

Gregg Lake in the Thirties and Forties

Mary Chagnon and Janice Mellen

Our family (Mom, Dad and three kids aged 1–3, along with a baby who joined us two summers later), first started summering at Gregg Lake in 1931 when our father, D.A. Maxwell, took over the cottages built by his uncle, Frank Brooks around 1893. With donations and help from friends, Uncle Frank had built a total of six buildings—three cottages with three bedrooms each, a smaller cottage, a small store at the intersection of Brimstone Corner Road and Craig Road and a tonic house (a storage shed where we kept “tonic,” or soda) across the road. We summered in one of these cottages until the war years, when gas rationing made it difficult. Although the cottage burned down from mysterious causes in the fall of 1945, we four kids have many fond memories of those years.

At that time, Mescilbrooks Farm owned the three cottages now occupied by the Scotts, the Kohlers and the Felsmans. We always referred to them as the “compound” or Brown, Red and Yellow Cottages. The Red Cottage, back center, was one of the first cottages to be built on Gregg Pond, as it was known then, but it was built on the other end of the lake and moved over the ice to where it stands today.

(Editor's note: Michael Kohler confirmed the rumor that the Red Cottage was cut in half and moved over the ice, but said no one seems to know exactly where the cottage was originally located. Ben Pratt remembers seeing a photograph of the Johnson cottage being moved across the ice from the other side of the lake, however, and says it wasn't that unusual for buildings to be moved.)

Most cottages on the lake had no water. Some might have had lake water, but that was undrinkable. We had a spring a short distance up Cuddihy Hill. My dad piped it above ground, flowing by gravity, to a faucet between the cottages in the front. Every year we had to drain the spring, clean out the leaves and hook up the pipes for use. Then, drain the pipes again in the fall. We had outhouses, fireplaces for heat, oil lamps for light, and an icebox for refrigeration. Some years we brought a large block of ice from home in Henniker strapped to the running board of our 1929 Frank-

lin, and some years we had our own ice house, stocked with ice cut from the lake.

Our home was on Main Street in Henniker and had no yard for play, so we lived at Gregg Lake. We learned to swim and dive, row a boat, catch and clean fish, catch frogs and eat frog legs, pick blueberries, identify wildflowers and much more. We remember Aunt Myrtie Brooks, owner and operator of Mescilbrooks Farm, delivering milk around the lake. Our brother Robert was her “boy” one summer. Cushman's Bakery truck came weekly. From the bedroom window we enviously watched the girls from Camp Birchmere ride by on horseback. We played lots of board games and cards. Often we went swimming before breakfast in the morning and also took an evening dip.

We learned how to entertain ourselves and how to make believe. The hurricane of '38 caused a great deal of damage to parts of New Hampshire, but the results brought the four of us much fun. Just across the wooden bridge was a forest of birch and pine trees. The hurricane blew down all the birches in one snarled mass. We discovered that they would bounce up and down like riding a horse. We collected

old blankets for saddles and pieces of rope for reins and stirrups and had hours of fun bouncing up and down on them. What a summer of fun that was!

The cottage was surrounded by a rustic fence made from maple saplings. Our brother, at the age of three or four, put his head between two of them and got stuck. Mother couldn't get his head out. No phone or electricity in those days, and she was there alone. She called to two men fishing in a boat in the “Big Hole” just off the cement bridge, and they rowed to shore for the rescue. They sawed one of the saplings in half and presto, Robert was freed.

We knew one of the fishermen, but only by the name “Bigfoot.” He had caught a huge snapping turtle the previous summer and we had been allowed to get out of bed and go down to see it, along with several other large turtles that he made into turtle soup.

In the early thirties there was no road into Boy Scout Camp Sachem;



Pickerel caught by N.F. “Bigfoot” Hildreth, in Gregg Lake in August 1930. Length, 25 inches; weight 4 lbs., 4 oz.

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everything was either carried in or taken by boat in an old Coast Guard Cutter that tied up at the cement bridge. One day we were all at the bridge talking with the Scouts when Robert slipped, rolled down the embankment and ended up between the shore and the boat. Mother went sliding down after him, but one of the Scout leaders reached over and picked him up by his straps and lifted him out of the lake.

Another incident was less hair-raising but more painful. Our Dad had bought us an old bike and the three oldest were all learning to ride. Mary was riding down Gregg Lake Road toward the bridge. She realized she was headed toward the edge of the road and, of course, the edge of the lake, too, but figured the bridge railing would keep her from falling into the lake. It did, but caused a much worse problem. The railing was attached to the bridge with very large nuts and bolts that had not been sawed off at the nut. One of these tore a deep gouge in Mary's leg. When my mother saw what had happened, she sent Robert to ride the bike to the Waumbek for help. One of the Cuddihys (either Anna or Alice) drove up and took her to the doctor in town.

Camp Sachem operated in the summer for many years. Campers arrived on Sundays and left on Saturdays. Parents would drop them off at the lower gate on Cuddihy Hill Road (now Brimstone Corner Road) and they would hike in on a narrow footpath. In those years, that was the only entrance. Logs pressed into mud got you over the low, wet spots. Food, lumber, etc., were delivered to the bridge, where Scouts would meet them in the old Coast Guard Cutter. The meadow dried up except for the narrow channel, and at times the lake was so low the channel was not deep enough for the boat to pass through. When that happened the boat would tie up at a small boat launch known as Sawyer's Gap just before where the town beach is now. We ran about and played all over the dried-up meadow!

The old town beach was across the street from where the Shumway cottage is now. It was a beautiful, natural sandy beach, but very small. The new beach, along with the peninsula, was made in later years, when the lake was no longer being drawn down to flush the brook downtown.

Where the boat launch is now was a water hole where Johnnie Brown pulled in to water his horse every day when going to and from town. One year the water was very low and a large mother horned pout and oodles of black babies got stranded in a small puddle. They would have died with no way for water to enter the puddle, so we took a pail, scooped out mama pout and as many of the babies as we could get and released them into the main lake. Also, the roads were all dirt and in the spring there were lots of red salamanders and tiny black toads hopping all over the road. You couldn't even walk, there were so many. Today, there are few.

We have many, many great memories of our summers at Gregg Lake. ♦

I recently ran across one of her handwritten music manuscripts. It was an arrangement of "Wait 'til the Sun Shines Nelly" for barbershop quartet. I was taken with how perfect the notation was, how easy to read, both notes and words. Even the tedious work of copying out parts was important to her.

A major responsibility for me while on the staff at Tabor Academy in Marion, Massachusetts, in the late 1960s, was directing the boys' glee club—100 boys strong. I decided to do Brahms' Alto Rhapsody with them and invited Isabel to do the solo. She was not a dramatic contralto, which is what the Rhapsody calls for, but she had notes below Middle C and was especially good in the sublime third section which includes the men's—in this case, boys'—chorus.

I was delighted to have her do it. Always the consummate professional despite the permission a small town gives you to be less, she arrived for the dress rehearsal with the piece fully memorized in German. She was also a commanding visual presence. I knew that in performance she would look and sound great. And I wasn't wrong.

Isabel had studied with a real contralto, Doris Doe, who had for fifteen years performed comprimario roles—"She was always somebody's mother," Isabel said—at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Ms. Doe's home, Melody Hill, was in Bennington, and Isabel liked to say you were required to drive past four cemeteries to get to it.

Doris Doe's real name was Jane Doe—what were her parents thinking? This got her into trouble when pulled over by a traffic cop in New York. He thought she was promoting a hoax with a fake driver's license. So she used her middle name ever after—had it legally changed.

Isabel and I remained friends until her death in 2005. Whenever I returned to Antrim we would meet and talk, especially at the James A. Tuttle Library where she was librarian. She maintained an active interest in music, new trends, what was I doing, which composers did I admire, etc. She attended my high school class's 50th reunion in July of 2005, and brought with her a scrapbook of memories specific to our class. It was a trip down memory lane. But that trip, for me, lasted more than fifty years. ♦



Main Street
P.O. Box 265
Antrim, NH 03440

Ofc: 603-588-2130
Fax: 603-588-3036

Paul E. Hardwick, Broker
Cell: 603-491-3928 • Res: 603-588-2724

Lawrie Barr, Sales Agent • 831-4469
Maria Isotti, Sales Agent • 533-5413
E-mail: appleshedrealty@tds.net