

Schroon Lake

A quiet Adirondack retreat

by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, Sept. 5, 2003



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

Schroon Lake's public beach is the site of this Adirondack village's annual Independence Day fireworks extravaganza, featuring music from the World of Life community.

For some visitors, "the Adirondacks" means Lake Placid, with its array of modern hotels and winter-sports venues.

For others, the Adirondack experience means a rough road leading to a remote, rustic camp, or a hike through the wilderness, or a panoramic view from a mountain peak.

But there is another Adirondack experience, one that provides a different kind of getaway from urban congestion and workaday busy-ness.

It's called Schroon Lake.

A little history

Schroon township is situated on the southern edge of Essex County, about as far as one can get from Lake Placid, which is situated up in the county's northwestern end. Schroon's original settlers came to the area at about the same time as North Elba farms were first being cleared, just before 1800.

There are two general theories behind the origin of Schroon Lake's name. One is that it is derived from a Native American word or personal name.

The other theory - and the one given more weight by historians - is that the lake was given its name by the French during their occupation of Fort St. Frederic at modern-day Crown Point. The lake was named, this theory says, for Madame Scarron, a wife of Louis XIV.

Like other settlements in the Lake Champlain area of the eastern Adirondacks, Schroon Lake began as a working town, not a resort. Tanning, lumber, iron - these were what drew the first settlers. But with the rapid depletion of the region's lumber, entrepreneurs were forced to seek another way of supporting themselves and their communities.

The answer was tourism.

"Adirondack" Murray's famous 1869 book had triggered a near stampede into New York's northern wilderness. The completion of the Adirondack Railroad in 1872 made tourist travel to the Lake Champlain area practical.

In Schroon Lake the leading hotel was the Leland House, built in 1872. Unlike many Adirondack resorts, with their notorious anti-Semitic policies, Leland House began actively seeking

Jewish guests in the early 1900s. Other nearby hostelries followed suit, including Taylor's Hotel on the south end of the lake, which later became the famous Scaroon Manor resort.

Joe Frieber, Scaroon's nimble operator, fell ill in the late 1950s. The property was sold in 1960 to the state, and in 1969 the state's Department of Environmental Conservation torched the remaining buildings.

Leland House burned to the ground before World War II, and postwar changes in vacation habits steered newly mobile American families away from places like Schroon Lake to more remote sites.

The opening of the Northway in 1967 removed the primary flow of traffic between New York City and Montreal from Schroon Lake's Main Street, Route 9. With that shift, tourism subsided even further.

Revitalization

In recent years, however, Schroon Lake has undergone a kind of renaissance.

"Main Street used to be full of empty storefronts," said Cathy Moses, Schroon Lake supervisor, when she took a reporter through the hamlet last fall. "Now they're mostly full."

Unlike many Adirondack hamlets, Schroon Lake has a small full-service grocery, a new pharmacy, a bank, a one-screen movie theater and a bowling alley in addition to its motels, restaurants and gift shops.

State money has paid for resurfacing Route 9, building new sidewalks down Main Street and along the town's waterfront, installing new streetlights, restoring a 1930s park fountain and plumbing new handicapped-accessible bathrooms in the Boathouse Theater adjacent to the central village park.

Local businesses, Moses added, have bought benches that have been placed throughout the park and along Main Street.

A perennial garden planted around a new, modern sculpture highlights the park's two-story stone bandstand, which last month hosted the Adirondack Folk Music Festival.

"We're just about done!" enthused Moses in a recent interview.

The street and park improvements enhanced the activities already offered visitors to Schroon Lake. A paved area in the park near the bandstand hosts square dancing every Wednesday night in July and August, as it has for as long as anyone can remember, drawing people from throughout the area. The band, Ed Lowman & Friends, and the dance caller, Paul Rosenberg, marked their 25th year at the park this summer.

The Boathouse Theater on the hamlet's waterfront has a full schedule of musical performances in the summer, coordinated by the historic Seagle Music Colony and the Schroon Lake Arts Council. This summer's performances ranged from "The Marriage of Figaro" and the Bolshoi String Quartet to Woods Tea Company and Adirondack harpist Martha Gallagher.

The DEC maintains an ample dock below the theater for small craft, where a cruise boat takes visitors on a one-hour tour of the lake twice weekly.

Nearby is Schroon Lake's town beach, the home of the hamlet's July 4th concert and fireworks extravaganza. Above the beach is a playground. Across the street are tennis and basketball courts.

After Labor Day, Schroon Lake grows very quiet. But from mid-June to the end of August, the hamlet is something unique in the Adirondacks: an old-style summer resort, unblighted by over-commercialization but still offering a full, simple array of what visitors need and want from a vacation destination.

The past is present

Several of Schroon Lake's best modern attractions are actually restored remnants of its past.

Schroon Lake's nine-hole municipal golf course was built in 1917 for the Leland House hotel. After the Leland House fire of 1938, the links were bought by another local retreat. In 1944, the town was pressured to buy the course to keep it open and publicly accessible.

Adirondack Life golf correspondent Alex Shoumatoff included the Schroon Lake links in a 1996 rundown of eight North Country courses.

"It draws you in, lulls you into complacency, with a short, straight, par-four first (hole), followed by two par threes," Shoumatoff wrote, "but the last four holes are blind. This is a course that has



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

The Schroon Lake Historical Museum, the former Root Homestead on Main Street, has been operated by the Schroon-Hudson Historical Society since 1977.

to be played a lot before you get the hang of it.”

According to Shoumatoff, his wife evaluated the course in simpler terms: “This course looks easy, but it’s tough.”

Another Schroon Lake relic revived for modern-day use is the single-screen Strand Theater, on Main Street. The building was originally the Terra Alta boarding house, built in 1922. In 1937 it was converted into a movie palace, one of a string of Strand theaters being opened throughout the North Country.

After sitting empty for years, the place was bought by cinethusiasts Larry and Liz McNamara, who restored the theater’s 300 seats, complete with original leather, updating only the projection room and the sound system.

Though the Strand’s opening night on Aug. 1, 1998, was marred when a skunk became trapped in the ventilation system, the movie hall has been a big hit ever since, according to locals.

The Schroon Lake Historical Museum is another one of the town’s tourism assets that has been rescued from the past. The museum is housed in a beautifully restored, two-story white frame house on Main Street, the Root Homestead. Bought from the county in 1975, the Schroon-Hudson Historical Society spent two years restoring the structure before opening the museum in 1977.

The museum is open Wednesday through Sunday during the summer from 12:30 to 4:30 p.m., and Saturdays and Sundays (same hours) from Labor Day through Columbus Day weekend - or by appointment.

The exhibits inside the museum, endearing as they are to long-time local families, aren’t nearly as evocative of the area’s history as those in the new annex building in the rear, where several displays tell the story of the different kinds of labor that originally built the region’s economy.

Two major players

Two other major components in the life of Schroon Lake deserve mention: the Word of Life community, and the Seagle Music Colony.

Word of Life is an evangelistic enterprise based in Schroon Lake that now

includes facilities in several states. Preacher Jack Wyrzten bought what’s now called Word of Life Island - or, to its teen-aged campers, just “The Rock” - in the middle of Lake Schroon in 1946. Wyrzten later purchased the main house of the Brown Swan Club on the mainland, which became the Word of Life Inn, the core of a convention and retreat center. Another youth ranch operates in nearby Warren County.

In the 1970s Word of Life was at odds with Schroon Lake natives over its tax-exempt status and its aggressive proselytizing tactics, but today the operation seems to be living peaceably with its neighbors.

The second major player in Schroon Lake life is the Seagle Music Colony. The motto on its letterhead boasts of “seven glorious weeks of musical theater every summer.” Founded by popular singer Oscar Seagle in 1920, it was the first of the summer music colonies, predating even Tanglewood.

The Seagle Colony brings more than 100 budding musical actors to Schroon Lake each summer for training and a full performance schedule in its rustic theater. The colony also stages several programs each summer in Schroon Lake’s Boathouse Theater and the Lake Placid Center for the Arts.

The present, and the future

Two major activities are part of Schroon Lake’s renaissance. The first is the Adirondack Marathon Distance Festival, now in its seventh year, being run over the weekend of Sept. 27 and 28. Billed as “probably the most beautiful 26 miles, 385 yards you’ll ever run,” the marathon course takes participants all the way around Lake Schroon.

The marathon is the creation of Schroon Lake retiree Dan Perry, a former marketing executive. After watching his son-in-law run in another marathon in 1996, Perry had a hunch. He drove around Lake Schroon, clocking almost exactly 26 miles on his odometer. All the course needed was a loop added around Schroon Lake Central School to complete the standard marathon’s 26.2 miles.

In its short life the Adirondack Marathon has won a surprising degree

of respect in the running world. After just one year’s operation it was chosen as one of the two finalists for the 1998 U.S. Olympic trials for the marathon.

The start of the second of Schroon Lake’s major activities is still a few months away, but planning is already in an advanced stage for the town’s big bicentennial in 2004. The year-long celebration will kick off with First Night festivities this Dec. 31, including a dance, carriage or sleigh rides (depending on the snow pack), an ecumenical worship service and midnight fireworks.

Lots more bicentennial activities are planned throughout 2004 for Schroon Lake. A calendar is available from the town’s chamber of commerce.

For more info

There’s lots more to do in the area around Schroon Lake that we simply don’t have space to describe here: a wide-ranging network of snowmobile trails, miles and miles of bicycle routes, hiking paths galore, a number of heritage attractions, even a buffalo farm.

There are several excellent sources of further information about the Schroon Lake region. The first is the Schroon Lake Area Chamber of Commerce. The chamber has a visitors center right on Main Street. Its phone number is (888) SCHROON (724-7666), and the mailing address is P.O. Box 726, Schroon Lake NY 12870.

Several Internet sites also offer plenty of regional information:

- www.schroonlakechamber.com
- www.schroonlake.org
- www.schroonlakeregion.com

For some really excellent background on the history of Schroon Lake, you’ll want to pick up the two books by Ann Breen Metcalfe available at the Schroon Lake Historical Museum:

- “The Leland House: An Adirondack Innovator,” a 68-page illustrated paperback, published in 1994 by the Essex County Historical Society in Elizabethtown, and
- “The Schroon River: A History of an Adirondack Valley and its People,” a 64-page illustrated paperback the size of a coffee-table book, published in 2000 by the Warren County Historical Society in Lake George.