamers of the Highland Lake Transportation Company were removed from the lake in 1891. Captain George W. Lee, owner of Apothecaries Hill drug store, purchased the steamer "Carrie," which did most efficient service on the lake for many years. On July 4, Mr. Lee carried more than 1,000 passengers on this boat.

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the development of Highland Lake taken from historical records supplied by Milly Hudak of the Winchester Historical Society. This article relates the controversy between the owners of lakeside homes and the manufacturers.

The extension of Winsted's water system to Crystal Lake in 1895 removed the last obstruction to the development of the lake as a pleasure resort. Fishing and bathing could now be freely indulged in, and its popularity as a pleasant place for a day's outing or for the building of a summer house continued to grow with the years.

The maintaining of a high level of water in the lake during dry seasons is still a problem. Those who believed the building of Rugg Brook Reservoir would solve this problem have been somewhat disappointed.

The controversy has shifted now from one between the Water Board and the manufacturers, to one between the owners of lakeside homes and the manufacturers, as to which has the greater claim on the water. Although the water reaches low levels occasionally, it never gets as low as it is recorded to have done in 1810 when farmers wishing to cross the lake drove their carts across second narrows through the shallow water.

One of the problems which confronted those interested in promoting the public use of the lake as a pleasure resort was the difficulty of reaching the place. One must either drive or walk up a steep hill. At one time the officials of the P.R. & N.E.R.R. considered running a spur from near the Empire Knife Shop up to the north end of the lake. The steepness of the grade probably discouraged them, and it was not until the building of the Winsted-Torrington Trolley road with its extension up the mountain to third bay that easy access was opened to the lake, and the era of picnic outings became popular.

In 1903 Rev. N. M. Calhoun and other interested summer residents started a movement for incorporating the "Highland Lake Improvement Association." The object of this association was to make the district about the lake a sort of independent, self-governing body with power to regulate all civic matters. The project met violent opposition and a special town meeting was called where an attempt was made to appoint a committee to oppose the granting of the charter by the (State) General Assembly. The application for a charter was finally withdrawn.

The Highland Lake Hotel was opened July 1, 1900. It was conducted by A. M. Grant and was located on the west shore of third bay, a few rods south of Second Narrows. The hotel was fairly successful for a number of years but was sold in 1919 to Mrs. M. Fjelde. There was some talk in 1912 of building a new and more commodious hotel at the lake. Hatch's Landing, Highland Lake Farm and other sites were recommended as suitable locations. In an attempt to bring the project to a successful culmination, Mr. Rufus Eggleston, in October 1912, offered to make a present of 7½ acres of land with a lake frontage of 50 feet to any person or company who would construct such a hotel. His generous offer was not accepted, there being quite a strong objection among owners of private cottages to anything which would further lend to the commercializing of the lake.

The constantly increasing number of cottages on the banks of the lake was more and more emphasizing the fact the public was rapidly being deprived access to its waters. With the exception of the park maintained by the Trolley Company on the east shore of third bay, there was scarcely any place open to the public for recreational purposes. A committee appointed in 1913 to see if a public park could be created on the west shore of first bay, where the Highland Lake Farm was located, reported the location was not at all desirable. About three years later a number of benches were placed at the north end of the lake for public use.

Again, in 1919, there was talk of securing all the land on West Lake Street, between the spillways and Wakefield Boulevard, removing the houses and, by adding sand to the shores, providing public bathing beaches. The Selectmen appointed a committee consisting of Mrs. Ruth C. H. Munsill, E. M. Phelps, A. O. Lamb, Benjamin Epstein, and Cornelius Hubbard, to investigate this or any other suitable location for such a public park, with the thought it might become a permanent memorial to the soldiers who served in the World War. This committee reported the various properties of West Lake Street could be secured for \$25,000 but were inclined to favor the purchase of land known as "Sandy Cove" on the east bank of first bay, a spot that had been a favorite swimming place since the early days. This land, they reported, could be secured for \$15,000. At the October town meeting in 1919, their report was accepted and "laid on the table."

Following the defeat of this park project, I. E. Manchester, editor of the "Citizen," proposed a substitute plan by which a wall would be built through the north end of the lake, extending from Captain Lewis' place on East Lake Street, to the Newett place on West Lake Street. He proposed to fill in the area enclosed by this wall and make a Memorial Parkway. Just how the spillways and outlet were to be taken care of is not quite clear, but with characteristic energy Mr. Manchester secured the adoption of his plan and an appropriation of \$2,500 for the purpose at a town meeting December 5, 1919. Mr. George G. Girard was interested in the plan and offered to donate all the gravel and stone necessary for filling from his Boyd Street property. About this time, E. Manchester & Sons announced they had secured a rebate of \$212 on a shipment of sugar which they had sold to customers. As they had no records of their sales, they would contribute the rebate money to the parkway fund. However, it developed in March 1920 that landowners refused to sell at the specified price, so the appropriation was never used and no further action was taken in the matter.

This is the fifth and last in a series of articles on the development of Highland Lake taken from historical records supplied by Milly Hudak of the Winchester Historical Society. This article concludes with the second attempt to secure a bridge across the first narrows in 1930.

Summer residents at Highland Lake who were interested in maintaining quiet Sundays at that resort were much annoyed when an announcement was made in July 1921 that the State Police had issued a permit to Samuel Bennet and D.V. O'Connel to conduct Sunday dances at the pavilion. So severe was the criticism, the promoters voluntarily announced no more Sunday dances would be held. Commenting on the episode, Editor R.S. Hulbert of the *Citizen* sagely remarked the present generation would have to make its own rule of conduct.

The Highland Lake Improvement Association was organized in the summer of 1922 and was quite active for some time in procuring needed improvements at the resort. The association was instrumental in securing electric service around the lake.

The lack of any system for specifically locating the cottages on the Boulevard led the Selectmen to appoint a committee in 1926 to make recommendations for solving this difficulty. The committee consisting of Joseph A. Norton, Louis T. Stone and Leroy B. Hurlbut, suggested the simple expedient of placing numbers on the telephone poles, commencing with 100 in First Bay, 200 in Second Bay and 300 in Third Bay. The letter "E" was used as a prefix on the east side and "W" on the west side. The author of this article wrote it in 1940 and went on to report these numerals have practically disappeared and a much more concise method of enumeration would be much appreciated.

Once more the Chamber of Commerce, in a meeting held in February 1926, discussed the matter of a public bathing beach at Highland Lake, but as no feasible method of financing such a project seemed to be available, the matter again lapsed. However, in 1926, Gaetano Lentine built bathing houses and established a park and beach at the west entrance to Wakefield Boulevard.

On August 9, 1929, Hiawatha Lodge, the name given the Highland Lake Hotel after its purchase by the Fjelde family, was completely destroyed by fire, and since that time no summer hotel has existed at the lake. During the time the fire was raging, Loretta, a parrot belonging to Mrs. Burton Moore, which had escaped from its cage, perched in the top of a tree and called loudly "Help, Help!" Many of the guests at the Lodge were temporarily entertained at the "Oaks," Mrs. Moore's home.

In April 1927, Joseph Carey sold a large tract of land (640 acres) bordering on the east shore of Highland Lake to the Highland Lake Development Company. This company opened up the tract for building purposes, built new roads, and was instrumental in inducing many people from all over the country to build summer cottages in that section. In 1940, there were 384 cottages on the shore of Highland Lake.

A second attempt to secure a bridge across the first narrows of Highland Lake was made in 1930, when Mrs. Lydia Adams gave the residue of her estate to assist such an enterprise provided the town made use of the money within 25 years. There was some question to the legality of the 25-year stipulation, but the will was sustained by the court. However, upon the settlement of the estate, it was found there was very little, if any, "residue."