

Indian Lake Hamlet

Above the northern end of Indian Lake, a small community was taking hold. Men were returning from the Civil War to rebuild their lives. Lumberjacks were settling down to farm and take on blacksmithing, carpentry, taxidermy, and other trades. Families were arriving from crowded urban areas seeking healthier lives. Entrepreneurs were starting businesses to serve this growing population. As early as 1858, the community was officially established as the Town of Indian Lake, and though it was tough going—with its short growing season, primitive roadways, harsh winters, and few services—the town thrived. Scattered near the town were small settlements such as Cedar River, Big Brook, Little Canada, and Irishtown, with their often-tiny populations and their own one-room schoolhouses.

In town, up and down Main Street, there was a mix of farmhouses and town residences. Men and women cobbled together several jobs, depending on demand and season, to support their families. Homes had businesses tucked inside—a small retail store, carpentry shop, a post office, even a museum. Some were modest log cabins; others were elegant, two-story family residences. Indian Lake was growing into a community of working people with an expanding middle class. By 1900, substantial houses lined Main Street, schools were full, and hardware stores, pharmacies, and liverys prospered.

Along the way, some calamities caused havoc—the 1897 black diphtheria epidemic and the 1921 fire for example, but Indian Lake and surroundings survived.

Here's a bit of history regarding Little Canada and Johns Pond:

“John Pond is an odd-colored gem in the backcountry of the Siamese Ponds Wilderness, whose shores and waters are split by Hamilton and Warren counties. According to the “Property Rights Foundation of America,” John Pond gained its name from a Canadian, John MacKenzie, who moved to the area around the time of the Civil War. However, it is not completely conclusive that MacKenzie is the correct surname. During the time of the naming, it was more commonly known as “John’s Pond.” The loop starts and ends on Wilderness Lane in Indian Lake. In Indian Lake follow state Route 30 toward Speculator and continue for just over a half mile to Big Brook Road on the left. Turn down Big Brook Road for 3.6 miles. Turn left onto Starbuck Road for 0.4 mile. Continue straight onto Lakeview Drive until it dead ends into Wilderness Lane. The north trailhead is at the intersection. For the south trailhead, turn right on Wilderness Lane, turn left onto the forest road and continue about a tenth-of-a-mile to a small grass lot and the trail register. In the winter this is a snowplow turnaround, you will need to park roadside in a safe location. We parked at the north trailhead and walked the road to the south trailhead to begin a journey through “Little Canada” (more on that in a bit). The trail was in superb condition thanks to three snowshoers pulling sleds to camp on John Pond. I should buy them a brewski one of these days. The trail passed before us like a gateway through massive red pines. With John Pond Brook flowing ever so silently to our right we had the wilderness to ourselves.

It wasn't long before we were at the 100-yard spur trail for the gravesite of two unfortunate souls — Peter Savarie and Eliza King (half-sister and brother) who perished from the black diphtheria epidemic of 1897. They were residents of the small logging town called "Little Canada." Most of the settlers were from Canada and came to the township to work for companies during their logging operations. Eventually, the land was sold to the state of New York, and the families were evicted. The history of the area is quite rich and surely a deeper subject for another time.

After visiting and paying silent respects, we continued to John Pond. The trail continued to pass over undulating hills as Jimbo, one of the ducks on this hiking party, told stories only a fool would believe — but then again, look at his company. We soon stood on the shores of a pond, whose brown hue in the summer was veiled in a perfect sheet of white.

From here, we did not finish the loop, instead deviating a bit from the trail to reconnect with it at Clear Pond. For those of you wishing to do just the loop, it is quite a pronounced trail to Clear Pond with a continuance of rolling hills — quite a nice walk indeed.

We aimed for the cliffs, referred to as John Pond Ridge. Clearly, they were seen from the lean-to, and we aimed for the southernmost. The crossing of the outlet was minimal, but the snow was not. While other parts of the Adirondacks had a solid crust worthy of support to a larger hiker like myself, Indian Lake did not, the calories would peel off in sheets.

The climb was steep to the south end of the mountain, but in taking turns with the course-load, we managed it in rapid time. The views were astounding, and there were more to come. We would climb, drop, climb, drop and continue this repetitive line along the entire ridge of distinctive summits. The step from Warren County to Hamilton County was, well, undramatic and this happened in the center of the ridge. Not that we expected to feel like we drove over a speed bump, but maybe a blaze on a tree or something. Nope, just more rocks and trees. In fact it looked identical (go figure). The highest summit of John Pond Ridge was dramatic, however. The "knife edge" on the south side of the summit opened up vistas that ranged all the way from Bullhead Mountain to Snowy Mountain, a massive 200-plus-degree view. The rock shelf at the summit was outstanding as well, reaching views up toward the High Peaks.

We finished off the ridge by passing over the open rock of the northern summit and down to Clear Pond. This traverse is one of the finest in Indian Lake. Bushwhacking and navigation is not in everyone's comfort zone, but if you can manage or find someone to go along who can, it is worth every inch of travel. We hit the loop trail on the west side of Clear Pond, which is aptly named for its clear waters, but its white cloak only made it look like an open field. This side was also well-traveled and in this frequent visitation, allowed us a broken trail, and a welcomed easy stroll, mostly downhill to our vehicle. We had just traversed what I felt to be true wilderness, a wonder in the Park we all so dearly cherish. Spencer Morrissey is an author and licensed guide who lives in Long Lake. His outdoors column will appear regularly in the Adirondack Daily Enterprise and Lake Placid News. He can be reached at adkpeaksurvey@gmail.com, or through his Facebook and Instagram pages "adkpeaksurvey."

In the 1880's and on, guest accommodations were being built to serve city folk who were suddenly discovering the joys of the North Country. This influx began when the railroad was completed from Saratoga to North Creek in 1871, and three stagecoach companies started operating to take people northward. Because Indian Lake was a destination in itself and on the stagecoach line to the famous resorts to the north, hotels and restaurants came to Main Street. Local men became guides, taking tourists into the woods and mountains and onto the water for fishing, hiking, and hunting. Visitors were regaled with stories of lumberjacks, woodsmen, and hermits, such as Adirondack French Louie who lived in the area.

In town, the hotels were the three-story McSweeney's Indian Lake House, the First Commercial Hotel, and the Second Commercial Hotel. Curiously, though the latter two had the same name and existed at the same time, they weren't related. A bit out of town were the Cedar River Falls Hotel, North River Hotel, Arctic Hotel, and Indian River Hotel. Smaller hotels, housekeeping cottages, boarding houses and eateries dotted the area.

Most of these old hotels—built of wood—had similar fates. They burned down. For example, the Cedar River Falls Hotel burned down once.... twice....three times. Owner William Wakeley, did not rebuild a fourth time. He had put it in his own road and stagecoach to his hotel, as it was off the main stagecoach route. The First Commercial Hotel also burned down, and was replaced by the Ordway Hotel, which burned, and then by a third hotel.

Other services proliferated. As you will see below [further on], the entrepreneurial Ste Marie family built many commercial places—Jack Ste Marie started Ste Marie's Saloon. Carlo Hutchins created a store and dance hall. John McCane was the town barber, and William Mccane operated an ice cream store which acted as a community center. William Carroll started an undertaking business.

Various liverys for horses and garages competed for business from visitors. Churches appeared: the first Baptist church was built in 1892 and St. Mary's Catholic Church in 1894. Indian Lake had an Oddfellow's Hall for lodging and events for members. In the 1890's, this was the largest group of fraternal organizations in the country. It was the first to accept women as members—in the Utowana Rebekah Lodge.

Tour of Main Street

Indian Lake is basically at the intersection of Routes 28 and 30 where the two roads are joined for 13 miles. If you go southeast on Route 30 you get to Sabael and Speculator. If you go east on Route 28, you get to North Creek and Warrensburg. If you go northwest on the joined Routes 28/30, you get to Blue Mountain Lake where the two roads once again go their separate ways.

Following is a quick history tour of the Main Street of the Indian Lake hamlet, starting at the eastern end, on Route 28 coming from North Creek. See the accompanying map.

A In the 1880's, Civil War veteran Beriah Wilber came to Indian Lake to build a hotel and this home to house his family. He served as the town's postmaster from 1875 to 1885 and used part of his house as the post office. (#6159 Route 28)



B Others used their homes in creative ways. George Persons built this house for his family with a workshop for himself in 1886. His daughter Katherine had a small museum next to her father's workshop. She was a teacher and Indian Lake's first town historian. (#6152 Route 28)



C As people rose into the middle class, they wanted more refined homes. For such a couple, George Richardson built an elegant house in the Italianate style (basically, a box with short roof and long windows), which was the architectural rage in the US in the mid-1800's. It continues to be a private home. (#6146 Route 28)



D In 1896, George Persons built a house for Oriella and George Morehouse who operated a blacksmith shop next door. Subsequently, the Morehouse's' stepdaughter, Mabel, and her husband, Allie Hunt, moved in. They had been caretakers for Lucy Carnegie on nearby Raquette Lake. (#6133 Route 28/30)



E In 1906, in the middle of town, entrepreneur James McCane replaced his log cabin with a two-story house. On the first floor, he ran a popular ice cream parlor; on the second floor, his wife, Lillian, operated the Indian Lake telephone exchange. The McCane family lived here until 1970. Today the building houses the Adventure Sports Rafting Company. (#6127 Route 28/30)



F Fire is part of Indian Lake's history. In 1921, a huge fire started to spread down the north side of Main Street, taking down every building in its path. An emergency decision was made to dynamite Russell Ste Marie's large pharmacy to halt the fire, which it did. It was rebuilt as a hardware business. The Pine family took it on in 1984, and today Pine's Country Store is an anchor for Indian Lake. (6123 Route 28/30)



G In the 1870's, the growing population of residents and visitors needed supplies, services, and entertainment. Oliver St. Marie built a large department store, Ste. Marie's. For about 150 years, you could buy anything here—meat, shoes, furs, fishing gear, flour, and furniture. The Adirondack hermit, trapper and guide French Louie, yearly sold his furs to Ste. Marie's. Stewart's Shops now inhabit this corner of Route 30 and Route 28. (#6295 Route 28/30)



H Another property affected by the fire of 1921 was Frank Pelon's small hotel and restaurant with a next-door dance hall. All burned to the ground and were later rebuilt. The new dance hall had many uses: church festivals, basketball games, square dances, and movies. During Prohibition, the barroom was hidden behind the dance hall. The restaurant thrived and, in the 1930's, brothers John and Henry Farrell bought the property and installed a beautiful wooden bar from the Old Nassau Tavern in Princeton, New Jersey. Today, it is the popular Indian Lake Restaurant, – Tavern & Liquor Store. (#6296 Route 28/30)



I In 1900, William Carroll built this store. On the first floor was a meat market; on the second an undertaking business. Later, it became a rooming house, and, during big-game seasons, cots were set up in the dining room to accommodate the crowd. Later, it was Marty's Chili Nights and is now McSweeney's Irish Pub. (#6303 Route 28/30)



J Perhaps the most iconic building in Indian Lake is the Indian Lake Theater. It was built in 1937 by Grover Ward Shippey who had worked on many of the resorts in the Catskills. Over the years, the building has housed a restaurant, retail store, a deli, and pizzeria. In 2008, it was transformed into a popular not-for-profit community center and theater. (#6311 Route 28/30)



K Isaac "Ike" Kenwell, who is credited with building the first hotel on Raquette Lake as well as the famed Ste Marie's store in Indian Lake, built this house for his family in the 1880's. Ike worked for Union Bag and Paper Company (now part of International Paper) and was known as an expert in estimating the worth of forest land. (#6322 Route 28/30)



L George Orton Trip had a house built for his family in 1893 while he was Sheriff of Hamilton County from 1892 to 1896. He also ran a blacksmith shop which his son, Roscoe, turned into an automobile livery. (#6329 Route 28/30).



M The home thought to be the oldest in Indian Lake contains the Indian Lake Museum. It was built in 1866 by Allen Brooks, a soldier in the Civil War. His family grew to eight children, and, luckily for them, the schoolhouse was just across the road (now Route 28/30). This was Indian Lake's second schoolhouse, the first being a log cabin. (#6355 Route 28/30)



N Nearby was a farm built in 1870 with two barns, an icehouse, and a chicken coop. One resident, World War 1 veteran Bill Cross farmed here, did carpentry, and hired out as a guide. His wife, Liliias, taught at a nearby one-room school. Today continues to be a private residence. (#6368 Route 28/30)



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