

GROTON POND CAMPING – A Reminiscence by Charlie Lord

From the diary of his mother, Mrs. Charles Lord, August 22, 1908:

“We have been here 3 weeks. Have had a fine time. Quite a quantity of fish and berries of all kinds - raspberries, blueberries, and blackberries. The logs were all away here the first of August. The steamer only made a few trips while we were here... The screeching of a wildcat has been heard several times and Ralph saw it once and shot at it. The boys have gone to the foot of the pond... to fish and to get their father who is coming on the 4 o'clock train.”

My folks tell me that I first went to the Pond when I was about 1 year old, the summer of 1903. My recollection of being there was one time when my father and brothers were putting on roofing on the porch on Camp Fairview and during this process a large hawk was seen flying over the pond near camp. This would make it the summer of 1906 or 1907.

The next incident I recall was when my father went to get some drinking water in Cold Brook after supper and hearing him holler for someone to bring a gun . I thought at least he had seen a bear, but it turned out he had treed a porcupine, which they shot. Another time after supper, a group of men and boys scared up a half grown rabbit which they more or less surrounded and my father caught it by making a dive and getting it by the legs. They eventually let it go.

At this time it was pretty much open in that area, only a few small trees and brush. I also recall the time that my mother took a picture of Alice, Wendell and myself gathered around an old pine stump. Wendell is just standing, Alice was looking for a butterfly and I was painting a small toy boat. (The stump was still visible in 1970.) It was at the next camp, the Carpenter's, (now owned by Proudfoot) and I believe the Tellier family was staying there, that I got my first taste of dried beef. It came in a round tin can of at least 5 lb. capacity. The contents were wrapped in a sort of butter paper and the container had a removable top or lid.

There were several camps nearby, all owned or occupied by Groton people; the Clarks, Carpenters, Pillsburys, and Dr. I.N. Eastmans. Other camps farther down the lake on the east side was the Plainfield camps; Batchelors and Balls. The Gale's and Edson's camps were on the west side about halfway down and then further down on the same side was Robinson's (they had a sailboat) and the camp built by Ayers. There were several others and all these were built by 1910 or a few years later.

When people went camping in those days it was for a week or more and large amounts of food, clothing, etc., were taken in on the first trip, as transportation was not as convenient as now. We came by train to Lakeside (the station nearest the foot of the pond) where all the baggage was toted nearly a mile to the pond's edge (or a team could be hired from the mill to haul the articles) then all the stuff was stowed in a boat, rowed the length of the pond and carried into camp. There was no road into the area, no refrigeration (later on some campers put up ice) no electricity, no telephone and no outboard motors. So it was expedient to bring everything in on the first trip, if possible. Once settled in camp, things leveled out and one could relax. Some common staples of food and milk could be gotten at the small store operated by the mill. There was also a post office there.

Up until around 1924, the mill was operating and during the winter, logs were cut and hauled to the so called 'log pile' near the present State bathing beach (Spencer's camp) (Boulder Beach). A small steamer made trips daily on the pond to haul these logs to the mill and so groceries were sometimes delivered to the log pile where they were picked up by the campers. Most lake transportation was by rowing or motor boats. I still like to row.

In the early days, there weren't too many other kids to play with. I recall the Tellier girls, Peter Thurston, Nelson Ricker, Franklin Clark, the Frost kids and occasionally some kids from Groton. There were other children on the pond, but they were strangers and we seldom got to know them. Such was our limited world.

I remember the forest fire of 1908 (I was nearly 5 years old) which started one hot day in mid-summer in back of the Plainfield camp. They said it was started by the dumping of hot ashes. Anyway, it got going in mid-day and spread eastward up the slope towards Jerry Lund hill and became quite a fire. I recall it burning at night and seeing the flames shooting or flaring up, as it burned some particular trees. Some of the men from Miller's mill came to protect the pile of logs at the 'logpile'. Also, some of the men campers went to the scene and they did save Ball's motor boat, but not the camp. The fire burned for quite a while and over a sizable chunk of land, mostly Ricker's. Next summer, we kids were able to get birch bark from the standing fire killed white birches and we made torches of this material.

I can't remember much fishing or boating at this stage of things. What we ate or how I slept is all blank. Needless to say, my waking hours were concerned only with playing. Cooking was done on a wood stove and some perishables were placed in a tight metal container and kept in Cold Brook. At first, our drinking water came from Cold Brook and then later on from a small stream that comes from the area where Deer Mountain State camp now is. (Big Deer Campground)

In 1910 my folks sold Camp Fairview and built another camp directly westward across the pond. This camp (Greyledge), is now owned by my sister, Alice Goodine. The area at that time was heavily wooded and there were no camps in that area. Am Hooper, about this time, built his camp (Rockhaven) on the next lot northward, now owned by Tom Eastman. Am used to refer to the area across the pond where Fairview was, as "Bingville". He liked to camp and fish in the pond. He lived on a farm Peacham way, near the North Ryegate school and many a time he would cross lots through the woods from his farm to camp and return. As with camp Fairview, the new camp was built as economically as possible, the rafters, studding and floor joists were all poles which were cut in the so called swamp near Stillwater Brook. The siding and roof boards were square edged, random length hemlock, which I believe cost all of \$9 per M. The lumber was gotten at Miller's. Frank Hanchett out on the roofing and the sides were covered with a metal siding that simulated brick. We sometimes walked down to camp from the railroad following the Tin Pan Trail.

I recall much more about fishing, rowing, and swimming at this time, as I was much older. We got our drinking water at the head of the pond from the same source that the Forest service now does (Big Deer pump house). We had acquired a small 'steel boat', this boat was easy to handle and row and I spent a lot of time in it. Also did more pond fishing, a meal of perch could be had most any time. Also in season, there was an abundance of blue berries and a lesser amount of blackberries and raspberries. Dr. Tillotson built a camp just north of Am Hooper's so we had a tight little group of camps. I remember the Dr. and one of the Emery's (Archie, I believe) planting the Scotch pine around his camp, and also seeing them start lining out a swarm of honey bees.

For kids to play with, there was Franklin Clark, whose folks spent a lot of time at camp (especially his Grandmother Clark) and periodically other Groton kids. By midsummer, the level of the water in the pond had fallen low enough, so that we kids could traverse around the head of the pond way over to where the State bathing area now is. We played many a game of "duck on the rock". etc. near this area. Rocks and two small islands became visible and we sometimes played train by leaving passengers on these rocks and islands and then picking them up later. We also made small dams, etc. where the brooks entered the pond and of course we were constantly in and out of the water. I recall Franklin and I fishing down at the foot of the pond opposite the mill and also getting milk and groceries at the store. For a couple of summers, my brother Ralph ran the steamer for Miller and I had quite a few rides in it. It was thrilling. I was about 10-11 years old at the time.

After the big fire of 1903, which started in Lanesboro and burned over Owl's Head, Little Deer and Big Deer mountains, Stillwater campground and as far easterly as Cold Brook and part way down on both sides of the pond, plus the fire of 1908 left lots of standing dead trees, plus good feed for the deer, plenty of wild flowers for the honey bees and lots of blueberries, all flourishing in the 20-25 years after the fire. Now it is particularly grown up and the deer, blueberries and honey bees have been drastically reduced. At one time there were quite extensive beds of rhododendron and trailing arbutus, but these have been stifled out by the growth of the woods. At the pond side near Rocky Point, there were quite extensive beds of rhododendron and lesser ones at the foot and head of the pond. Trailing arbutus could be found in the swamp area near Stillwater Brook, also blueberries here.

At one time around 1914-15, people came from miles around to pick blueberries. At one time, Gus Tellier was out picking blueberries in a lumbered over area near the bog, when he got lost and finally coming out in Jennison Hill in Peacham. Some of the Jennisons who were then living there (long abandoned) showed him the way back. Blueberries could be found also on the mountain tops, especially on Owl's Head. One time, probably around 1915, my father got off at Tin Pan and started to walk down the foot trail and somehow he got off the trail and got turned around. Realizing he was lost and as it was getting dark, he built himself a shelter and spent the night in the woods. The next morning he showed up at camp, none the worse for his adventure. No one got very excited, for we didn't know for sure if he was coming that P.M. or not.

The boys went berrying, but we were more interested in rowing, swimming and just plain playing. We did go fishing in the pond and caught many a meal of perch. My father was not one for fishing, but sometimes in the evening he would fish off the rock in front of camp and puff on his pipe (he never smoked much). One time, years ago, a caught a trout, at least 100 or more. There used to be trout in the pond. Also the early lumbermen cut big white pine as a preferred timber crop. There are a few big old white pine stumps left, generally fire scarred. One berrying experience I recall, there were 3 of us kids; Nelson Ricker, Wilfred Legare and myself. We took the path that went from Dr. Tillotson's camp to the swamp and as we were walking along and talking loudly, Am Hooper and Dr. Tillotson heard us coming and hid in the bushes beside the trail and as we approached, they began to growl, make noises like a wildcat or bear. Needless to say, we suddenly turned tail and hot footed it back to camp, thus ending our berry picking for the day. Am and the Dr. got a big laugh out of it, but we didn't for a while. Fred Welch of Groton, resurrected the hull of an old steam launch, fixing it up with a gas engine and he carried passengers on the pond, mostly blueberry pickers.

Around 1909, we built a boat house at the foot of the pond and my father built a motor boat - he sent for the plans, lumber and machinery. It was about 18' long and had a single cylinder Detroit engine, a 2-cycle. The boat pattern was by Brooks. The boat ran fine and is now owned by Dr. Clark and family, who still run it. As mentioned before, I was constantly rowing and fishing from the tin boat. One time I was setting a cane pole near the head of the pond (about opposite Howard Page's camp) and in my exertions to push the pole into the bottom, I pushed the boat out from under me and I fell in. Inasmuch as I couldn't swim much, I did a bit of thrashing about before I got hold of the boat and got back in.

One time when my brothers were at camp during deer season (I wasn't there) a buck appeared on the beach near Cold Brook and it ran down the beach towards the 'log pile'. My brother began to shoot across the pond at the deer and the bunch staying in the Carpenter camp, also began to shoot. This latter group were 'boozed up a bit'. Anyway, the deer escaped unharmed, but later on in talking about it, Johnny Hatch (one of the Carpenter camp bunch) said that one of my brother's shots came close as he saw the bullet go between the deer's horns. When my brother Ralph shot his first buck, near the foot of Owl's Head, my father who was with him, helped to drag it out. However, it got dark and they were still in the woods, so Ralph got Duffy Pillsbury and crew (they were in Am Hooper's camp) to help drag out the deer. They went back and found my father and the deer to help and with lanterns they got the deer out easily.

About the time I was 12, I began to hunt some with older boys and my brothers. I had a Hopkins and Allen single shot 22. I have related elsewhere about shooting at a deer with this rifle. I finally shot my one and only buck in 1929 near the top of Big Deer. I found out how much work was involved and have been careful ever since. I like to hunt, but not to kill. One time, I believe it was in early winter (Nov or Dec) about 1913-1914 (the same time my father built the hand sled) the lumbermen were moving into the French camp. There was some snow and the pond had frozen over - for I could hear the teamsters shouts and the tinkle of sled bells as the teams journeyed up the Cold Brook log road towards the 'French' camp. In the summer, we kids would occasionally go to the 'log pile' and watch the men, generally Portuguese, assemble rafts of logs which work required them to be constantly waist deep in the water. There was a long wharfing where the steamer came to pick up the tow of logs. It was also good fishing here. Towards Stillwater Brook the shore line was rocky and as the water went down we used to hop, skip and run over these rocks. One time I miscalculated and fell, making an abrasive cut over one eye, resulting in some blood and some bellowing.

Another time I was using an ax when I cut myself on the left shin bone, but nothing serious. During one deer hunting stay at camp Greystone, I was unloading my brother's 38-55, which held 19 shots. The muzzle was on the floor and I thought I had ejected all the shells. I pulled the trigger, but there was still one left and the resulting roar turned most everyone over. My father was reading a paper and my brother, Wendell, was resting in a chair. It scared the stuffing out of me. That evening, we went hunting on Hosmer Brook and the ridge towards Cold Brook way, when we came across a water tub made out of a tree trunk and hollowed out and a maple tree that had been tapped. There was a spout and a pail on it.

Occasionally, we would have a cook-out on the beach. I suppose it was more work than now as things weren't as handy as they are now. Anyway, I can only recall one or two. Once it was on the beach in front of my present camp. I remember catching some perch which we fried on the spot. At camp, we had simple meals. I can recall how good the boiled coffee and condensed milk tasted. Also the canned beans and tomatoes and the many meals of fish plus berries in season. Once in a while (in later years) we made ice cream in a hand freezer.

Along about this time we had an ice house where ice which had been cut on the pond the previous winter was stored in a thick layer of sawdust. The bugs (mosquitoes and black flies) bothered us some. For bug dope we used a combination of oil of citronella, pine tar mixture and a paste called Lollycapop. Even today, the repellents haven't improved much except that we have sprays. One expedient my father used when working outside was a so-called smudge pot which consisted of a slow burning or smoldering fire which emitted a dense smoke and could be carried around from spot to spot. This was really effective, even if one did smell like a smoked ham. We had cloth screening on our windows and I can remember on rainy nights of going to sleep listening to the patter of rain drops on the roof. I quite often slept in a bed that had a feather tick supported by ropes crisscrossed underneath.

Once while living at Groton (before 1911) we came to camp Greystone, not only with ample samples, but also with a mother duck and little ones, plus some hens and a cat. What a struggle that must have been for my parents. Dr. T was quite an ardent fisherman, not only in the pond, but on the brooks. Once I went with him to Hosmer Pond (my first visit). Ricker's old lumber camp was partly tumbled down then and today (1971). A portion of it is still visible. The Dr. fished around the west edge of Hosmer Pond. I remember the sawdust pile was quite in evidence then. It was about where the Picnic area is now. Another time we fished Coldwater Brook and I saw the ruins or remains of the old mill for the first time. The stone foundation is still quite visible today. It was about 1913 or 1914 when I first saw it.

One time shortly after St. Johnsbury Academy had let out for the summer (1920), Reg Hovey, Hugh Mclean and I went to camp from St. Johnsbury by train. We stayed several days. We went to Hosmer Pond for an overnight trip and we found a tar paper shelter that someone had built and stayed there for the night. We didn't catch many fish, but had a good time. Another time, the Pike boys and I stayed at camp a few days. About the same time there was a tote road from the head of the pond lumber camp to Cold Brook at a point about 14 mile below the old mill today. I can find no trace of it. It probably was used as a short cut and was not a main log road.

Around 1912, I recall going trout fishing with Jim Main and my brother Ralph on Hosmer Brook and seeing Ricker's camp (head of the pond) still intact (just about where the present road to the State Bathing Beach curves around the former Hooper Lot, NW corner) and also on and near the brook there were remains of brush piles, so this had been logged off not too long before. Ricker's other lumber camp was visible (about this time). It was located about 1/4 mile back from the pond on the east side just south of the camp formerly owned by John French and one of the first camps on the pond. Dr. T. at one time had a small motor boat which was a home made affair. George Pillsbury came to the pond a lot. He had a rowboat named 'Bowser'. One time he (George Pillsbury) was having a porch roof constructed at his camp and my father was helping and in the process, fell from the rafters to the porch floor. It kind of knocked the wind out of him as he hit his throat in the fall on a 2x4 rafter. However after a brief rest and a drink of water, he went back to work.

As cars became more common, we sometimes drove to Ricker's Pond and walked up the tracks to Lakeside and then go to the boathouse. By 1930 considerable agitation had arisen to get a road built from Ricker's Pond to Groton Pond. The town put in some money, volunteers and labor which resulted in a passable road. This road followed in general the winter road used by lumbering operations. With the advent of the C.C.C., in 1933 a better road was constructed which eventually linked up with the one from the Lanesboro end. A road to the Stillwater area was soon built during the C.C.C. years and finally around 1955 a road was commenced circling the head of the pond which meant that most campers could drive to their camps. In one way this is nice and I suppose a logical development. However, if one really wants to get away from it all, there are places like the OUTPOST. We used to see deer around the edge of the pond most every night. Now with the increased noise level plus decrease in the local deer herd (due to changing browse conditions) deer are seldom seen in daylight.

One time when our boathouse (at the foot of the pond) was facing east (it was moved around to face north, which is better to launch the motor boat), I fell on the rocks and got a muscle bruise. To relieve the soreness, my father got some Sloan's Horse Lineament and applied it - result, no soreness. Generally, I was fortunate as far as serious accidents were concerned; just the usual cuts, bruises, etc. Our favorite swimming area was the beach (white sand) in front of Dr. Page's camp. There were no camps there back then. Sometimes we used the beach between Cold Brook and the 'log pile'. Our favorite fishing spots were most anywhere around the shore line near the mouths of the brooks with rocks and a sandy drop-off. Stillwater brook used to be good trout fishing for about 12 mile. The water was quite still when the culvert and a new road was built and the water level was lowered. We used long cane poles in fishing this stretch of the brook and we approached the brook by going through the swamp. Beavers made their first appearance around 1940 after working their way down from Seyon Ranch, a private club, now owned by the state. For the next 15 years or so, they created many dams and by doing so, improved the trout fishing. There are still some beavers in the area. In a few years when the feed trees grow up, they will be back - I hope. Right now the fishing is poor, both stream and pond (1971). I have never fished through the ice, but hope to do so soon.

For evening recreation, we sometimes went visiting at nearby camps and occasionally played cards. I recall one time when I was about 10 or 11 that the older boys found some beer that a bunch of sports had secreted in the back of their camp (Carpenter's I believe). Anyway some of it was brought to our camp and I had a taste of it - real beer! I'll never forget the taste. Drinking was at a minimum. It was frowned upon in most circles.

One summer Ralph's folks, Myra, Priscilla, Mrs. Walker and I were at camp for several weeks, probably the summer of 1923, as it was near the last of Miller Mill operating. Ralph and I would walk in the morning up the Tin Pan Trail to the railroad tracks, then up the track about 14 mile (near Peabody's) and just on the west side we cut and peeled poplar pulpwood. There was a log road the extension of which goes by the old dynamite shack that the C.C.C. built. We got a \$3.00 a cord for it and it just about paid for the groceries we got a Miller's store.

In August 1927, my folks were at the pond and I came over to Lanesboro by car, then walked down the tracks to camp. In March 1928, Hugh and I took the train back to Montpelier arriving there at 5:30. In May 1928, Alex Graham and I drove to Hosmer Pond, leaving the car there and walking down trail to camp. Cold and windy, we still caught 10 trout on Stillwater brook and some perch which we had for supper. Another time Brooks O'Neil came with me about the same time way. From this period until 1933, we still had to walk either from Ricker's or Hosmore Pond or come by train to Lakeside and walk and row to get to camp. By October 1933, the C.C.C. had pushed the road from Lanesboro towards the pond to a point about the town line between Peacham and Groton (opposite Owl's Head) for we drove this far. The leaves were off and we could see the pond from this point. They continued to work towards the pond and juncture with the road from Ricker's camp.

About 1936, I bought some land on the pond from Rich Hooper and after clearing out a spot with my father, we began to build a camp. It was several years in the building. It was about 1941 before it was completed. The hurricane of 1938 blew down quite a few trees. There was a clump of 3 white birches leaning at about 45 degrees which with the aid of block and tackle, Henry (my father) and I pulled erect and propped them and they are still growing. My father did all the finish work. I supplied the unskilled labor. We eventually built a boat house and a woodshed and before the camp was sold in 1967, a road was built (1962) enabling us to drive right to camp. I retained a portion of the land on which I had started to build another camp near the pond. A road to this camp was built and my neighbors, Ray Munson and Leon Tucker, filled in the swampy area to the north, so that now we have good solid beach. All materials for the first camp had to be transported by boat from the Stillwater area to camp and that included wood.

by Charles Lord, 1971