

Forge Village Beauty Recalled

By G. B. Seavey

(The author of this historical article is a resident of Belmont.)

Around 1864 the property was sold to Thomas S. Hittinger of Belmont, who not only operated large market gardens in that suburb for the residents of Boston, but is considered the first to ever export ice to the Caribbean and to other hot ports of the world. Ice cut from Fresh Pond in Cambridge was taken over a special spur track into Boston, then loaded on sailing vessels for many parts of the world. Packed in wet sawdust, the ice survived long days at sea to enhance the tables and drinks of the wealthy in hotter climates.

Hittinger noted that Forge Pond was ideally suited for his operations, being right on the railroad line, only some 35 miles by rail to Boston. It is also a sizeable pond with the Littleton-Westford town line splitting it in half, with 104 acres of water in Westford. A tiny bit of the lake lies in Groton.

HERE HE WENT into the ice business in a big way, as statistics later showed.

The cost of his new ice house, great even in these days, stood him \$65,000 including the steam engine which ran the endless chain from the lake up ramps to carry ice cakes to proper levels. As the icehouse gradually became filled, the cakes would have to be raised higher, then were chuted to whichever section of the icehouse which was being filled.

Another \$3000 went for the cost of tools. Even today, fishermen sometimes hook onto an old ice pike or chisel which some careless ice harvester dropped in the water many, many years ago.

When ice harvesting time came around, almost every man and boy in the area had a chance to go to work. It was in the dead of winter, the cakes were heavy, and it always was wet and frosty work. For the year 1881, records indicate that 175 were employed cutting ice, with 50 horses on the project. These animals were used to pull heavy saw blades that scored the ice, and also to pull the floats up to the loading entrance of the icehouse. Here the floats were broken up in long strips by men with iron bars with blades on the end, then into individual cakes before they were picked up by the revolving chains.

In this same year, Hittinger sent some 35,000 tons of ice to Boston for John P. Squire and the amount stored for the Southern market was 50,000 tons.

About 12-14 inches was the desired thickness for cutting ice. Some years, when the weather was cold and the water again froze to this thickness, it was possible to cut over the same area, thus bringing the supply closer to the center of operations.

When summer rolled around, campers were able to pick up broken hunks from ice cakes which were being loaded onto box cars, without charge, at the icehouse.

The contour of Forge Pond has changed but little over the past century or more. The late Julian A. Cameron, an officer of the Abbot Worsted Company, was heard to state one time, however, that the story had been told him that the pond, before it was dammed by the white man, covered about half its present expanse.

Instead of the swinging and dancing and other such innocent amusements which went on in old Excelsior Grove, today's vacationists find much pleasure at Forge Pond.

Bathers find the waters soft and clear, although late in the season, as the warmer waters up in the marshy tributaries of Beaver and Gilson Brooks send down harmless algae, the pond has never been known to become contaminated. Incidentally, canoeists find both of these meandering streams a delight to explore.

THE GASOLINE MOTORS have taken over most of the work of the man in the row-boat, although most fishermen still cling to the slower form of transportation. Incidentally, in recent years sizeable bass have been removed from Forge Pond, but not in such quantities as to cause an influx of hungry fishermen. The last one we heard about weighed just over five pounds, and was caught at 2 a. m. What patience!

And now summer residents report a slight decline in the number of speed boats on the lake with an increase in the use of sail power. Nearly every day this past season a flotilla of graceful and noiseless sailboats can be seen on Forge Pond. The art of sailing a trim little craft, in spite of the many variances of the winds on a small lake, may be overtaking the impulse of pushing a speed boat the full length of the lake, back and forth a few times . . . and then, no place else to go!

The lake is ideal for sailing. Crescent shape, it extends about one and one-half miles, mainly east to west. Its widest part is only a half-mile. This is at the western side of the lake, from where a marker sets off the joining of three old Colonial towns, Littleton, Groton and Westford, to Seavey's Cove, about midway on the eastern side of the lake. It is near this latter spot where the first summer campers came to Forge Pond, at the turn of the century.

Forge Pond is sometimes called Lake Mattawankee. No one seems to know how to spell this name because no one really knows where it came from. When some twenty acres of land at the upper western end of the lake were developed shortly after World War II, the land promoters used this Indian name extensively. Some forty years ago, we remember the name being used on a post card, with the English "interpretation or translation being the "smiling blue waters."

Most old timers still like the old historical name of Forge Pond and the group of power boat owners on the lake calls itself the Forge Pond Boat club.