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# THE FIGHT TO SAVE A GOLDEN POND

By Mary McGrory September 13, 1987

ANTRIM, N.H. -- When will we ever learn? I asked myself. Every year, a tribal trek brings us to this lovely, plain old town in the Monadnock Mountains. We come with our delusions and matching flimsy summer wear. We forgot how it can rain at the end of summer, sometimes three days in a row, with drenched birches, sweating stone walls and mists settled over the clear waters of Gregg Lake.

We go to bed wearing all our clothes. We huddle around the woodstove -- fireplaces frequently do not function in rented cottages. We tear up weeks of old newspapers to coax the flames. We cadge dry wood from our neighbors.

But this year, our fight for survival was nothing compared to the one going on around us. We got word of it from the bumper stickers on the cars at Wayno's Supermarket. "Save Camp Sachem Forever," they thundered.

Our lake, small but incomparable, set in a ring of blue hills, was in danger. Its north shore, some 350 acres, long occupied by a Boy Scout camp, was about to be sold to developers.

A solitary defender spoke to me of "progress" and "growth," two words seldom heard in Antrim's 210-year history. Consternation ruffled the colony on the lake shores.

Developers at large in our quiet corner of the world? Condos driving out the loons and herons? Sunsets over Mt. Goodhue blotted out by cluster housing?

Did the town feel the same? We have always worn our hearts on our sleeve about Gregg. The year-rounders have been laconic.

A town-hall meeting "to save Gregg Lake" last month put an end to such questions. It wasn't a town meeting, mind you, which has a protocol as rigid as an arms-control negotiation. This was strictly for "information," and it was called by Marc Tenney, a local farmer whose family has owned land in Antrim since the Revolution. Right beside him at center stage, sharing a large black chest used in town theatricals, was Bob Southall, who moved in at the lake a couple of years ago.

It was a rainy night, but 175 of Antrim's 2,300 residents were on hand.

Tenney explained the non-voting, non-binding nature of the proceedings, and Southall laid out the options, all of which related to the enormous step of buying the camp -- possibly for \$1.2 million, the value put on it by the owners, the Minuteman Boy Scout Council of Lexington, Mass.

Surely someone, I thought, some crusty skinflint would lash out against such wild extravagance, would invoke the sacred consideration of a tax increase.

This was not the case. The people in the hall seemed to be of one mind and to have reached a point where they thought they already owned the land.

The moderator's mother, Beverly Tenney, stood up and brightly inquired about the details of the logging operation they might carry on.

"When I was in Yellowstone Park," she said, "I noticed they leave the logs where they lay. Will we do that?"

The hall cracked up, and Marc Tenney laughingly tried to rein in his impetuous parent. "Mother, we're a long way from that. We haven't bought anything yet."

But the proprietary talk raged on, sweeping away the worry expressed by one woman that the Boy Scouts "resented" the militant bumper sticker because it put pressure on them. They wondered if they should lease the land to a Girl Scout camp, maybe set up a day-care camp, hire a manager and a ranger. What about the increase in taxes?

Carter Procter of one of Antrim's oldest families finally burst out, "I don't want my taxes going up, but I would rather have that happen than to lose the lake. I would like the town to buy the property now and worry about what to do with it later. I would like to see town have that property so my kid, my grandchildren and their grandchildren can enjoy it."

One woman put down her knitting and asked for a show of hands for the purchase. Every one in the hall went up.

Disparaging comments were made about the Boy Scout appraisal. It had been done, for heaven's sake, by someone from Massachusetts -- and in February when the camp road was impassable.

Rachel Reinstein, who was not attending in her capacity as chairman of the board of selectmen, was asked if the Boy Scouts had given the town the right

of first refusal. She said they had given their word, but not in writing. It seemed a detail.

The people streamed out of the hall, full of dreams and purpose.

The next day, because of the bad weather, the Gregg Lake Association held its picnic in the Presbyterian church. They raised enough money and voted to offer it to the town to make a proper, New Hampshire survey of the land.

It may be too early to say, but it looks to me as if Antrim, with the town and the lake as one, has embarked on a great adventure of salvation and love.

Mary McGrory is a Washington Post columnist.