

# TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

## **"TURNPIKE TALES" #15**

*(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)*

*By Jim Ford*

The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

### **A HISTORY OF MADISON LAKE**

One of the most beautiful lakes in the Central New York region is located in the Town of Madison. To find the lake, turn off Rt. 20 at the entrance to Madison Central School. You are on the lake road. Continue past the school and the athletic fields beyond and you will see the entrance to Madison Lake Park. Driving a short distance down the hill, you will see the lake.

Madison Lake was formed by nature at the end of the last ice age. It comprises 43 acres and has a maximum depth of approximately 100 feet. The lake was a favorite fishing spot for the Oneidas. This Native American tribe often camped on the north side of the lake, on the area that later was known as "Indian Opening." A road in the township at that spot still bears the name.

With the arrival of settlers from New England following the Revolutionary War, a settlement grew up at the "Opening." In 1796 the first July 4th celebration in the township was held in the cleared area near the lake. A feast was served and a cannon was sounded during the day.

The construction of the railroad system through the township, beginning in 1869, created a convenient way for many people from the city areas to come to the lake for picnics. Summer boarders also came from the cities. They rented rooms in Madison Village and enjoyed days at the lake.

By 1885, there was a steamboat on the lake and a crew of workers was kept busy cutting a channel between the two parts of Madison Lake. George DeWitt set up a photography stand in 1888 and a picnic area known as Leland's Park was opened on the northeast corner of the lake.

In 1889, the Leland Hotel was constructed on the shore of the lake in the same area as the park. A boat house was also built. The renting of boats provided a healthy income for the proprietors. Fireworks displays became the new attraction, especially at holiday times.

During the 1890's, picnic groups of ever-increasing size came to the lake. In 1891 it was estimated that 2000 people attended the Grange picnic. (That estimate grew to 6000 for the Grange picnic in 1895.)

In 1894 a merry-go-round, operated by George Pulver, made its debut at the lake and proved to be a popular attraction. A second hotel, the Lewis Hotel, also known as the Lewis Pavilion, opened that year. It featured a bowling alley, shooting gallery and a large dance hall. The lake also had a baseball field at this time where the famous Bouckville Summits played some of their games.

In 1895 a third hotel was opened on the south side of the lake at a spot known as Woodhull's Grove. It remained open for a brief number of years.

During the early years of the 1900's, the lake saw an increasing number of parades, fireworks displays, balloon ascensions and dances. Concession stands were built along the shore. A waterslide ride was constructed and also a bandstand. Swings were installed in front of the Leland Hotel. During the winter, horses and their riders competed in ice racing on the lake, while the cutting of ice for the preservation of milk was an annual endeavor.

While the beginning of Prohibition in 1919 cut alcohol activities at the lake, the 1920's saw the growth of dancing and the performances of many nationally known bands. Dance contests and dance marathons were the new rage. Family reunions were held during the summer months and there was even an attempt to draw crowds by staging boxing matches.

We have to admit that the flow of alcohol was not completely stopped during this time period. As a result, there were three raids conducted by State Police and Federal Agents in the early 1920's, and the lake property was also raided in 1924 to break up a cockfighting activity. Arrests were made in all of these raids.

The 1930's saw a gradual decline at the lake as the popularity of the auto allowed people to leave our area and frequent much larger recreational facilities. In the later 1930's, just before WW11, roller skating became the new national craze. The dance floor area of the Lewis Hotel provided a perfect skating floor. This activity continued through the 1960's.

The old buildings at the lake finally fell to advanced age and lack of maintenance. The Town of Madison purchased the property, which had included the Leland and Lewis hotels, in 1984 and following an extensive cleanup project, a picnic pavilion and storage buildings were erected. This represented the beginning of the present Town of Madison Park. Today the park consists of approximately 19 acres at the northeast end of the lake. A swimming area with lifeguards on duty, picnic areas, and a playground is offered in the summer for those using the park and is enjoyed by many in the area.

Madison Lake has had a long and storied past. We are sure that it will continue to provide recreational enjoyment for many residents of the area in the years to come.