

Folklore, Facts Evoke Mystery, Beauty of Seneca

by FRED YAHN and
GLEND A GEPHART

The early people of Seneca Lake called it "the place of the stone."

Later, the lake would be called "a lovely vixen."

The images of the words may contradict, but the contradictions work together as over the ages have the myriad ways this lake has given back to the people who live and visit here.

Commerce, sustenance and recreation have been Seneca's gifts to its people.

In return, it has earned awe and respect that never have diminished.

Seneca Lake is the jewel of the glacially carved Finger Lakes, the central lake in a spectrum of lakes across central and western New York.

Its legends are many, from the pounding of the lake drums from its bottom, to the Wandering Chief.

Some still believe the lake is bottomless in spots, and it has rarely frozen over in recorded history.

Seneca is the largest of the 11 Finger Lakes by volume, 4.2 trillion gallons worth.

It is deepest of the Finger Lakes—618 feet at maximum—the second longest (35.1 miles; Cayuga Lake is 38.1 miles long), and the widest, 3.2 miles at its maximum and averaging 1.9 miles in width.

It has a 75.4-mile shoreline and drains an area of 707 square miles, inhabited by more than 60,000 people.

It has many moods and colors, and can swiftly change from a glasslike lagoon to a raging inland ocean.

'LOVELY VIXEN'

Rochester reporter and historian Arch Merrill wrote in his chapter on Seneca Lake in "Slim Fingers Beckon":

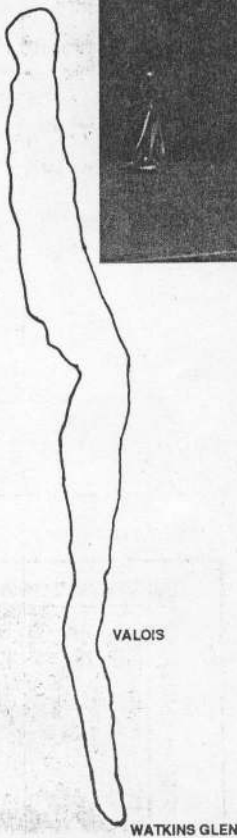
"Seneca Lake is a lovely vixen.

"Centuries ago the Red Men became enamored of its 36 miles of cold and shining water. They gave her the name of the mightiest nation of their confederacy. They made her wooded slopes where falling waters tinkled in the glens their happy hunting ground. But they never trusted her...

"But she could be so charming when she smiled that the Red Men forgave her tantrums and her guile. And they held her in deepest awe, for supernatural voices spoke from her spring-fed depths—with the dull rumble of hidden guns."

SENECA LAKE

GENEVA



Length: 35.1 miles.

Depth: 618 feet.

Watershed: 707 square miles.

Shoreline: 75.4 miles.

Commerce: Salt, grape-growing, tourism.

their distinctive booming.

THE LEGENDS

The lake guns are intertwined with the Senecas' legend of the Wandering Chief, Agayentah.

He was the tallest and bravest of the Seneca warriors, and one day, he was hunting a bear when he was surprised by a sudden storm. The chief sought refuge under a tree on a shoreline cliff.

A flash of lightning struck the tree, killing both chief and tree, and they fell into the lake.

When storm clouds gathered over Seneca the next day and the lake's guns were booming, the Seneca people saw a tree trunk, floating on the water's surface, protruding. It floated slowly around the lake, like a funeral barge.

Over the years, the Seneca people saw the barge again and again, and always in the deathlike stillness that preceded a storm.

When the drums roll, lake people still say, "The Wandering Chief is on the march."

We still look at Seneca Lake with awe and reverence. Those who live on the lake will tell you that it's the never the same, from day to day.

there—anywhere—from here.

While the schooners and barges of the 1800s are long gone, much of today's commerce in Schuyler County still depends on the lake.

Look to the two salt extraction operations on the southern shores in Watkins Glen.

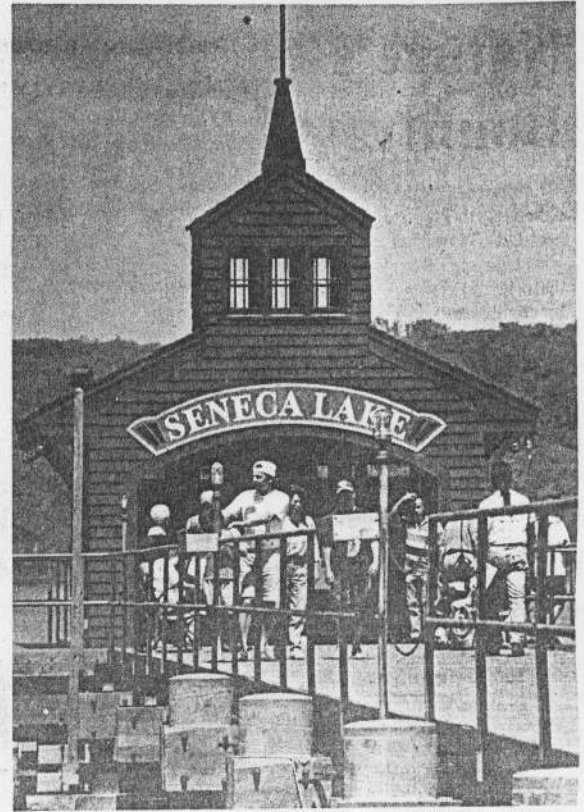
The hundreds of jobs at the facilities are possible because of the limitless water supply from the lake used in the evaporation process. In that process, water is pumped deep into the layer of salt far below the ground. When the water is pumped out and evaporated, the resulting salt is used for industrial and food processing purposes.

Much more visible is the area's grape-growing industry and its accompanying wineries.

Owing to its size and depth, the lake warms the surrounding hillsides in fall and winter, creating ideal conditions for growing grapes.

Today, the wineries of Seneca Lake join others in the Finger Lakes to make up the second largest wine region in the nation.

Recreational uses of the lake abound, not the least of which is its popularity with anglers look-



THE PIER AT SENECA HARBOR PARK in Watkins Glen at the southern end of Seneca Lake is popular with strollers and anglers year-round. The distinctive shelter has become a symbol for the lake. (photo by R.W. Gould)

researched series of articles on the Finger Lakes in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle. Kimball helped secure a \$70,000 Tripp Foundation grant and the Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association was launched.

Today, the advocacy group has 2,000 members and a tireless executive director, Mary Ruth Sweet, who has been with the group since its inception.

Sweet toils away in her small office on Franklin Street in Watkins Glen, writing newsletters and news releases, dealing with the public, organizing membership drives and committee work.

"I'd say Seneca Lake is in pretty good condition," says Sweet, whose group discovered early on that there's no definitive data base for Seneca and other Finger Lakes when it comes to water quality and similar barometers.

"That's one of our major goals, but it will certainly take time," she added.

Sweet's group also found there are very few zoning ordinances and regulations on the books concerning the lake, for the five counties, 23 townships, 11 villages and one city that are in

In the past four years the growing infestation of zebra mussels, not only in Seneca Lake but in other Northeastern lakes, has been added to the list of concerns.

The mussels, which can grow to 2 centimeters in length, eat precious algae and short-circuit the lakes' food chains. The zebra mussel also can wreak havoc with intake pipes at lakeside dwellings, water supply plants and industries.

"The mussels were first discovered in Seneca in 1992, and they've been growing in number ever since," Sweet said.

"There is some evidence that that they have a 15-year cycle, and that hopefully their population will crash. ... But there is really nothing that can be introduced into the lake to kill them off."

Certainly the heightened awareness of the dangers to Seneca Lake and the other Finger Lakes and the growth of advocacy groups, can only be good.

As Merrill wrote in "Slim Fingers Beckon":

"The white man has kept shifting the scenes along the lake that 'has no bottom, that never freezes,' whose Indian name

It seems those lake drums, some shore-dwellers say, have never been silenced. Scientists believe the booming sounds are caused by the popping of natural gas released from rock rifts at the lake's bottom.

When the gas fields around Tyrone, about 10 miles west of Watkins Glen, were being developed in the 1920s, the guns' booming was fainter. After the short-lived gas field gave all it had to give, the guns resumed

COMMERCE

Like many waterways, Seneca has been the key factor in commerce.

When the Erie Canal reached the Seneca and Cayuga River at the northern end of the lake in 1823, an already active shipping trade on the lake expanded.

Seneca Lake remains connected to the Erie Canal, now part of the New York State Canal System. Area residents proudly point out that a boater can get

ing for lake trout, Northern pike, bass, land-locked salmon and pickerel.

LAKE'S HEALTH

But, with people, come problems, and there is concern for the 12,500-year-old lake's future.

That's why Howard Kimball of Glenora, a longtime lakeside dweller, came up with the idea of a citizens' group to act as a watchdog for the lake—the Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association.

In 1990, after reading a well-

the lake's watershed and he on its shoreline.

"While there were few ordinances on the books, we found that people were very receptive to the model ordinances that we presented at many meetings," she said.

One of the big dangers to Seneca Lake's future is sedimentation and shoreline erosion. And there's always concern over unchecked development around the Finger Lakes.

means "place of the stone."

In the next century, the shifting of those scenes will likely determine Seneca Lake's fate.

To Join

To become member of the Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association, contact the group's office in Watkins Glen at 535-4753; or write to P.O. Box 290, Watkins Glen N.Y. 14891-0290.

