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## Landscape With a Storied Past

By SUSAN JACOBY

IN Indian tradition, the crystalline Finger Lakes of central New York owe their name and beauty to the imprint of the Great Spirit, who blessed the land by laying his hands upon it.

For later white settlers, this relatively small area of the state -- fewer than 100 miles separate Otisco, the easternmost lake, from Lake Conesus on the west -- proved to be an extraordinary human laboratory for nearly every kind of social and religious ferment.

The "burned-over district" -- so-called because 19th-century dissident religious and social movements swept over the area like wildfires -- has nurtured iconoclasts of every ilk.

The list includes Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a moving spirit of the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention; Amelia Bloomer, popularizer of pantaloons and editor of the first American newspaper for women; Harriet Tubman, the heroic slave-rescuer called the "Moses of her people"; Robert Green Ingersoll, the once-famous 19th-century orator known as "the Great Agnostic," and, at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, the Mormon founding father, Joseph Smith.

Today the Finger Lakes retain the beauty celebrated in Iroquois legend -- though most Indian settlements were torched during the Revolutionary War because their inhabitants were suspected of having pro-British sympathies.

The area's varied and endlessly seductive landscapes recall Burgundy, Italy's lake country and the environs of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Farms and orchards sprawl over vibrant green hills, lush vineyards are planted down to the water's edge -- the wine industry here dates from 1860 -- and the lakes are so pristine that some still serve as sources of unfiltered drinking water. It is easy to understand why local environmentalists are up in arms over a Bush administration proposal to drill for oil in the Finger Lakes National Forest.

There are actually 11 finger-shaped lakes, the best-known being Skaneateles, Cayuga, Seneca, Keuka and Canandaigua. It would take at least two weeks to explore the area fully, so my companion and I decided to concentrate on Lakes Skaneateles (pronounced SKANNY-atlas or SKINNY-atlas) and Seneca.

Because we wanted to avoid the drive of some 300 miles between New York City and the lake region, we took a one-hour commuter flight to Syracuse and rented a car at the airport. Shunning the New York State Thruway, we drove south on Interstate 81, then west on Route 20, the former stagecoach link between Albany and Buffalo.

By 3:30 (our plane landed at 2), we had checked into Hobbit Hollow Farm, a bed-and-breakfast just outside the village of Skaneateles (population 2,600) and were swimming in the extremely cold lake. This was a 90-plus day in late June but local residents say that the glacier-created lakes do not reach a comfortable swimming temperature until mid-July (though they often remain warm enough for swimming through September).

The village beach is really a grassy park leading straight into the water. Having overlooked a parking meter in our eagerness to jump in the lake, we assumed that a slip of paper on the windshield was a ticket. Instead an envelope informed us: "Our meterperson found your vehicle parked overtime. . . . Realizing that you may have been detained, we have placed a coin in the meter, courtesy of the Village of Skaneateles."

Hobbit Hollow, a 90-year-old house with broad porches overlooking the lake, stables and a working farm, has five double rooms (with baths) furnished with antiques in the style of a grand hotel rather than a bed-and-breakfast. From our windows, we could see the water on one side and sleek horses on the other.

One of the greatest pleasures of a stay in Skaneateles is dinner at the Krebs, a local institution since 1899, whose notable customers have included Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, and Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

My grandparents, who always stopped in Skaneateles en route to vacations in Canada, were among the restaurant's less famous customers. It was easy to see why they kept coming back when I tasted the juicy prime rib of beef (Gramps's favorite), one of the establishment's signature dishes.

Other frequent offerings -- this is not a restaurant for dieters -- include crisp pan-fried chicken, mashed potatoes, cream of tomato soup with chunks of fresh tomato, and brownies made from the recipe of Cora Krebs, whose husband, Fred, was the original owner.

The next morning, we headed toward Auburn, 15 minutes to the west -- once an important stop on the underground railroad. The town has two house-museums -- one the mansion of William H. Seward, the secretary of state responsible for purchasing Alaska, and the other a down-at-the-heels memorial to Harriet Tubman.

The Tubman museum is rich in documents (including a 1913 local newspaper obituary recreating the life of the "forgotten old slave" for a presumably ignorant younger generation) but obviously starved for funds. The site offers a shaming lesson in whose history is, and is not, considered important enough to memorialize.

Tubman, who led more than 300 slaves to freedom in the Northern states and Canada before the Civil War and rendered the Union Army invaluable services as a spy and scout, was able to buy a house in Auburn in 1857 only because her friend Seward acted as the front man. Pauline Copes-Johnson, a distant relative who resembles her ancestor in appearance, explained during an informative guided tour that African-Americans were not allowed to buy property in Auburn before the Civil War in spite of the town's strong abolitionist sympathies.

In fact, only the home Tubman founded for aged blacks -- not her own house -- has been restored. In Tubman's day, the property had a brickyard and a garden, from which the "female Moses" sold bricks and vegetables to supplement the \$8-a-month pension (eventually raised to \$20) she received as the widow of a Union Army veteran.

The government never paid Tubman a pension for her services to the Army. As I walked around the grounds, it occurred to me that some restitution -- perhaps a generous preservation grant from the National Park Service -- is in order here.

Seneca Falls (20 minutes to the west), the birthplace of 19th-century feminism, offers a perfect example of what combined government and private support can do to bring once-neglected history to life. One could spend the better part of a day viewing exhibits at Women's Rights National Historical Park, operated by the National Park Service, and the privately supported National Women's Hall of Fame.

The modest but beautifully restored white frame house where Stanton wrote the first draft of the Seneca Falls convention's Declaration of Sentiments ("We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal . . .") can be seen on the Park Service tour.

The Hall of Fame features exhibits honoring distinguished women from the colonial era to the present. Another section, dedicated to previously uncelebrated women, is in some ways even more interesting. Private donors pay \$100 to honor special women in their lives, and that enhances the project's importance.

A typical letter came from Earlyse Swift, who vividly described her mother, Jeanette Allen -- one of the first women hired during World War II to work at the Todd Ship Yard in Tacoma, Wash. When Harry Truman, then a senator, toured the facility, the women were ordered to remain silent -- but Mrs. Allen loudly asked, "Why is it that women journeymen are paid 95 cents an hour and men are paid \$1.10 when we do the same work?" A month later, management granted the women equal pay.

Sated with museums for the moment, we moved on to Geneva (population 14,100), at the northern end of Seneca Lake. The town and its environs, strongholds of preservationism, are filled with buildings of architectural and historical importance.

These include Federal row houses dating from around 1820 and the magnificent Greek revival Rose Hill Mansion (named for Robert Selden Rose, a Virginia planter who emigrated to New York in 1802 with 36 slaves who were freed only when slavery was abolished in New York State in 1827.

When the Geneva Historical Society began restoring Rose Hill in 1968, local residents who owned antique furnishings began donating them to the mansion. Among the pieces is an 1825 piano -- one of the first such instruments made in the United States -- and a bust of Benjamin Franklin, commissioned in France by Franklin himself.

For a bit of uncharacteristic local kitsch, there is Belhurst Castle -- a riotous 1885 Richardsonian Romanesque structure with beveled glass and sliding mahogany panels. Built as a private home, Belhurst was reincarnated as a gambling casino in 1933 and is now a restaurant and hotel.

We stayed at Geneva on the Lake Resort, a graceful mansion built in 1910 and modeled after an Italian Renaissance villa in Frascati. Offering exceptional comfort and service, the hotel would make an ideal base for exploring any of the lakes. It has a swimming pool and rental boats for sailing, fishing and canoeing. Our room was upgraded (no one should expect that on weekends, or in July and August) to a suite with a living room, from which we could see the sun rise over the lake.

The dinner menu in the candlelit dining room was loaded with suspiciously elaborate sauces that suggested what the writer Calvin Trillin once dubbed "La Maison de la Casa House." Happily for us, the food outperformed its pretentious descriptions. My friend warily requested "Dijon mustard, heavy cream, mushrooms and brandy" on the side of his veal-and-shrimp dish -- but the sauce proved so irresistible that we competed to sop up the last drop.

The next morning, we headed south toward a little-known museum honoring Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899), born in the tiny shore town of Dresden. A spellbinding orator -- he drew larger audiences than United States presidents during the last quarter of the century -- Ingersoll crusaded against religious encroachment on government in terms that remain controversial today. Conservative clerics reviled him as "Robert Injuresoul."

The Ingersoll Birthplace Museum, a project of the Buffalo-based Council for Secular Humanism, is packed with memorabilia that will

fascinate anyone who cares about the history of radical dissent in America.

Just inside the entrance is a massive sculpture of Ingersoll's head, rescued from destruction in 1966 by a nest of freethinkers (that lovely anachronistic term dating from the 17th century) in southwestern Michigan and recently rediscovered and restored. Reflecting the interests of secularist immigrant Jewish intellectuals in the 1880's is a Yiddish translation of Ingersoll's "Some Mistakes of Moses," a critical analysis of the Pentateuch.

Best of all, a visitor can pick up a headset and hear Ingersoll's voice on a recording, made just before his death, in the Menlo Park, N.J., laboratory of his friend Thomas Edison. "While I am opposed to all orthodox creeds," he declares through the static, "I have a creed myself; and my creed is this: Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The way to be happy is to make others so."

To me, the experience was (may the Great Agnostic forgive me) like hearing the voice of God -- courtesy of the RCA Victor historical vaults.

Since Ingersoll was also famous for enjoying wine and food, we felt obliged to honor him by lunching at Glenora Wine Cellars, one of the many vineyards along the lakeshore. Glenora's Veraisons Restaurant, like its attached inn, offers an unimpeded view of both vineyards and lake. Local restaurants naturally highlight the region's best wines, and I could easily have wiled away the afternoon drinking Glenora's own cabernet sauvignon.

Nevertheless, we pushed on to the spectacular 156-foot Shequaga Falls, at the southern tip of the lake. It seems that the falls have been impressing tourists for nearly two centuries. As legend has it, a sketch of Shequaga was made by the future King Louis-Philippe of France in 1820.

Let loquacious Bob Ingersoll have the last word on the Finger Lakes. On Oct. 1, 1888, he returned to his birthplace and spoke before a crowd of 8,000 at an agricultural fair.

Before launching into his customary oration on separation of church and state (people thought nothing of sitting still for two-hour speeches in those days), Ingersoll told the people that they inhabited "the most beautiful spot in New York," adding that "I wish to congratulate myself on having been born in such splendid country."

From the Tubman Home to wine tastings

It's a good idea to make reservations at hotels and restaurants from June through October. Hotel rates are often lower during the rest of the year.

Where to Stay

Hobbit Hollow Farm Bed-and-Breakfast, 3061 West Lake Road, Skaneateles, N.Y., (315) 685-2791, fax (315) 685-3426, or [www.hobbithollow.com](http://www.hobbithollow.com), has five double rooms. Rates run \$120 to \$270 whether single or double and include full breakfast.

Geneva on the Lake Resort, 1001 Lochland Road (Route 14), Geneva, (800) 343-6382, fax (315) 789-0322, or at [www.genevaonthelake.com](http://www.genevaonthelake.com), costs \$216 to \$630 a night from June until late November, Continental breakfast included.

Belhurst Castle, Route 14, Geneva, (315) 781-0201, [www.belhurstcastle.com](http://www.belhurstcastle.com), offers 13 rooms, including two guest cottages, as well as a contemporary home. Rates range from \$135 to \$315 double occupancy from April until November.

Where to Eat

Visitors may want to check on restaurant hours before arriving. Prices below do not include drinks or wine, unless otherwise specified.

The Krebs, 53 West Genesee Street, Skaneateles, (315) 685-5714, offers old-fashioned American food and is open daily for dinner and Sunday brunch from early May until late October. A seven-course prix fixe dinner is \$39.95. Lighter meals are served a la carte in an upstairs tavern.

The Gould Hotel, 108 Fall Street, Seneca Falls, (315) 568-1282, features American food with an Italian influence. Open for lunch and dinner Tuesday through Saturday and for dinner on Sunday. Closed Monday. Dinner runs about \$10 to \$20.

The Lancellotti Dining Room, at Geneva on the Lake Resort, serves Continental-style food and is open for three meals daily. A five-course prix fixe dinner, offered Monday through Thursday, costs \$41.50; dinners on weekends from \$45 to \$75.

Belhurst Castle's dining room, offers Continental-American style cooking. Open daily for lunch and dinner. Dinner costs \$15 to \$24.

Veraisons Restaurant at The Inn at Glenora Wine Cellars, 5435 Route 14, Dundee, (607) 243-9500, offers a regional fusion menu with French classical influences and is open daily for all three meals. A three-course dinner averages \$30 to \$50. A full selection of the vineyard's wines are on sale in the wine store, which includes a tasting bar.

Pasta Only's Cobblestone Restaurant, Hamilton Street (Routes 5 and 20) at Pre-emption Road, Geneva, (315) 789-8498, features Northern

Italian food. Open nightly for dinner and Tuesday through Friday for lunch. A three-course dinner, including wine, runs \$30 to \$50.

Patti's Lakeview Diner, 43 Lake Street, Geneva, (315) 789-6433. Open daily for breakfast and lunch, and for dinner on Thursdays and Fridays. Breakfast, \$2 to \$5, lunch and dinner \$4 to \$10.

#### What to See

Harriet Tubman Home, 180 South Street (Route 34), Auburn, (315) 252-2081. Open daily except Sunday, February through October; by appointment November through January. General admission \$3.

Seward House, 33 South Street, Auburn, (315) 252-1283. Open July through mid-October, Tuesday through Sunday; off season, Tuesday to Saturday. Closed in January. General admission \$4.

Willard Memorial Chapel, 17 Nelson Street, Auburn, (315) 252-0339, is the only unaltered chapel in the country designed entirely by Louis Comfort Tiffany. Tuesday to Friday year-round, and Sundays as well in summer. Closed Saturday. Call for a schedule of concerts on Wednesdays in July and August. Free.

Women's Rights National Historical Park, 136 Fall Street, Seneca Falls, (315) 568-2991. Open daily. General admission \$2; a tour of the Elizabeth Cady Stanton House costs \$1.

The National Women's Hall of Fame, 76 Fall Street, Seneca Falls, (315) 568-8060. Open daily May to October; limited hours off season. Closed January. General admission \$3.

Seneca Museum of Waterways and Industry, 89 Fall Street, Seneca Falls, (315) 568-1510, shows, among other things, how the Erie Canal was built. Highly recommended for children. Closed Monday. Free.

Rose Hill Mansion and Mike Weaver Drain Tile Museum, Route 96A, one mile south of Routes 5 and 20, Geneva, (315) 789-3848. Open daily May through October; closed November through April. General admission \$3.

Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum, 61 Main Street, Dresden, (315) 536-1074. Open Saturdays and Sundays Memorial Day through Halloween. Free.

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