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Groton State Park

There was very little formal development for park use until the C.C.C. had finished their work. The 1926 biennial report of the Department of Forests and Parks mentioned some "trail work to connect the ponds" had been done. A moderate amount of cutting for wood products was initiated in 1924 and has continued intermittently to the present day. The first State Forest acquisition was made July 1, 1922 being a tract of land purchased from R. J. Miller of 6,339 acres. Two hundred acres purchased from Harry Ricker were added June 23, 1928. Quoting from a letter received from the Department: "Except for three or four rights-of-way deeds, there is no major land deeded until October 20, 1967, when the state purchased 4,090 acres of the Seyon Ranch. This year we purchased 45 acres just above Rickers Pond and adjoining the State Forest from the Forestry Development Corporation. Our total acreage in the town of Groton as of March, 1969 is 10,674 acres. It might be interesting to note that the first land purchases were at a price of about \$2.25 per acre. The lands purchased within the past two years averaged about \$45.00 per acre. The present day system of fees was initiated in 1934. Originally land leased by the State to various individuals who built and owned camps on this land were called "Permits." There are now approximately 40 camp permits on the west side of Groton Pond and two on Rickers Pond. The east side state owned area on the lake has been developed for picnicing and a bathing beach.

As the interest in camping at the shelters grew caretakers homes were built and a couple were engaged as caretakers for each area.

Area	Tent Sites		Leantos	Totals
	No Platform	With Platform		
New Discovery	15	32	14	61
Stillwater	44	19	16	79
Big Deer	28	0	0	28
Rickers	26	7	22	55
Kettle Pond	0	0	27	27

Generally speaking, the average camper likes to have neighbors and gets only a short distance away from a road or camping area. There are

still very few really suitable sites at Groton Pond to service modern trailer camping so a large percentage are still tent and leanto campers.

Much of this expansion took place while Perry Merrill was commissioner. Robert B. Williams is now commissioner of the Department of Forests and Parks.

When the road connecting the new state road to the Stillwater area was opened it meant automobiles could be driven nearer the head of the Pond. Still the campers felt as if they lived on an island because after parking the car they had to carry supplies to the water's edge, going from there by boat. The temporary dock was really a very friendly meeting place as people came in and went out. Signals were arranged so one could tell who was arriving by the number of toots on the car horn. Now with access by private roads to almost every cottage, wheels can bring us anything, even unexpected visitors.

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The Groton Pond Association

It soon became obvious that some community organization was needed to build an adequate dock at Stillwater. Also the dam at the south end originally built by the lumber company, was becoming unreliable and demanded constant repairs. Periodically when the fall season arrived a group of men and boys made their repair trip down to the dam—well supplied with lumber, sand bags and even old carpets and mattresses.

However, some permanent construction grew more necessary each year. After a summer of surveying, planning, and ordering supplies the committee had to wait until the water had reached its lowest level on the natural stone dam. The members of the association gathered at the site the last weekend of October 1958 to rebuild with new boards, sand bags etc. It was beautiful fall weather although snow and ice arrived the next week. The boys, Jim and Dougie Lothrop, Dan and Stephen Clark and Douglas Lindsay—ferried the materials from the old mill area to the dam in the "Walrus" (Lothrop's boat) and other old boats. Men from all around the pond worked. An incomplete list includes: Cliff Jones, Douglas Lindsay, Midge Rossi, Morris Frost, Ernie Desilets, Nelson Ricker, Henry Goodwin, Tom Eastman, P. T.



White, Franklin Clark, Dunc Persons, Ralph Cathrew and Guy Lothrop. The "girls" brought lunches and served coffee. George Pratt, an ex-president was an enthusiastic promoter of this improvement.

Thus the level of the water was kept up until 1966. Yet, in spite of all the hard work, campers had to adjust their own docks as August came. For these first special needs the Groton Pond Association was formed.

The Association began September 16, 1947 as a non-stock and non-profit corporation and with the purpose of improving the recreational development of Lake Groton. The Association is recorded in the office of the Secretary of State and in the office of the City Clerk in Montpelier. The first articles of the Association were drawn up by Paul Hill, W. D. Lindsay and Harold Hewitt all from Montpelier.

The first meeting of the Board of Trustees was held at the law office of George Hunt in Montpelier. The following trustees were present: Percy Andrews, George O. Pratt, Paul E. Hill, Duncan Persons, B. Franklin Clark. They elected the following first officers of the Association: President—Percy Andrews, Vice President—George O. Pratt, Treasurer—Paul E. Hill. Through the years the membership has varied from 37 to 93. There are now 96 camps around the pond.

The annual meetings when projects are discussed and reports given have been popular gatherings of members and their families followed by an outdoor barbeque dinner. These are now held sometime in Au-

gust. For example, on August 4, 1957 there were 182 persons present at the Association picnic held at Stillwater Shelter. Finally through the efforts of the Association, the State with the help of federal funds cooperated and built a concrete dam in 1966. This maintains the water at a constant high level, improving boating, fishing, and swimming. Probably the most valuable result of these meetings and projects is the unification of the campers as whole families from all parts of the pond attend—acquaintances become friends. The oldest member, Eugene H. Kennedy of Chelsea celebrated his 100th birthday August 19, 1969. They share the same feeling for the place, namely to escape so-called civilization while at the Pond.

XVI

Wild Life

In November the cottages come alive again as the hunters arrive to test their skill. Often, radio messages send snow warnings which may cut short their stay but a little snow aids their sport by providing good tracking conditions. The white tailed deer is now Vermont's foremost game species. In the early days the deer herd must have been of great importance as a supply of necessary food and hides. The hunting methods were primitive (today there is a bow and arrow season). Deer were less common in northern Vermont than in the southern part because hardwood is less palatable to the animals and the heavy snow area a better habitat for moose. As the settlements progressed, greater demands were made upon the deer herd and by 1840 the number had dwindled to a fraction of its former abundance. They were also driven out because the land was denuded. This was caused partly because until 1863 the railroad locomotives were exclusively wood burners. Long woodsheds beside the track every 30 miles had to be filled by the hardwood timber from the area. Also sparks from the engine frequently started forest fires. Closed seasons did little to prevent the extermination of the deer.

However in 1878 seventeen animals were purchased from New York and released in Rutland County. Three more were presented by Governor Fairbanks of St. Johnsbury from his deer park there. The

first open season was in October 1897 when five deer were killed in the Groton area—103 in the whole State. The legal kill has risen in every county since. State ownership of wild game is a principle. The value of these deer is great but the aesthetic value every time one sees a deer in the woods is undoubtedly worth much more. If one sees a deer near the cottage or drinking from the lake in the early morning or evening it is always mentioned to someone else. Twin fawns are favorites and a doe and her fawn are always a lovely sight.

Bears are not numerous but are seen by many. There is also a bear hunting season. Moose again have been seen close to the camping sites in recent years.

Squirrels and chipmunks are friendly little animals about the camps. However, the skunks and raccoons attracted by the smell of food have never been welcome visitors. Raccoons can become interesting pets and are fascinating to watch. But a hungry raccoon at night is often most destructive. Encounters with these animals are a part of every camper's experience. Once, raccoons climbed into The Forest Store, opened the cardboard packages, eating the cereal but scattering the cake mix all over the counters and floor.

In the late twenties H. K. Noyes of Boston bought up land around a small pond in Groton township and enlarged it. Now it is called Seyon Lake and is owned by the State. Besides his own spacious summer home he built a very large guest house. He stocked the pond with trout—a great attraction for his city guests. When this was all a going concern he decided to import some beaver. On one town meeting day three pair of beaver were unloaded at the Groton Station. While being transported through town one escaped. The capture of this animal was even more exciting for a time than the oratory of its citizens. The beavers thrived and by 1931 some of their offspring were seen diligently working at Stillwater Brook. So the late thirties were never without beaver problems to the campers. Interesting to watch though his methods are, they cut down trees at night on campers land, so the birches had to have wire protection. All the brooks were dammed up in several places and pools became good fishing spots. Acres and acres of woodland were killed along the brooks and the barren places looked very unsightly from the top of Owl's Head. Finally, the damage done by the beavers became so alarming and their numbers so large that in 1951 the State declared an open season on trapping. Still today in

some unimproved shore line parts one can see a lonely beaver or two carrying on the tradition of unceasing work.

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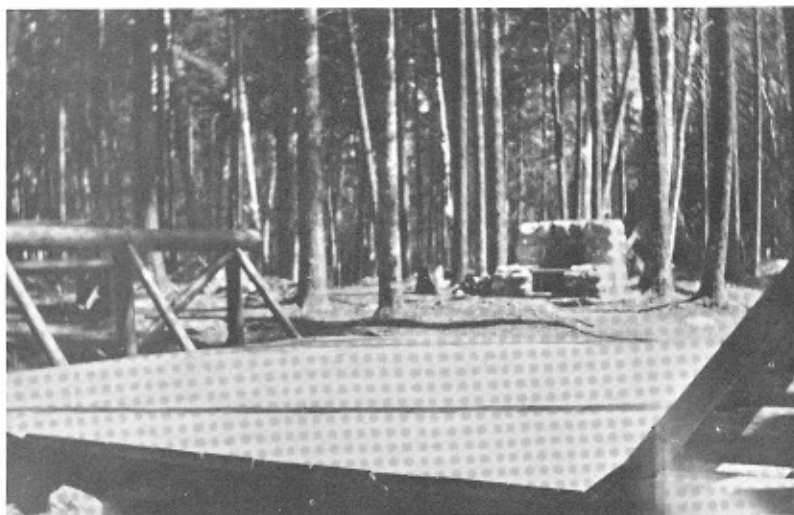
1938 Hurricane

According to an article printed on September 21, 1968 in the Valley News (Lebanon, N.H.) the biggest wind and rainstorm ever known raked the Upper Valley of the Connecticut 30 years before. Radio reports told of rapidly falling barometers and warned of a possible storm, but the science of forecasting was not as highly developed as in this age of sophisticated weather reports. The storm began about five in the afternoon after and 80° day in Wells River. The sound of the wind was soon joined by the sharp cracks of trees snapping. The eye of the storm followed the Connecticut River Valley northward from Long Island. By early next morning the skies cleared and everyone had an axe in hand so the roads could be opened.

In some villages electric power was not restored for ten days. The federal government sent loggers from as far off as western New York for the clean up (there were no chain saws then). Driven by the wind, the rain was forced through clapboards and around windows and kept people inside houses busy mopping up. The damage was tremendous as huge trees fell on homes.

Was there anyone at the Pond to experience the storm? It seems not a single person, because those were the years when September and October meant the whole place was deserted. Even Mr. and Mrs. Palmer, the caretakers at the Stillwater tenting area, were in town on an errand that afternoon. Perry Merrill, Commissioner of Parks and Forests asked them to go up the next day and estimate the damage but he added these words, "Put on your raincoat!"

Many owners of camp property also attempted to return the following day. The only way in was by boat from the lower end. To walk across one's land was almost impossible—desolation ruled everywhere. The Palmers had to take three days to cut their way into the state park campsites and spent the next three days clearing out trees there.



The large white pines with their heavy tops had been the first to be blown over. One camp on the western shore called "The Three Pines" for the trees which had always stood beside it, had one through its roof. Everywhere there was a tangle of fallen wood. Few cottages were damaged—many on the west side saved by a miraculous shift of wind away from the shore to the back.



One can hike into the woods today and find the trunks of once great trees lying there since 1938 rotting away. An old Vermonter described the scene as "Everything blown flat!" Except at the North where the pines escaped all the disaster a second growth is covering up the damage done first by the fires and the lumbering industry and then the hurricane of '38.

XVIII

The Last Twenty Years

During the last 20 years the towns of Groton, Peacham, Wells River, Ryegate, Barnet, Plainfield and Marshfield have remained almost unchanged for no industry developed to attract a greater population. In fact fires often wiped out growing businesses. Goddard College was established in Plainfield in 1938. In Groton the granite industry was used mostly for building stones but when the concrete industry developed granite was no longer needed in such quantities. However, the importance of recreation today has caused rapid development of the former "wild land" around the Pond. What was considered waste acreage in agricultural times has now proved to be the town of Groton's greatest asset as land values have increased taxes. Also the camps were improved, many more built, each more attractive and larger than the last one.

Gradually the campers accepted the material things to add to their comfort—tuning into the modern world. In 1948 the Washington Electric Cooperative brought power to many of the cottages and now most of them enjoy the convenience of push button life. This brought about a tremendous change in the way of life—with electric pumps, refrigerators, stoves, toasters, washing machines, power saws, and all types of gadgets, not forgetting the lights. It has been a safe and wonderful addition. The gas stove for quick cooking had been in use since the 30's. Bottled gas is still a standby in many camps. Flashlights proved a most useful invention to campers. Radios and now television bring the so-called civilization of the outside world into the peace of the camps. Another link with town was the installation of the Molly's Falls telephone lines in 1965.

Yet entertainment from radio and television has never replaced social gatherings with people amusing themselves. For example, in the late 40's an orchestra was formed by some campers who enjoyed playing together and continued this down through the 50's. On Saturday nights during the summers they often got together at one of the camps and played for friends to dance. Priscilla Cathrew—accordian (known as "the squeezebox"), Guy Lothrop—trumpet, Bob Carr—Banjo, Franklin Clark—saxophone and clarinet, Dunc Persons—saxophone. The "Tub" (an old washtub with oar paddle and rope used for a drum) was played by Ralph Cathrew or "anyone". Ruby Carr was the featured singer. The songs of the 30's recently revived were their favorites such as "I'm Looking Over A Four Leaf Clover" and "The Sunny Side Of The Street". This was the time when Life Magazine was publishing accounts of parties throughout the country and many felt Life ought to have taken pictures of these musical evenings.

Recently some of the stony ground has been covered with earth fill, and planted with grass. This gives a cottage a beautiful setting but the owners must mow these lawns. Perhaps a power mower gives the exercise the oars once supplied. This has all been made possible with modern earth moving equipment. The State road to the public beach was built in 1959. This made possible private roads to the cottages. Another road was built on the old roadbed of the railroad in 1964 and driveways into the camps on the west side were soon bulldozed down the hillside.

Many of the old isolated spots for picnics are now arranged as public picnic areas with fireplaces and tables. Where is Lover's Rock now? It may be that the vogue for outdoor cooking in which men are the experts today indicates the greatest change in the last twenty years.

As we realize the great increase in camps both public and private the following reflections in a recent editorial in the Philadelphia Inquirer should be interesting to many.

"Every experienced camper knows that there are two basic types of outdoorsmen; those who want to get away from it all and those who want to take it all with them. Their needs are essentially incompatible. The camper who wants close neighbors to chat with and who wants electric lights and modern plumbing and hot showers and other trappings of civilization is an entirely different breed from the other kind of camper who although not objecting to a few comforts, craves some

privacy in the woods and does not relish camping sites crunched together like row houses in a city."

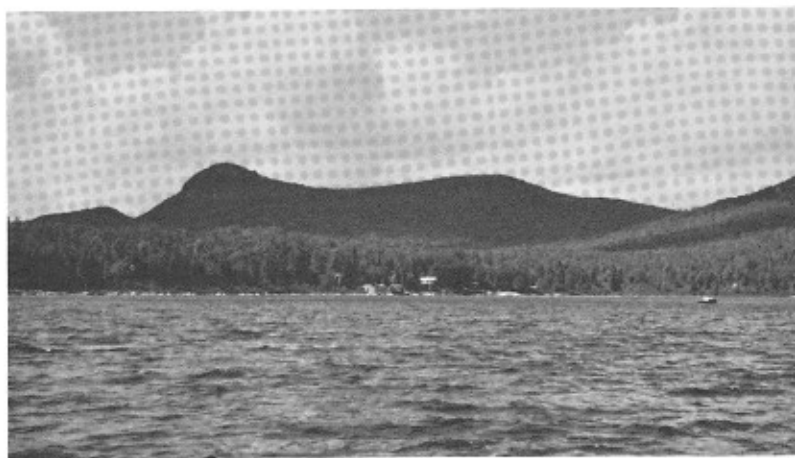
XIX

The Unchanging Things

Perhaps the cottages have been remodeled, electrified and improved but the great outdoors which the campers really come to enjoy still remains unchanged as yet, "unspoiled and uncrowded" as Vermont is described. The Pond has always been a holiday place and as one camper describes it, "We have always found it the most relaxing experience and the best possible vacation." The whip-poor-wills sing no more, good luck fishing is not sure, and the blueberries are blighted—but what man has been unable to touch is the same. The sunsets are lovely behind the hills, the cloud formations are always a picture, the stars and the moon shine down through the clear night air. And on a summer evening it sometimes is cold enough for a display of Northern Lights.

Thousands of words have been written about the seasons in Vermont. Vermont Life Magazine emphasizes the seasons as being distinctly different. A camper standing on the shore or hiking through the forest at the Pond might make the following observations about these periods of the year. The weather is of course the surprise always, May might have a snow storm or two and June thirty days of rain. But by May spring does come to the Pond. The water is cold and at as high a level as it ever reaches. At first the trees are bare and there are no ferns. The blueberry bushes show their tiny wax-white flowers and the bunchberry indicates it belongs to the dogwood family with four petaled white flowers. Wild flowers are in abundance—even the rare trailing arbutus and the lady slipper can be found. Years ago Rhododendron used to grow on the land near the shore north of Rocky Point Bay. The trout fishermen arrive to fish the brooks. By late May a fringe of spring green is noticed on the trees and the red buds make the hills resemble a muted autumn. There are sounds of campers repairing their cottages.

The days of June are the longest of the year and probably the most



rewarding for a nature lover. There are few people around. The lakeside is very quiet. The floor of the forest is covered with ferns. The woods are full of birds. In this month black flies can be a nuisance but people can endure them now thanks to the new insect repellants.

The Fourth of July marks the beginning of summer, as it did long ago for campers. They "open up the cottage." The most enthusiastic swimmers test the temperature of the water. Boats are launched. Reunions are held at picnic tables. The red bunchberries are a bright ground cover in many spots. And daisies, white and yellow eyed, return with the buttercup. One has a feeling that all nature is in motion.

Summer sends large numbers of townsfolk to the beaches. August continues the warm days and summer activities, but fog often covers the pond in the mornings.

Writers of prose in the early days used to refer to "Fall and its prismatic colors." As the foliage increases its color no better place to be a "leafer" (as the tourist is called) than here. Since it is after Labor Day the narrow roads are free of traffic. Since there is a variety of trees along each way. Flaming maples are framed by pines. The pine needles fall. A golden carpet covers the paths. After Labor Day often it is rarely that a cottage is occupied during the week days. Jesse Heath used to arrive on Labor Day and leave just before the hunting season and thus assured himself a quiet time. Sometimes October brings delightful weather—warmer than July. But the nights are always cold—the wood fires a cheery necessity. The water seems to sparkle more in October



and in the mornings shows a perfect reflection of the hills. Large flickers are busy and so are the squirrels. A heron comes out of hiding and can be seen fishing on the lake or standing quite still, well camouflaged, on the gray rocks. Now deer return, come nearer the cottage and often are to be seen down by the shore, drinking or swimming. Sometimes a lone boat quietly plows the surface of the pond. The occasional lingerer enjoys the feeling of isolation the early campers always liked.

In winter the lake is frozen. Snow sometimes comes in November and blankets the area usually until late March. Tree branches are covered with snow and the top and rocky side of Owl's Head glistens white in the sunlight. Fifty years ago only adventurous young folks attempted a trip here in winter to snowshoe and skate. Now the snowmobiles and ski-doo's provide an easy way to enjoy winter at the Pond. The sounds are like those of the old motorboat days. Groups come through the trails in the woods, over the hills from Peacham or starting out from some warm camp. These machines can also pull people on skis or skates. Among the most attractive of these extra passengers are Ernie and Jeanie Desilets' six year old twins sitting in a small trailer shaped like a little old fashioned sleigh speeding over the snow, tiny orange-colored bells ringing. All this activity—a new way to enjoy winter by all ages has come upon the scene.

The beauty of the place has not been marred. The three hills to the north never change except in light and foliage. "About the view" Priscilla Cathrew often says, "I have looked at this view of the hills

for 50 years and have never grown weary of it. Why do they choose Lake Morey and Willoughby for calendars when they could use this?" The shore line which still remains in its natural state is perhaps the most admired part—open spaces are so rare in the modern world.

Probably the intangibles are the things most permanent. To many the pond is something apart, satisfying their desire to be in a remote and lovely spot. It is possible to leave the world and its complicated problems, "over the hill." It is possible here even today to lead the simple life in the pioneer spirit by tenting and cooking outdoors. Several generations have now grown up in the area and to those who have come here since childhood it seems more like home than anywhere else in these mobile days. Children and grandchildren of the first campers return each year. Most of their guests spend the second day of their visit searching for a lot on which to build although few are for sale now. Here serenity abides, they feel. The place holds onto them and never lets go. Many remember George Williams Sr. who came to his camp on the Pond until his middle eighties and who said, "He rested his heart all winter so he could enjoy Groton all summer." In the summer of 1968 a young man drove into the state park camping area and asked for a site at Stillwater. On this particular day all sites had been reserved. But when he told the caretakers his parents had brought him there almost every summer as a child and youth and that now he was a soldier and slated to go to Vietnam and all he wanted to do was spend the last three days of his leave at Lake Groton he most certainly could not be turned away. Space at Stillwater was quickly arranged for one so deeply attached to this certain place. This incident perhaps expresses as clearly as any that could be mentioned the mysterious magnetism that draws persons back again and again who have once experienced "camping at the Pond" whether in the early years or only yesterday.

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The Reader's Notes

Blank pages follow on which to write the history of your own camp and your memories of the place

