The Improbable County

Hamilton County turns 200—against all odds

"Our stomachs live in towns.... That is where the work is. Our stomachs know this. But our hearts are usually somewhere else." —Alexander McCall Smith

THE HEARTS OF MILLIONS of people from towns, suburbs and cities across America reside in the Adirondacks. For 132,000, the People's Park is also our home, and the desires of what *The New York Times* once called "summer's plague of angels" provide the bread and butter that fill our stomachs in the seasonal tourist industry. For a slim minority of those—4,836 souls at the last decennial census—home, heart and stomach reside in Hamilton County, a conglomeration of nine towns, three hamlets and one incorporated village comprising a full 20 percent of the Adirondack Park. The county is the backdrop for a storied litany of Adirondack characters: French Louie, Sarah Sabattis, Pants Lawrence, Alvah Dunning, Foxey Brown, William West Durant. In 2016, Hamilton County marks its bicentennial, a milestone defying the dark predictions of almost everyone who put pen to paper to describe the county upon its birth.

Hamilton County in fact has several birthdays, for the region contained too few people to form an independent county upon its provisional creation in 1816. It would only meet the threshold to establish political autonomy several decades later, breaking free of Montgomery County in stages. Even then, it began its political life on a dubious note. The New York State Constitution as amended through 1846 held that "every county heretofore established and separately organized, except the county of Hamilton, shall always be entitled to one member of the assembly.... The county of Hamilton shall elect with the county of Fulton, until the population of the county of Hamilton shall, according to the ratio, be entitled to a member. But the legislature may abolish the said

Hamilton County farmers learned that altitude, rather than latitude, is the greatest enemy of North Country agriculture. Below: **This 1818 New York State map dismisses the county as a "wild barren tract."**

MAP COURTESY OF THE HAMILTON COUNTY HISTORIAN. FARM PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE BENSON TOWN HISTORIAN

market, but in the unpredictable labor market. Our dire winter unemployment rates are invariably published in the local paper with the caveat that "Hamilton County always has one of the highest unemployment rates in the winter and one of the lowest unemployment rates in the summer," but it is this very uncertainty that makes raising a family here such a risky business. Many Hamilton County workers live, year in and year out, with what optimists call "flexibility," but what might be plainly described as the "we'll-call-you-when-we-need-you" school of employment. For those in the tourist industry, a call from the boss is contingent upon the beneficence of mother nature, and in the harsh winter months especially, no snow means no work. With the prospect of retirement already a dubious one for even childless Generation Xers and Millennials nationwide, it is hardly surprising that fewer and fewer are choosing to raise families here.

Why do we fight to remain at all, here in Spafford's wild waste? To answer that question we must leave the terra firma of the historical record and enter the rocky waters of romantic speculation. Many stay out of sheer love: love of home, love of land, love of the singularity of real Adirondack life. Not the stuff of long weekends, annual vacations, seasonal retreats, planned retirements or distant dreams lived through the pages of a glossy magazine, but the hardscrabble struggle to remain rooted where our ancestors (of blood or spirit) planted their feet two centuries ago. And while love will not fill our stomachs, or make a roof over our heads, or fuel our vehicles across the long Adirondack miles, nonetheless Hamilton County history suggests that its people have an uncanny way of flouting the habitual forecasts of our downfall. Observers have been predicting our community's extinction for 200 years. We celebrate our bicentennial with a hope rooted in experience that we will once again defy history's odds.

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nizing a landscape that many deemed destined to repel all such overtures.

For a county that seemed liable to expire of its own accord, the next few decades would witness multiple attempts to hasten its demise. From its creation in 1816 all the way to 1930, proposals appeared in the state legislature to annex us to Fulton, Herkimer or Franklin Counties (and on one memorable occasion in 1905, to all three at once). Hamilton County remained, but it is little wonder that the county waited until 1940 to celebrate its centennial, for it hardly seemed stable enough to do so even a century after its provisional creation. As Stella King and Ted Aber, coauthors of *The History of Hamilton County* (1965), put it, "Politically, as physically, the Hamilton County of today has been hard won."

Why did our ancestors come at all? Aber and King suggest that those white farmers who did settle the county were sold a pig in a poke, convinced by the glowing accolades of early speculators, eager to buy cheap and sell dear, that the landscape would produce in spades if only plied with adequate labor and good intent. Alas, it was not to be. Growing nothing so well as rocks and roots, Hamilton County farmers learned the lesson articulated by surveyor Verplanck Colvin long before he set foot on Adirondack soil: that altitude, rather than latitude, is the greatest enemy of North Country agriculture. With unforgiving land and short growing seasons, farming reached its peak in Hamilton County in the 1880s. Lumbering, often a predatory colonial pursuit enriching the coffers of distant capitalistic interests far more than the local economy, lasted but little longer; by the mid-20th century the county was left to fall back on tourism for its survival.

While tourism is nearly as old as the county's forest extraction industry, it has never been a smooth ride. In the late 19th century, it took 26 hours to travel from New York City to Raquette Lake via rail to North Creek, coach to Blue Mountain Lake and boat on to the heart of the Adirondack Arcadia. The proliferation of passable roads has eased life in

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the county considerably, yet roads don't deliver pilgrims of their own accord. Adirondack tourism is contingent upon the vagaries of change in the pocket as well as change in the weather. In the 20th century, the promise of rubber-tire tourism augured by development of highways was offset by the growing affordability of luxury commodities—from air travel to air conditioning—to greater and greater numbers of American urbanites. Cities, in the process, became increasingly comfortable as well as increasingly interconnected, and the balsam Adirondack air, once believed so powerful as to cure afflictions of the body as well as the spirit, was no longer needed to remedy the maladies of urban modernity. Today, tourism is also subject to the caprice of climate change, bringing invasive species and unpredictable seasons. It is a difficult and precarious business, providing

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for the needs of urban hearts. If there is anything to celebrate in our county bicentennial, it is the bare fact that we are still here at all.

And yet, counties are strange animals. Largely invisible entities, they tend to go unnoticed by even their residents, save perhaps at tax time. While many of our visitors return to the same town, the same hamlet, the same lake and even the same cabin year after year, it is not entirely clear how many are even aware of crossing the border from surrounding counties on the way to these beloved destinations.

Like the Blue Line, the county boundary is a haphazard administrative imposition dividing communities that have more in common culturally, geographically and commercially with

places outside it than within it: Benson and Hope with Northville in Fulton County, Raquette Lake and Inlet with Old Forge in Herkimer County, Long Lake with Tupper Lake in Franklin County, Indian Lake with North Creek in Warren County. Town pride is invariably deeper, town business invariably more intriguing. In the grand American tradition of hyper-local politics, community sentiment vacillates between exultation and exasperation, particularly in nested municipalities where hamlets and villages vie with majority populations for resources from the parent entity. Even where no such formal divisions exist, subtle and not-so-subtle resentments occasionally bubble to the surface of the neighborhood scale, as when formidable Benson town supervisor Ermina Pincombe legendarily dismissed certain unruly residents as "Upper Benson Yahoos." At the broader scale, it often seems like Hamilton is two counties rather than one. An invisible Mason-Dixon Line runs between Indian Lake and Lake Pleasant, and in the longstanding Adirondack tradition of altitude constituting status, the residents of the southern borderlands are not infrequently subjected to the disdainful moniker of "flatlanders" by their northern betters, an epithet that can only be countered with a recapitulation of the geographical scope of the Blue Line, subtly communicating that "we're just as Adirondack as you."

The Blue Line is the most complicated border of all, a heavy cross borne at once proudly and painfully. The Blue Line is one of the few things that binds Hamilton County together as a reluctant community. Its existence is viewed almost ubiquitously in these parts as an instrument of the state's unquenchable thirst to gorge itself on more and more Forest Preserve, which currently covers about 67 percent of the county. "It's NO damn PARK. It's the ADIRONDACKS; it's our HOME; it's where we WORK" reads a sign in the chambers of the Hamilton County Board of Supervisors, wedged in a crack behind an oak windowsill by an irate citizen (or possibly supervisor). That sentiment unites most park-weary residents of what Frank Graham, author of *The Adirondack Park: A Political History*, once wryly termed "The Land of Mustn't Touch."

What the places of Hamilton County do share is extreme rurality. Hamilton County, whose landscape is 89 percent forested, is largely famous for what it lacks—a stoplight, a pharmacy, a hospital, a city. Clocking roughly three people per square mile, Hamilton is (depending on the authority) the most rural county east of New Mexico, Texas or the Mississippi River, distinguished in this regard even from our sister Blue Line county of Essex, with nearly eight times our population and many times our investment. Hamilton County, in short, has a whole lot of nothing, which is precisely what many seek in the peaceful quietude of our vast tenantless forest, standing within a day's drive of 84 million people from Montreal to Cleveland to New York to Washington.

The early settlers of Hamilton County were clearly prescient, for despite all predictions to the contrary, its lands would in short order become a much-sought commodity by the wealthiest Americans flaunting their conspicuous consumption in the resplendent Great Camps and their attendant infrastructure. Vestiges of the county's class extremes remain, as at Lake Kora (the former Kamp Kill Kare in Raquette), where one may partake of nature's bounty for a mere $20,000 per visit (to be fair, $15,000 in the off-season)—for some locals, nearly a year's wages.

Such a development was deemed inconceivable as late as the 1970s, when the looming prospect of private property regulation through the advent of the Adirondack Park Agency brought dire predictions that the landscape within its purview would quickly become worthless under the iron fist of the state. Whether in spite of the Private Land Use and Development Plan or because of it, precisely the opposite came to pass. While notorious New Jersey developer Roger Jakubowski dubbed the Adirondacks the "last nickel bargain in America" in the mid-1980s, nonetheless the price of lakefront property had

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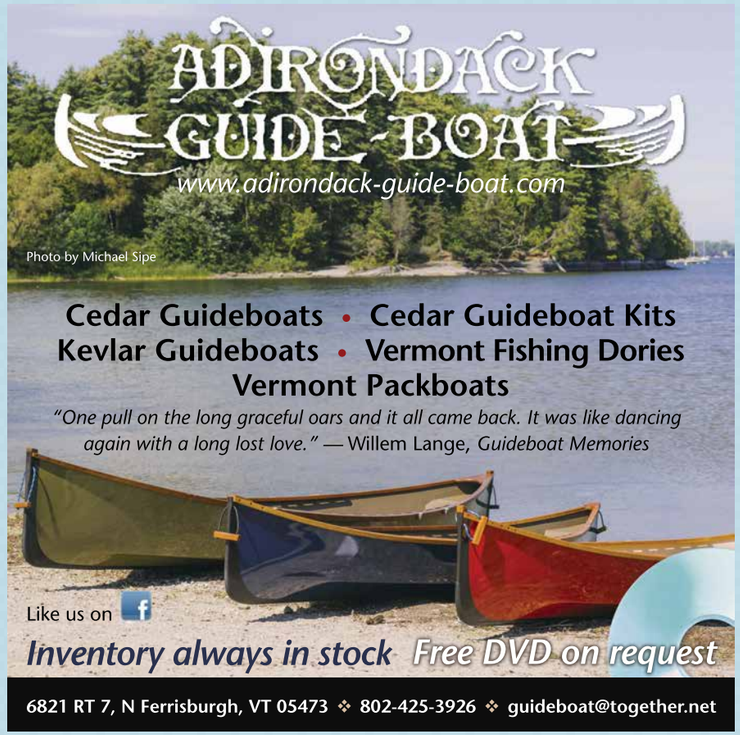

begun its steep ascent and today is a commodity far beyond the means of those residents whose household economies are entirely dependent upon the local labor market.

The shift from a landscape once relegated to the haunt of wolves to one fought over tooth and nail is a testament to the fickle tides of human taste in the face of astonishing change, the Adirondacks becoming more and more precious as America's original wilderness vanished beneath the plow and the pavement. And yet, that affection remains equivocal for most. Seasonal residents prefer the county primarily when covered with the gentle mantle of summer and flee for greener pastures when confronted with the hard reality of the mountains stripped to their bones through the long winter. In the main, it takes a particular kind of mettle to live here full time, and Hamilton County residents take justifiable pride in both the will and the ability to do so.

More and more of us are finding that hard to do. The county approaches its bicentennial in the face of a crisis which haunts the entire North Country: demographic decline. In this, we are hardly alone. After the respite of the "rural rebound" of the 1980s and 1990s, rural America is again on the wane. In 2007, the United Nations Population Fund declared the dawn of the Urban Millennium, in which, for the first time, more people were living in cities than otherwise. We are becoming not only an urban nation, but an urban planet. Yet the devil is in the detail when it comes to demography. In a county which began small and remained so, the absolute numbers are less concerning than the imbalance in our age cohorts, with nearly 30 percent of our residents aged 19 and under having disappeared from the census since the year 2000, a fact reflected in the recent loss of both Piseco and Raquette Lake schools. Increasingly, Hamilton is no county for young men and women, and the same predicament which drives people out prevents prospective settlers from coming in.

That predicament is one of precarity, not only in the gentrified housing

market, but in the unpredictable labor market. Our dire winter unemployment rates are invariably published in the local paper with the caveat that "Hamilton County always has one of the highest unemployment rates in the winter and one of the lowest unemployment rates in the summer," but it is this very uncertainty that makes raising a family here such a risky business. Many Hamilton County workers live, year in and year out, with what optimists call "flexibility," but what might be plainly described as the "we'll-call-you-when-we-need-you" school of employment. For those in the tourist industry, a call from the boss is contingent upon the beneficence of mother nature, and in the harsh winter months especially, no snow means no work. With the prospect of retirement already a dubious one for even childless Generation Xers and Millennials nationwide, it is hardly surprising that fewer and fewer are choosing to raise families here.

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