

Thompson Lake Hides Many Treasures

BY PAMELA CHODOSH

FORMED BY THE northwest-to-southeast scrape of the glaciers, Thompson Lake's deep crevice of clear water sits below the ridges of Scribner and Cobb Hill. It is parallel to Pleasant Lake, on the west, and Tripp Pond and two smaller ponds, on the east. With a surface area of 4,224 acres and a depth in places of as much as 121 feet, the lake runs nine miles in length.

There is evidence that the Abenaki Tribe seasonally frequented the shores of this wild lake to fish and hunt, but they themselves did not reside there. Instead, it was farmers and loggers who settled the large tracts of land that surrounded the lake and rolled down to its edge.

Once a place of tall majestic white pines, the lake is known for the large boulders or erratics that were delivered by the glacier long ago. There are also numerous islands and coves, shallow areas and steep rocky faces. Hidden might be a word to describe Thompson Lake. Gem might be another.





With no signs of life jackets in a bygone era, a dozen people enjoy the beauty of Thompson Lake.

The Lay of the Land

Thompson Lake's 32 miles of shoreline touch the three counties of Oxford, Androscoggin, and Cumberland, and the four towns of Poland, Casco, Otisfield, and Oxford.

Poland, to the east, features a ridge called Megquier Hill where rock maples planted in the 1800s still grow. There was a potash factory on Potash Cove and a general store built in 1848 that was still operating as of 1991.

Casco, originally named Aucocisco or "marshy place," lies on the lake's south end. This is where Thompson Lake Marina operates. Just south of this is a small culvert-connected body of water called The Heath. Motorboats are not allowed here, making it treasured by fishermen and naturalists alike for its peaceful waters.

Otisfield, to the west, was the site of Maine's first corn factory and the earliest rustic hunting camp.. The Outpost was where people went to gas up their boats and also buy ice cream, it is also home to the historic Bell Hill Meetinghouse. Re-built in 1839 by a man named Nathan Nutting after the older meetinghouse was damaged, Bell Hill Meetinghouse now hosts an annual summer event, a strawberry festival complete with homemade biscuits, and an ice cream social.

Oxford is located on the north end of the lake. It is known for having been the site of the now-defunct Oxford Woolen Mill and its dam.

Built in 1825, the mill was originally a picking and carding operation and then wove cotton. The mill burned in 1835 and was rebuilt as a brick building in 1836. In 1849, eight men partnered to create the Oxford Woolen Manufacturing Company. John Hall, who was among them, lured a man named Joseph Robinson from across the Atlantic to join the company and share his expertise in cloth dying.

By 1862, Robinson had a controlling interest in the mill.

Due to his need to power the waterwheel that ran the mill, he made plans to fortify and raise the existing dam. In advance of the inevitable lake level change, he bought the small pieces of shorefront property that would be flooded. At between \$100 and \$200 a parcel, by 1866, Robinson had paid \$5,200 to 63 landowners. He also bought a gristmill and tannery and paid additional sums to the three towns whose bridges would be lost. Once the dam was raised, the water rose six feet, making what was then known as Thompson Pond a couple of miles longer.

George Robinson, now deceased, was a fourth-generation member of the family. He acted as president of the mill. Says his wife Harriet, "The mill made a blue wool that was colorfast. During the Civil War soldiers bought that wool and made their own uniforms. It was a wonderful blue for those uniforms. That brought the mill to prominence."

The mill was not the only business on the lake. There were a number of settlements where people could rent fully functional cottages for between \$20 and \$30 a week. The Cape in Otisfield was one of these places. Another was Briggs Island.

A Haven for Summer Camps

Thompson Lake has been home to many recreational camps where city kids had the opportunity to experience nature.

Camp Ohuivo, meaning "place to which we return" was one of the first such camps. Founded in 1913, it had a dining hall called the Beehive, which is still perched over the lake's edge and in direct view of Streaked Mountain.

At the girl scout camp Wacipi or "Singing Pines" in Otisfield, girls learned dancing, archery, aquaplaning, baton twirling, and roller skating. Wayaka or "place of beauty" prepared Girl Scouts to become Maine Junior Guides.

Three recreation children's camps remain on the lake: Agassiz Village and Camp Fernwood both in Poland, and Kamp Kohut in Oxford.

Agassiz Village was purchased by Harry E. Borroughs in 1933 from the Maine YMCA after their dining hall burned. Named for Maximillian Agassiz, a Boston philanthropist who was the last to donate money for its purchase, Agassiz Village required boys to be part of a newsboy, bootblack, or street vendor trade group. The camp continues to serve economically disadvantaged kids, as well as children with disabilities. The dining hall was rebuilt in 1939. At 144 feet long and 60 feet wide, it remains one of the largest log cabins in the world.

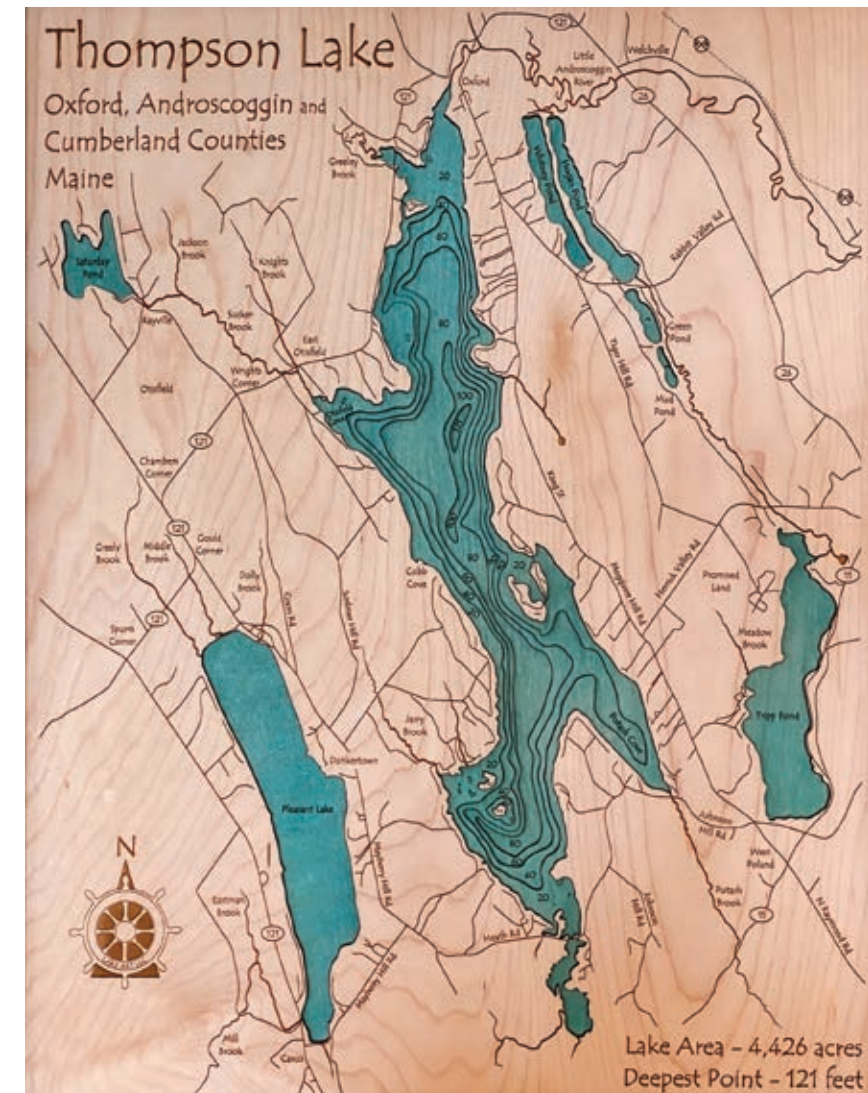
Founded by Dr. and Mrs. Julius Bluhm in 1921, Camp Fernwood hosts 150 girls each summer from all over the United States and the world. Its goal is to instill values of "tolerance, unselfishness, and appreciation for the simpler life in the out

of doors." To that end, there is still no electricity or hot water in the girls' sleeping cabins.

Kamp Kohut, founded by Dr. George Kohut, was first located in Casco Bay and then in Monmouth. It relocated to a 100-acre parcel on the eastern shore of Thompson Lake in 1911. Catering to boys aged 8 to 16, Kamp Kohut emphasizes confidence and helps campers become "all that they can be." It not only has fishing, hiking, archery, shop, and outdoor theatre, it is also known for its award-winning literary magazine, "The Kronikle."

Camps and Cottages

The children who attended these camps had some indelible experiences. As a result, many returned to the lake and built houses. There are now between 1000 and 1200 shorefront properties.





Top: Camp Ohuivo, the first recreational camp built on the Thompson Lake, welcomed girls until sometime in the 1930s. **Middle:** Members of Moulton Pottle's family joined forces to rebuild their beloved 1890s camp Loseekum after it was damaged by a hurricane in 1938.

Bottom: In 1939, paddling Thompson Lake was often a family affair.



"If you take a look at a topographical map of Thompson Lake from the 1900s, there are almost no houses," says local historian Jean Hankins, a longtime resident of Otisfield and the president of the Otisfield Historical Society. An archivist, Hankins has family albums that chronicle visits all the way back to the 1930s, which include tracings of feet from every baby who visited.

Moulton Pottle built the very first "camp" on the lake's west shore in the 1890s. Hankins' husband was one of his 11 grandchildren. At once an important place from which to fish and hunt, the small rustic cabin or shack, which Hankins describes as "not woman-friendly," had no running water, no power, and an outdoor toilet. Even when it was rebuilt after the 1938 hurricane blew down a whole catch of pines and laid them uphill, it remained a simple place. The 1938 cabin still stands on the shore and below an expansive set of hayfields, a large barn, and a rambling farmhouse in which Hankins still lives.

Says Hankins, "Our family camp was one of the very oldest. Its name Loseekum was made-up."

Hankins has fond memories of the time she spent at Loseekum. She remembers, "Every Saturday night there was a bean supper down at camp. It was for the family mostly and also some friends."

The other early cabins that were built were crude in construction and primitive in the shelter they offered. There weren't many though until after the war.

Says Hankins, "People had more money and more time then. They had office jobs and a 40-hour work week. They had vacations. People weren't spending their time farming."

In the 1950s, local people also began opening their farmhouses to summer tourists. The people who came didn't have cars. They took the train to Oxford Station instead and were then picked up.

Thompson Lake Maintains Its Pristine Waters

Due in large part to the work of the Thompson Lake Environmental Association (TLEA), Thompson Lake is in the top 5% of the cleanest lakes in Maine.

Says limnologist Scott Williams, "TLEA has been around for decades. They have played a strong role in raising public awareness about the lake's sensitivity and the kinds of conservation that should be used for development standards. They have done a lot."

In addition, TLEA has worked to control milfoil. Though the battle is never over, their five-year eradication program smothered and then removed five tons of the invasive plant.

Williams, who evaluates lakes and rivers all over the state, cites the lake as being an excellent cold-water fishery for lake trout, brook trout, and landlocked salmon. The deep cold spots which hold high densities of oxygen are important to the fish, which he calls "canaries in the coal mine, in terms of lake quality."

The clarity of the lake is measured by lowering a simple device called a Secchi disk into the water until it can't be seen. Williams reports that average Thompson Lake's Secchi readings come in at 10 meters and even sometimes at 11 or 12.

Says Williams, "That's way above average. Being able to see the bottom of the lake, even at a significant depth, tells you an awful lot. There are clear lakes in Maine, but not many. When compared to other lakes, Thompson is near the top."

Though regular church services at the Bell Hill Meetinghouse were discontinued in 1887, an annual event has taken place the last Sunday of July since 1913.



Remembers Hankins, "My in-laws placed ads in *The New Republic* and in *The Saturday Evening Review of Literature*. Visitors slept in the house, and the kids slept up over the barn. There was no indoor plumbing and no central heating. Water was heated on the cookstove. They did have singalongs, but it was not a party atmosphere."

Callie Zilinsky, a longtime resident of Otisfield and president of the Bell Hill Meetinghouse Association still lives on a farm where she was raised and which is not too far from Hankins.

"People did not come here for the lake. They came to farm or log," says Zilinsky. "They thought the lake was pretty, but they didn't really have much use for it."

Zilinsky, a first cousin of Hankin's husband, also has fond memories of Loseekum.

"It was just being able to get down there and be with our cousins and play," she says. "I remember my Grandmother Pottle being there with us. We had a big rock out front, kerosene lamps, and a big Portland cookstove in the kitchen. I remember waking up in a room on the other side of the kitchen. I could hear Grandma rustling around in the morning. It felt so secure. I don't remember ever thinking it was less than we needed. It was just the place we loved." OHM

Acknowledgments: Some of this information was taken from *The Thompson Lake Book*, written by Joan C. Madden and Margaret E. Slattery and published in 1991. Thanks go to Kathy Cain, president of TLEA and her husband Paul, and Ben Conant, director of Paris Cape Historical Society.