

# MONDAY IN JULY LAST DAY

A BOATER WHO HAD BEEN PARTYING ALL DAY COLLIDED WITH A FAMILY TAKING AN EVENING CRUISE ON LAKE GEORGE. THE FAMILY—AND LAKE GEORGE—WILL NEVER BE THE SAME BY LISA BRAMEN

CHARLOTTE McCUE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HER FAMILY

## VIDEO FOOTAGE FROM A BOATHOUSE SECURITY CAMERA SHOWS LAKE GEORGE CALM AND QUIET ON THE EVENING OF JULY 25, 2016.

It's after 9 p.m. and twilight has turned to darkness, making it hard to discern much other than the lights from homes on the far shore and the erratic, looping flight patterns of insects in the foreground.

Around 9:24, a boat—appearing only as a row of three lights—enters from the left, moving slowly. It is followed shortly after by a much faster boat with a single light, which soon catches up with the slow boat. The lights mingle briefly in a confusing jumble before the slower boat, now with two lights, drifts out of the frame. The other boat bobs in the water. The insects continue their oblivious aerobatics.

The eeriness of this silent footage, shown at the trial of Alexander West—the driver of the faster boat—is heightened by the knowledge of what it depicts: a horrific collision that took the life of an eight-year-old girl, seriously injured her mother, and upended the lives of everyone involved.

**THAT MORNING**, Eric McCue woke up around 10, disappointed to have slept in on his first day of vacation after being apart from his family for three weeks. McCue, the CEO of a skincare company, had stayed behind in California to work while his wife, Courtney, and their three kids—Madison, 10, Charlotte, eight, and Cooper, four—began their annual summer visit to the Lake George home of Courtney's father and stepmother, Robert and Christine Knarr.

Eric and the kids spent most of the day by the water, fishing and swimming. The Knarrs' 1920s Tudor home sits on a rise at the tip of Cramer Point, with paths leading down to the lake. The boathouse faces onto a small bay, affording a bit of quiet despite being in a busy section of the lake.

Bob Knarr had been coming to Lake George since the 1960s, when he and his high-school buddies hitchhiked from their Connecticut hometown. After he had a family

and moved to Clifton Park, Bob and his first wife bought a boat to take their children, Keegan and Courtney, for rides on weekends. When they moved back to Connecticut they would rent a vacation home on the lake before eventually buying their own.

**Charlotte McCue jumps off her grandparents' Lake George boathouse, four years before a boat crash took her life. Her family recently provided this image for a boater-safety campaign around Lake George.**

Through a second marriage, the kids growing up and moving away—Keegan to Florida and Courtney settling in Carlsbad, near San Diego—and the arrival of grandchildren, the lake remained a constant.

**BY THE TIME** Eric McCue woke up on July 25, 24-year-old Alex West was already out on the water in his family's 21-foot Larson powerboat. He was on his way to Log Bay Day, an annual party held on the last Monday in July. West, a 2010 graduate of Lake George High School, grew up boating on the lake. After graduation he studied business at Castleton University, in Vermont, for a few semesters. A former ski racer, he moved to Colorado to work for the winter season, returning to his parents' Lake George home in summers.

He picked up some friends—Morland Keyes, Matt Marry, Kristine Tiger and Cara Mia Canale, all in their 20s—at Marry and Tiger's apartment in Kingsbury, southeast of Lake George, around 8:30 a.m., Canale testified at West's trial. They stopped to buy beer before heading to Marine Village resort, where West worked and where his family's boat was moored.

They got into the Larson and picked up three more passengers—Matt Peterson, Shelby Gordon and Montana Reilly—in Diamond Point. By 10:30 a.m., they were headed across the lake to Log Bay.

**LOG BAY DAY BEGAN** around 1997 as a way for Lake George locals to celebrate the season with a day of revelry on the water. In the early years, the band Half-Step would set up on a parasail raft and play to a flotilla of a few dozen boats, as well as others who drove by car to the Shelving Rock area and hiked down a short trail. As word of mouth spread and attendance grew, so did arrests for underage drinking, driving while intoxicated and other offenses. There were environmental concerns, too, over the effects of litter and the collective waste of hundreds of people wading in the water for hours. Law enforcement always maintained a heavy presence on and around the bay that day.

In 2016, despite a slightly lower turnout than usual, police made 26 arrests. One man broke his neck when he dove from a boat into shallow water.

**THE KNARRS MOVED** to Lake George year-round in 2014. Bob, the CEO of a Connecticut-based medical-device company, works from his home office and travels frequently. He spent much of July 25th preparing for a meeting in Chicago the next day.

Sometime that afternoon he took a break to go food shopping at Jacobs & Toney, in Warrensburg, with Christine and their eight-year-old granddaughter, Charlotte. The McCues' middle child—blonde, freck-

led, with a Pippi Longstocking fashion sense and a raspy voice her family jokingly attributed to a Pall Mall habit—was always game for an outing with Nana and Poppy. She adored her time at the lake. At school introductions in Carlsbad, the Knarrs recalled, she stood and said, “My name is Charlotte McCue and I’m from Lake George.”

Around 5 p.m., Courtney and the Knarrs prepared dinner. Bob had a glass of wine as they cooked, and another during the meal. He had been taking a beta-blocker since undergoing heart surgery in June, but his doctor had cleared him to drink in moderation. After dinner the family decided to take the Knarrs’ 28-foot antique GarWood for a “putt-putt” cruise to help the children wind down for bedtime. The 1928 boat has three cockpits, one in the rear and two in front of the engine. Eric sat in the back with Madison and Cooper; Courtney and Charlotte sat in the middle; and the Knarrs sat in front, with Bob as pilot.

They pulled out of their boathouse around 8:35 p.m., then took their usual route north through the no-wake zone by Speaker Heck Island, crossing the lake and then heading south along the Cleverdale shoreline. On the way back, Madison asked to move to the front with her grandparents. Charlotte fell asleep with her head on her mother’s lap.

Christine looked behind her and gave a sigh of gratitude over a wonderful family evening. They were almost home.

according to Reilly and Canale, though neither could say for sure whether he finished it.

Canale has struggled with heroin addiction and admitted to relapsing since the crash. She often appeared confused on the witness stand, though she insisted she recalled many details clearly. She and other witnesses (some of whom were in various states of intoxication themselves) said they saw no physical signs—stumbling, slurring words—that West was impaired.

After dinner, Reilly, Peterson and Gordon parted ways with the other five, who took the boat south toward Marine Village. West was at the wheel. At some point, Canale testified, Marry asked West’s speed, to which he replied 30 or 35 miles per hour.

**THE GARWOOD** was near the shoreline just past Cooper Point when the Knarrs heard a series of booms, then a splash. Eric testified that he saw the bow of a white boat out of the corner of his eye. It crossed over the GarWood at an angle, exiting near Courtney and Charlotte. For a stunned moment, he was amazed no one was hurt. Then he heard his wife screaming. He went over the engine compartment to reach her and Charlotte.

The left side of Courtney’s torso was sliced open. Charlotte was limp, her damaged arm hanging off the seat. Eric told Courtney not to come near and covered his daughter with a blanket.

## LOG BAY DAY BEGAN AROUND 1997 AS A WAY FOR LAKE GEORGE LOCALS TO CELEBRATE THE SEASON WITH A DAY OF REVELRY ON THE WATER. AS WORD OF MOUTH SPREAD AND ATTENDANCE GREW, SO DID ARRESTS FOR UNDERAGE DRINKING, DRIVING WHILE INTOXICATED AND OTHER OFFENSES.

**THOUGH NO ONE** could say definitively how much alcohol Alex West consumed at Log Bay Day, several witnesses testified to seeing him drink beer at various times throughout the day. In one photograph time-stamped 2:27 p.m., West is holding what appears to be a beer bottle (he later told police he had stopped drinking by 1 p.m.). Multiple witnesses also saw him smoking “dabs,” or concentrated cannabis, and snorting cocaine.

Canale and Reilly testified that West and Matt Marry had prearranged for Marry to drive the Larson as they left Log Bay Day, because Marry wasn’t a drinker—dabs were his intoxicant of choice—and it was thought he would have a better chance of clearing the gauntlet of law enforcement surrounding the bay.

Around 6 p.m., Marry piloted the boat to Bolton Landing, where the group planned to go out for dinner. On the way there, Reilly testified, West was flirtier than usual (they had briefly dated, but West had broken it off), which she took to mean he was as drunk as she was. Canale, who said she had been up the night before tripping on LSD, fell asleep in the cuddy cabin, waking when they arrived at the Bolton public docks. They went to the Huddle, where Reilly sat next to West; they both ordered pot stickers and Moscow mules. West ordered a second cocktail,

In the chaos and trauma, the Knarrs and McCues weren’t focused on what the Larson was doing. If anyone called out to ask if they were hurt, they didn’t hear it. The GarWood, still in gear, continued moving. Christine, initially too flustered to unlock her phone, managed to call 911 as Bob steered them to their boathouse. “We’ve been hit and there are two seriously injured,” she told the dispatcher. “They just tore apart our boat. Oh my gosh, please. Hurry, hurry.... Please hurry.”

**WHEN THE LARSON** went airborne, Canale testified, she initially thought they had hit something sticking out of the water, not a boat. She and West, in his statement to police the next morning, say they never saw the GarWood until they hit it.

After she had collected herself and saw that everyone on the Larson was unhurt, though in shock, Canale said she noticed the taillights of the GarWood driving away and heard screaming. “There was no way any of us could have known there was a fatality,” she testified, “but I knew what had happened was not good.” She said she distinctly recalls West punching the steering wheel and saying, “But I had the right of way!”

The lights on the Larson were flickering, and the boat wasn’t



Clockwise from above: Alex West was sentenced to five to 15 years for his role in the boat collision that killed Charlotte McCue. The eight-year-old was visiting her grandparents on Lake George. West had spent the day of the crash at Log Bay Day, an annual party on the lake.

CHARLOTTE MCCUE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HER FAMILY; ALEXANDER WEST AND LOG BAY DAY PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE POST-STAR (2)

running properly. West told police, “We were yelling, ‘Hey, are you all right? Do you need help?’ But they kept going so we thought maybe they were trying to avoid us.”

West said he was concerned about sinking, so he continued south to find a place he could safely dock. He settled on Tea Island Resort, a sister property of Marine Village.

**GREGORY GUERRIERI**, on vacation from Pennsylvania, was renting the house next door to the Knarrs’. On the evening of July 25, he and his mother were sitting on the porch facing the water when he heard what he judged to be a speeding boat and then a crash, followed by screaming. He ran inside to call 911, then hurried down to the water. He testified he saw two boats close together, and recognized one as the Knarrs’ boat, heading towards him. “I said to keep an eye on the other boat.... I remember saying to my mother, ‘That fucker’s leaving!’”

Just south of Cramer Point, several campers at Hearthstone Point also heard the crash and “blood-curdling” screams and called 911. Other vacationers to the north of Cramer Point jumped in a boat and went looking for the crash scene, but by the time they got there the boats were gone.

Ronald Miller, who lives on the east side of the lake, was driving his boat to pick up his daughter and son-in-law at the Inn at Erlowest, an upscale restaurant north of Lake George village, when he saw a slow-moving white powerboat with no lights on. He described the occupants as huddled in the boat and said they didn’t say anything or signal that they were in distress. “I was pissed off,” he testified. “I almost had an accident and I didn’t want anything to do with them.” When he arrived at the Inn at Erlowest he called 911 to report the boat as a hazard.

Around 9:30, a police detective from Cheektowaga, Timothy

Turnbull, had just arrived at Tea Island Resort for a week-long vacation. He was on the sun deck with his fiancée when they heard emergency vehicles. “Honestly, I thought, I drove five hours to get away from this,” he testified.

He heard a slow-moving, gurgling boat approach and pull into an open slip. Turnbull looked through the railing and saw a boat with no lights, with a group of people in their 20s. He heard whispering and shushing, and heard a blonde female say, “Don’t you dare text or call anyone.” As they headed uphill toward Lake Shore Drive, the blonde said, “Everybody shut the fuck up.”

Turnbull called police and asked if they were looking for anyone, then relayed what he had witnessed.

**MICHAEL KENNY** was at his apartment, a half-mile up a steep hill from Tea Island Resort, when his friends Alex West and Matt Marry knocked on his door, around 10 p.m. Kenny testified that West told him he had “messed up,” without specifying how, and asked for a ride. Kenny said he had to work early in the morning, so West and Marry went to ask Kenny’s roommate, Kyle Schoonover.

Schoonover testified that West told him he had run out of gas. Though he didn’t believe him, he said, “I assumed I was a designated driver and regardless of the reason I was doing the right thing.”

It wasn’t until they got outside that Schoonover realized there were three others who needed a ride. He described the mood of the group as strangely quiet as (Continued on page 81)

**LAST MONDAY IN JULY**  
*Continued from page 53*

they drove to Glens Falls, where they dropped Keyes off, and then to Marry and Tiger's apartment. "I had an uncomfortable feeling that something had gone on," he said.

The next morning, when he learned about the crash, he and Kenny called police and gave statements.

**COURTNEY MCCUE** was taken to Glens Falls Hospital with serious injuries. As Bob Knarr waited in the hospital's quiet room, Warren County Sheriff's investigator John Maday came and asked him to take a Breathalyzer test. Upset and concerned about Courtney's condition, he said he would do it in about an hour. When asked again later, he became angry. "They couldn't find the people who had run over my boat and killed my granddaughter," he testified. "I said I had called my lawyer and he said I didn't have to."

His refusal led Maday to request a warrant to administer a blood test. After a CT scan revealed Courtney had a fractured spine she was transferred to Albany Medical Center. Knarr told Maday he would take the Breathalyzer and admitted he hadn't really called a lawyer, but once a warrant had been requested Maday had to follow through with the blood test. The test, taken at 1:30 a.m., showed a 0.0 alcohol level.

**MARTIN AND CASSIE WEST** were watching television around 10:30 p.m. when they saw the news about a boating accident on Lake George. They hadn't spoken to their son, Alex, since noon or so, but were aware he had been out on the boat. "Whenever you hear about an accident, you worry" about your child, Cassie West said, in a joint phone interview with her husband.

Martin said that his son had standing permission to use the Larson and had never given them reason to fear he would act irresponsibly. "He took good care of it," Martin said, and had never been in any kind of trouble—"Zero."

They grew more worried when Warren County Sheriff's Office Major James LaFarr came to their house in the middle of the night and began asking questions about the boat and

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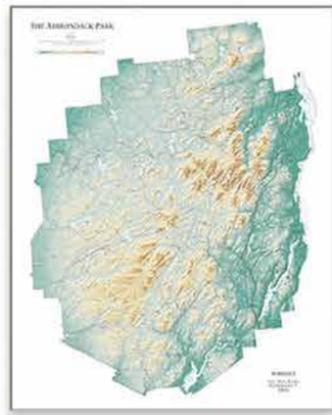
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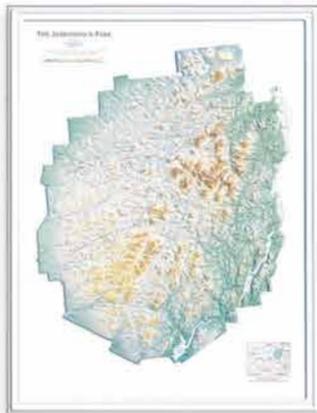
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### LAST MONDAY IN JULY

Alex's possible whereabouts, without confirming that he had been involved in an accident.

Cara Mia Canale, asleep on Matt Marry and Kristine Tiger's couch, was awakened at 3:30 a.m. by Marry telling West his mother was calling. She testified that West was frantic, saying, "I have to leave, the cops are coming."

By the time state police arrived at the apartment, at 4 a.m., West and Canale were gone. The investigator confiscated Marry and Tiger's cell phones. Data extraction revealed Marry's phone had been used to search for news about the crash with a browser that doesn't track history; there were also text messages from and calls to Cassie West's phone shortly after LaFarr's visit.

The Wests said they didn't tell Alex about Charlotte until morning because of an anxiety disorder that arose during college, after a close friend's suicide. "That really changed him," Martin said, but until the crash, "the old Alex seemed to be coming back."

Alex went to the Warren County Sheriff's Office around 7 a.m. on July 26. He told investigators he had stopped drinking early because he wasn't feeling well. He claimed to have been going about 25 miles per hour and to have been paying close attention to his surroundings, but the other boat "came out of nowhere." He said, "I have nothing to hide, it was a complete accident."

Explaining why he hadn't immediately called police, he said, "I did not make very good choices. I should have reached out to you right away, I was just so scared."

When Maday asked him if he knew a child had died, he said, "It's really sad," and put his head down, apparently crying. "I just wish I would have saw them."

He consented to take a blood test, which detected marijuana, cocaine and MDMA—Ecstasy—but his lawyers noticed a discrepancy in the dates on the warrant. Prosecutors decided not to use the test at trial, opting to establish drug use through other means.

West was charged with 12 counts, including second-degree manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide and

leaving the scene of an accident. The passengers were charged with hindering a prosecution and giving false statements; Canale agreed to testify in a plea deal after another arrest, for driving while intoxicated, in September.

**PUBLIC INTEREST** in the case was intense, with online commenters forming a virtual pitchfork mob and calling West spoiled and selfish. His parents said that characterization couldn't be further from the truth. The Alex they described is "a good kid" who loves hiking with his dog and spending time with family; a hard worker who enjoyed sharing his knowledge of Lake George with tourists; a person of deep faith. "He's not the monster he's portrayed as," said Martin West.

The Wests hired a prominent defense lawyer from Albany, Cheryl Coleman, who tried to have the case moved outside of Warren County, but Judge John Hall was unswayed. It took two days to impanel a jury.

There was standing-room only in the courtroom for opening statements in May. Warren County District Attorney Kate Hogan personally prosecuted the case, along with her lead assistant D.A., Jason Carusone. They called nearly 40 witnesses, including a boat accident reconstruction specialist who testified the damage to the two boats showed the Larson approached the GarWood at an angle that would mean West was in an overtaking position and did not have the right of way. Even if he had, marine law experts said, he was still responsible for avoiding a collision. The coroner who handled Charlotte McCue's autopsy testified that she died instantly from head injuries sustained from the Larson's propeller.

Charlotte's family gave emotional testimony. At one point the jury was shown a photograph of a bruise on Courtney McCue's left thigh, which she explained was where her daughter's head had been at the time of the impact. "I still have a bruise," she said, "a nine-month-old bruise."

The defense tried to poke holes in Hogan's case by calling into question witnesses' recollections, pointing out

### LAST MONDAY IN JULY

clerical mistakes in law enforcement reports and questioning why Robert Knarr was treated differently from West by investigators.

The defense hired its own expert to rebut the prosecution's theory of the angle of impact—a retired FBI agent and boater who wasn't trained in accident reconstruction and who didn't personally inspect the boats until the day before testifying. He contended that the Larson hit the GarWood at closer to a 90-degree angle, which would mean West had the right of way.

West did not testify. In closing statements, Coleman conceded her client had erred in not immediately reporting the accident. "Who remembers what it's like to be 24?" she said. "Who remembers what it's like to be dumb?"

After two days of deliberation, the jury found West guilty on all but four counts, the ones related to drug impairment. At the sentencing hearing, on June 5, Judge Hall allowed three family members to read impact statements: Courtney McCue, Christine Knarr and Bob Knarr, who read Eric McCue's statement because he couldn't "bear to be in the same room as" West.

Courtney described the physical and emotional pain she has endured since the crash, saying she feels like an empty shell of a human, a zombie. "We will always look to the lake with sadness and grief," she said. "How do we get our kids to feel safe again?"

Christine Knarr noted that four-year-old Cooper had originally thought that pirates had taken his sister. She said Charlotte had shown more integrity in her eight years than Alex West had in his 24, calling his boat "a loaded gun" after he had partied all day.

West gave a brief statement, saying that he is haunted every day by having had a part in Charlotte's death.

Judge Hall sentenced West to five to 15 years in state prison. His lawyer said they will appeal the verdict.

A few days later, Charlotte's family filed a lawsuit against West, his parents, and the passengers on the Larson, except Canale. They are asking for three-million dollars in damages for the survivors; a wrongful-death

suit will follow once Charlotte's estate is settled. It's not about the money, the Knarrs said, it's the principle. People who drink or do drugs and get behind the wheel of any vehicle "need to know that they're going to be held accountable," Bob said.

If authorities have their way, Log Bay Day 2016 was the last. Law enforcement agencies have a plan to keep partiers out of the bay that day. Boat patrols have increased throughout the summer, and Lake George marinas will be required to show renters a safety video before letting them on the water. Marinas and restaurants are being offered training to spot people who have had too much to drink. The Knarrs recently donated a drug-detection device—akin to a Breathalyzer—to the Warren County Sheriff's Office.

**IN MID-JUNE**, Bob and Christine Knarr sat in their kitchen facing the lake that had once been their sanctuary. They paged through photo albums representing years of memories—Charlotte making silly faces, posing with her siblings, jumping off the boat-house, fearless at age four.

They described the flashbacks that descend like a movie screen in front of them. Therapy has helped, they said, but the trial forced them to relive the horror. In some ways it was even worse than the actual crash, because now they know what each of the others on their boat experienced.

They've put the house on the market, unsure if they want to stay. Forming her hands into a ball, Christine said the lake has been the nucleus of the family, "so the fact that Charlotte was killed here hurts to the depths of our souls."

Asked where else they might go, they exchanged a look. "We never thought at this time in our life we would have to start over," Bob said.

Christine said they have days when they are ready to fight to salvage their love for this place, and others when they wonder if they can ever recapture some of their former happiness. What it may come down to, she said, is a question: "Are we going to let Alex West take Lake George from us?" ▲

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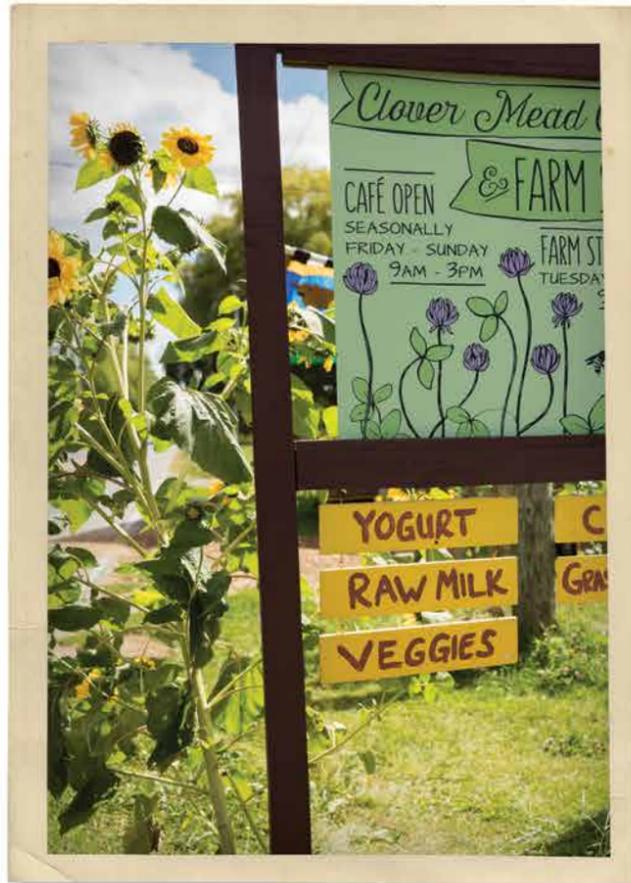
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# SEEDS OF REVIVAL

HOW A WAVE OF NEW FARMERS IS TRANSFORMING ESSEX COUNTY TOWNS

BY LISA BRAMEN  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA J. GODFREY

**FOR 169 YEARS THE ESSEX COUNTY FAIR** has celebrated the region's agricultural heritage. But lately attendance for the five-day extravaganza of fried food, livestock exhibitions, carnival rides and demolition derbies in Westport has wobbled. One explanation—"Farming is just dying in Essex County"—was related to Schroon Lake business owner Lisa Marks about a year ago.

"I was astounded that anyone could make that statement," says Marks. After all, the county's thriving local food scene was one of the things that had lured her and her husband, Edward, to open Pine Cone Mercantile and North Woods Bread Company here in 2015. "I think [local farming] is more vibrant than ever," she says.

Which impression is more accurate depends on your frame of reference. Historically speaking, the pessimists have a point: Once a mainstay of the Adirondack economy, agriculture slid steadily from its peak around the turn of the 20th century, when the Champlain Valley had more sheep than people, until the dawn of the 21st.

But there are hopeful signs that the tide is beginning to turn. In 2007, for the first time in more than a century, the United States Department of Agriculture census noted an uptick in both the number of farms and amount of acreage used for farming in Essex County. By 2012, the last time the census was conducted, the amount of farmland had grown by almost 5,000 acres over the last dozen years.

Since then, even more farmers have moved in. But in many cases they are doing things differently from their predecessors.

Rather than milking a herd of cows or planting a field of corn and selling it to a major producer from away—the conventional model—these new farmers are part of the small-farm or local-food movement, focused on creating a food system that feeds the community they live in and keeps the money circulating locally. They espouse a commitment to healthy food and a healthy environment, with a general tendency toward organic practices. Racey Henderson, of Reber Rock Farm, calls this ethos the "triple bottom line," balancing the financial, social and ecological aspects of their business.

In the process, these farmers are changing not just the local agriculture scene, but the county's economy, culture, tourism and—crucially—its demographics.

**ON A SATURDAY EVENING** in April 2016, Dogwood Bread Company, in Wadhams, was packed. The crowd, primarily farmers, skewed well below the median age—46—of the Essex County population at large. They mingled over wood-fired pizza topped with local ingredients before settling down to the evening's business: the inaugural meeting of the Adirondack Farmers Coalition, a local chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition.

Sophie Ackoff, field director for the Hudson Valley-headquartered group, explained its mission as "organizing to make it easier to start and stay in farming." She said the Adirondack launch represented the organization's biggest number of new members they'd ever had at one time.

In a place like the Adirondacks, where hand-wringing over the aging population is

*Clockwise from top left: Juniper Hill Farm vegetables at the Adirondack Harvest Festival. North Country Creamery's Clover Mead Café, Ausable Brewing Company and Mace Chasm Farm have turned their rural Keeseville road into a locavore destination.*

~~~~~  
“Helping a farm and keeping it going creates all kinds of jobs, not just on the farms. It has this multiplier effect that’s hard to quantify.”  
~~~~~

a perennial topic of discussion, any influx of young adults is notable. As paper mills, mines and other major employers have closed or moved elsewhere over the last few decades, young people have been forced to leave the region after high school—and few return. The exodus has affected everything from school attendance to health-care costs. The young farmers moving in, and in some cases starting families, represent one of the few bright spots in the overall demographic picture.

Though similar pockets are popping up throughout the Adirondack Park, the small-farm trend is most pronounced in Essex County, particularly in the Champlain Valley. The reason for this is simple: the same things that made it a farming mecca a century ago are still working in its favor. With rolling hills spilling gently toward the western shore of Lake Champlain, this region has always stood apart from the rest of the Adirondacks, resembling parts of Vermont or the Hudson Valley more than the High Peaks. Its fertile soils and availability of farmland make it appealing to young people looking to start a farm. And, compared to Vermont and the Hudson Valley, the land is relatively affordable, especially with grants from land-conservation organizations such as the Open Space Institute and the Essex-based Eddy Foundation.

But it will take more than cheap property to entice young farmers to move here—and to keep them here.

In early 2016 the Wild Center, in Tupper Lake, released a report it had commissioned called “Connecting Millennials to the Adirondacks.” While it was geared toward tourism, the report’s insights—especially Millennials’ attitudes about food—could easily apply to attracting more young people in general. Sixty-four percent of survey respondents said they were interested in food, wine and breweries, and 66 percent said they were interested in farmers’ markets. Overall, food quality is a high priority to Millennials, the generation born from about 1981 to 2000.

Courtney Grimes-Sutton, 34, who started Keeseville’s Mace Chasm Farm with her husband, Asa Thomas-Train, in 2013, says the study’s conclusions ring true. “Our generation wants to learn something when they go somewhere,



Seventeen-piece New Orleans brass band Wit's End performs al fresco at Mace Chasm Farm.

spends more on food than any other generation and wants spaces to hang out. We need more gathering places. Nothing else is going to keep young people here.”

In some Essex County communities, the farms themselves are becoming gathering places. A couple times a year, Grimes-Sutton and Thomas-Train host their friends’ bands for concerts on their property. Last August, while traditional New Orleans jazz band Tuba Skinny performed in the barn, the couple served gumbo and boudin sausage from their food truck. “If there’s food, it becomes an event,” Grimes-Sutton says.

On Thursday nights throughout the warmer months, the couple park their food truck across the road at Ausable Brewing Company, cooking up tacos from their own pasture-raised meats and other local ingredients; they also

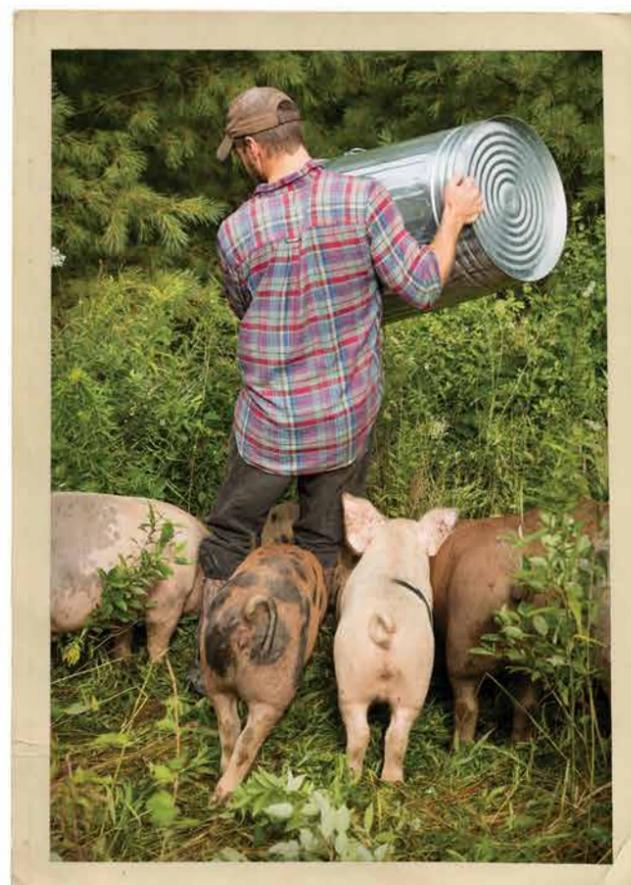
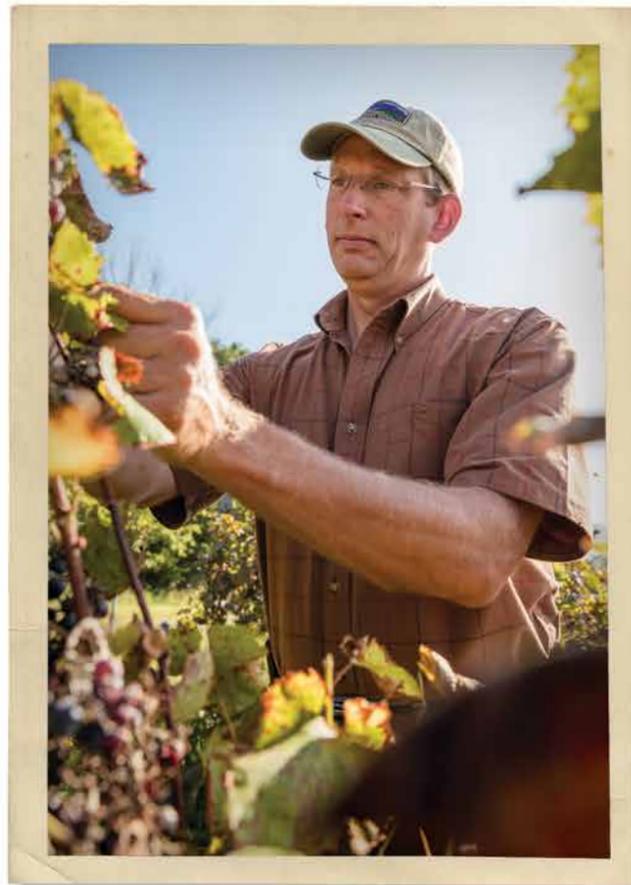
bring it to special events around the region. The food truck doesn’t add a lot to their income, Grimes-Sutton says, but it’s important as “a gateway to buying our food.”

Between Mace Chasm Farm, Fledging Crow Vegetables, North Country Creamery’s Clover Mead Café, and Ausable Brewing Company—operating under the state’s farm brewery license that Governor Andrew Cuomo established in 2013—this little section of rural Keeseville has been transformed into a destination for the locavore set.

Sugar House Creamery plays a similar role in Upper Jay, a sleepy hamlet with fewer than 300 residents (see “Sugar House Creamery,” June 2015). On Sundays from late October to early June, Margot Brooks and Alex Eaton, 32 and 33, respectively, host the Snowy Grocery, a scaled-down farmers’ market, after the one at Marcy Field closes for the

season. Locals come to fill their reusable bags with freshly baked scones, beets and hockey puck-size wheels of Little Dickens, Sugar House’s soft-ripened cheese, but there’s more to it than stocking the refrigerator. “It’s also about connecting communities,” says Brooks. “People who [come to] live here want to live intentionally, and they want good food that’s nourishing.”

If anywhere is the cultural center of the Essex County farming scene, it’s the Whallonsburg Grange, smack in the middle of the highest concentration of farms in the county. The revival of this community center, which dates to the Champlain Valley’s original farming heyday, is representative of the burgeoning local farm movement as a whole. Nearly every week the 102-year-old building, renovated in 2008 after decades of disuse, hosts cooking classes, film



screenings, lectures or square dances.

In August, Kristin Kimball, of Essex Farm, introduced a guest speaker on farming and the environment. Standing in front of the grange hall's recently restored painted theater curtain, Kimball said, "In the 13 years we've been farming here we've seen a community of farmers spring up. While headlines in the rest of the country are all about agricultural decline, in our little area we have headlines about agricultural growth."

**KRISTIN AND MARK KIMBALL** were the pioneers of the small-farm movement in Essex County, a story Kristin detailed in her 2011 memoir *The Dirty Life*. Directly and indirectly, the Kimbells were responsible for bringing other young farmers to the area. Some, like James Graves and Sara Kurak, of Full and By Farm, in Essex, and Courtney Grimes-Sutton, of Mace Chasm, came to the Adirondacks to work at Essex Farm before starting their own ventures.

The Kimbells formed the Essex Farm Institute in 2012 to offer on-farm experience to beginning farmers. In 2016, the organization changed its mission to focus on supporting the farmers in the community through farm visits and workshops on topics like welding and protecting livestock from predators. Racey Henderson, of Reber Rock Farm, joined as program coordinator, a position that dovetails nicely with her experience as a rural development consultant in Africa.

Henderson, 39, is another Essex Farm alum; she met her husband, Nathan, when she worked there between stints in Africa. When the couple, along with partner Chad Vogel, went looking for their own farm, in 2012, they initially avoided Essex out of concern the area couldn't support another draft horse-powered operation like the Kimbells' and Full and By Farm, but they found the perfect spread a few miles away.

So far, the region isn't oversaturated, in part because farmers are finding ways

*Clockwise from top left: Jori Wekin launched the Hub on the Hill, in Essex, to support the growing local food movement. Jay White is starting a vineyard and winery in Essex, part of a new emphasis on agritourism in the region. Dillon Klepetar feeds the pigs at Echo Farm, in Whallonsburg, which exclusively provides food for custom weddings. Courtney Grimes-Sutton, of Mace Chasm Farm, butchers her own pasture-raised meats.*

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to differentiate themselves in their offerings and business models, some of them novel. Instead of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) system, where members pay an up-front fee for a share of the year's bounty, Reber Rock opted to open a farm store; in addition to grass-fed beef and other pasture-raised meats, they make and sell sunflower oil and homemade soap. KZ Farm, in Westport, produces the ingredients for their Poco Mas taco truck; owners Josh and Sarah Kingzack are experimenting with packaging sauerkraut and pickled vegetables to extend their business to the off-season. Farmstead Catering at Echo Farm, in Whallonsburg, provides all of the food and flowers for custom wedding events, planting and raising only what it needs for up to six weddings per year. "It's like a CSA for your wedding," says Dillon Klepetar, who started the business in 2014.

"People are deciding for themselves what fires them up, what makes them happy," Henderson says. In the end, though, she adds, "We're all competing for the same dollars."

How much bigger the local movement could grow will depend in part on whether these new businesses can reach more customers. "If a hundred percent of Adirondackers actually only ate local, we could support so many more farms," says Brooks. "The barriers are cost and convenience. That's a bigger social issue. We all need to figure out how to make it more accessible and more convenient."

One of the groups working on overcoming those barriers is the Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA), based in Saranac Lake. The nonprofit organization's mission is to support sustainable economic development, with agriculture as one of its focuses. Last fall ANCA and several partners launched Bike the Barns, a fundraising bike tour with stops at area farms; the proceeds went to help subsidize CSA shares for people who can't afford them.

"There are definitely hunger issues in our region," says Josh Bakelaar, ANCA's director of local economies and agriculture. "Price is one of the things we can work on."

One problem is that fresh local food is often more expensive than meats and produce shipped across the country or the world. But that doesn't mean local farm-



Piglets at Mace Chasm Farm, in Keeseville.

ers are getting rich. On the contrary, the financial risks for farm startups are great, and many beginning farmers need a supplementary source of income, whether a part-time job or an Airbnb rental on their property.

Another obstacle is student loan debt. The National Young Farmers Coalition is lobbying to have farmers included among essential “public service” professions, such as teachers and nurses, in a federal loan forgiveness program.

Working off the land has always been a physically demanding profession with little promise of financial reward, but to the farmers giving it a go here, that’s not the point. “Farming is totally a choice,” says Grimes-Sutton. “I’m very employable, but this work is the healthiest work for our minds and bodies.”

Building a thriving agricultural economy has implications well beyond the farmers themselves. Multiple studies have found that for every dollar spent on local goods, as much as 58 cents continues to circulate locally, while only about 14 cents of a dollar spent at a chain store stays in the community. On top of that, farmers use the services of local tradespeople and other local businesses. “Helping a farm and keeping it going creates all kinds of jobs, not just on the farms,” Bakelaar says. “It has this multiplier effect that’s hard to quantify.”

**LIKE MUCH OF THE** Adirondacks, most Champlain Valley towns all but shut down in winter. But on a Thursday morning last December, a commercial kitchen in a former self-storage warehouse in Essex was full of workers making hot sauce and processing vegetables.

Launched in 2016 by Jori and Andy Wekin and Steve Blood, the Hub on the Hill is both a product and an enabler of the growing local food scene.

The Wekins moved to Essex from Vermont in 2010 to manage Black Kettle Farm, a small operation associated with Lakeside School, a Waldorf-style program where children spend a lot of time on the farm and in the woods. The Wekins saw it as an opportunity to “dig in to a community” where they could raise their young children according to their values.

As more farmers moved into the area, Jori says she and Andy wanted to do some-

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OCTOBER 8

### ESSEX COUNTY CHEESE TOUR

*Tastings and tours at Sugar House Creamery, Asgaard Farm and North Country Creamery.*

Upper Jay, Au Sable Forks  
and Keeseville  
www.adirondackharvest.com

thing to help support them. “We were inspired by what was happening.”

Jori was instrumental in helping the Whallonsburg Grange renovate its community kitchen in 2012. She and several partners used it to start a co-packing business, now called Dak & Dill, making pickles, condiments and other value-added products from local ingredients. They soon realized the need for a bigger work area for Dak & Dill and to help launch other businesses. In addition to the spacious, well-equipped kitchen, the Hub on the Hill has a fermentation room and cooled, frozen or dry storage space for rent. There’s also a self-service store featuring local foods and crafts. Poco Mas, Farmstead Catering, Flying Pancake Catering and Dak Bar energy snacks are a few of the businesses the Hub has incubated.

The next challenge to tackle, Wekin says, is distribution. Right now, individual farms are making their own deliveries and doing the legwork to find restaurants and other outlets for their products. It’s a huge duplication of effort—and mileage—that will need to be addressed for the movement to continue to grow and be sustainable.

**DESPITE SOME INITIAL** skepticism from their older and more established counterparts, the majority of the young farmers say they have felt welcome in their adopted communities. “Most of the local people that I’ve talked to are pumped” because their businesses are growing right along with the farmers’, says Klepetar, of Farmstead Catering.

Jay White, president of the Essex County Cornell Cooperative Extension board of directors, works with farmers of all stripes, giving him a good perspective across the generational and cultural divide. “The older farmers sit back a little and watch [and say], Huh, that’s a different way of doing that,” White says. “But when those young people call on those older farmers for help, they’re right there.”

In any case, not all of the newcomers were born post-1980. Though the small-farm movement is disproportionately young, there are plenty of farmers in their 40s, 50s and beyond whose practices and business models fit comfortably into the local-food scene. Some (Continued on page 76)

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## SEEDS OF REVIVAL

Continued from page 43

are lifelong farmers, while others are doing it as a second or retirement career.

Jay White, who is 47, is a good example. He and his wife, Sarah, have professional careers, but he longed to return to his family's agricultural roots (his grandparents had a fruit farm in the Hudson Valley). In 2014 they bought 85 acres in Essex, with plans to turn it into a flower farm, vineyard and winery with a tasting room. They envision it as part of a growing emphasis on agritourism, a way to expand on the Adirondacks' appeal as a vacation destination.

White is also spearheading an effort to establish several state-designated "cuisine trails" that guide tourists to farm stores, farm-to-table restaurants, craft breweries, wineries and other foodie destinations. It is inspired by a similar trail in the province of Quebec, called the *Circuit du Paysan*. Last summer a contingent of farmers and local officials toured part of the circuit with their Quebec counterparts; they hope to build a cross-border partnership that will bolster both regions' tourism efforts.

Since the idea was floated in early 2016, interest from businesses wanting to be included on the cuisine trail grew so much that the group eventually submitted applications to the state department of agriculture and markets for six connected regional trails, with two each in Essex, Franklin and Clinton Counties.

The Wild Center's Millennial study showed that travelers in that generation are looking for "authentic experiences" they can't have elsewhere. "It only adds to the draw of a region to have special regional products that aren't available in Brooklyn or wherever," says Margot Brooks, of Sugar House Creamery. "The people who already come here for recreation often also appreciate good food."

**ON A GORGEOUS SATURDAY** in September the Essex County Fairgrounds hosted a new event called the Adirondack Harvest Festival that brought all of the strands of local agri-

## SEEDS OF REVIVAL

culture and tourism together. The day started with a hamlet-to-hamlet hike on the Champlain Area Trails, while the fairgrounds, in Westport, were transformed into a farmers' market with food trucks, a pig roast, music, craft beer and wine tastings, cheese making and beekeeping demonstrations, farmer discussions and screenings of Keene Valley photographer Ben Stechschulte's 2012 documentary, *Small Farm Rising*. The only kids' rides were on a horse-drawn wagon.

The event was everything that the new farmers say is missing from the Essex County Fair. "[The county fair] is a perfect example of the divide between the old and new," says Racey Henderson. "It centers around food, games and agriculture, but the food is not local food. It doesn't attract the new folks."

At a meeting in September, members of a fairgrounds task force came to a similar conclusion. "I think we've got to put more ag participation back into the agricultural fair," said Shaun Gilliland, the 58-year-old town supervisor of Willsboro, where he and his wife raise grass-fed beef, lamb and pork on their 500-acre Ben Wever Farm.

Henderson hopes the county fair's organizers can find a way to breathe new life into the 169-year-old institution. "I really don't want to see it die," she says. "It's an incredible opportunity for a combination of the old and new."

At the Grange last summer, Kristin Kimball read a quote about how farmers are "always poised between nostalgia for an idealized past that never existed and hope for an easier future that never comes," a description that could refer to the Adirondacks as a whole.

But for the young farmers who are putting down stakes here, and the communities they are joining, the balance is firmly on the side of optimism.

As Henderson says, "I think we're at a pretty exciting place where anything can happen." ▲



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# FROM ORE to ORCHIDS

THE LEGACY OF BENSON MINES

BY LISA BRAMEN



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENDAN WILTSE, BENSON MINES PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE ADIRONDACK MUSEUM, IN BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE

**IF A LANDSCAPE COULD BE READ LIKE A BOOK, TWO SCENES NEAR THE WESTERN ADIRONDACK HAMLET OF STAR LAKE WOULD SEEM TO BELONG TO VERY DIFFERENT GENRES.**

The first is visible to anyone driving west along Route 3 from Wanakena. On the right, surrounded by a chain-link fence, is a dilapidated complex of industrial buildings, overgrown with weeds. A sign out front declares this the J & L Steel Jobsite and bears the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Emergency Response seal.

Similar tales of woe have played out across the Adirondacks, in towns like Corinth, Tupper Lake and Moriah: industries built on the exploitation of natural resources bring jobs and prosperity, only to leave environmental and economic devastation in their wake when the market shifts or the resources are exhausted.

But across the street, hidden from view on private land, the narrative takes an unexpectedly hopeful turn.

**ON AN OVERCAST JULY DAY**, Professor Donald Leopold and Grete Bader, one of his students, lead a group through stands of gray birch and along dirt roads surrounded by pale-green tufts of reindeer lichen. Kneeling, Leopold scoops up a handful of crumbly, reddish dirt and lets it sift through his fingers.

This soil is why we're here. The sandy, iron-rich tailings are left over from the mining operation on the other side of the highway, which turned Star Lake from a small-time 19th-century resort to a booming company town—more than once. In the decades since Benson Mines closed for good, in 1978, this virtual desert has transformed into a landscape like no other in the Adirondacks.

In another half-mile or so, we see the first hints of what makes this place so special. Bader wades through a field of low shrubs and disappears behind some tamaracks. "Found one," she calls. It's a grass pink—a small, fuchsia-colored bloom that is one of three species of native orchid growing here in incredible numbers. Bader wrote her master's thesis on the phenomenon for the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF), where Leopold was her advisor. She estimates that at least hundreds of thousands of grass pinks, rose pogonias and hooded lady's tresses are growing on the wetland formed at the base of the tailings pile—plus the state's largest known population of pink wintergreen, a non-orchid flower that is threatened in New York State. "I was blown away when I first came here and saw the abundance," Bader says.

**DISSIMILAR AS THEY APPEAR**, the stories on both sides of the highway have the same opening lines: Under the most likely scenario, more than a billion years ago, iron-rich sedimentary rock metamorphosed under intense heat and pressure into magnetite and hematite—two kinds of iron ore—in quantities sufficient enough to be of value, eons later, for making steel.

Most sources trace the discovery of magnetite here to the War of 1812, when military engineers building a road from Ogdensburg to Albany noted their compass needles jumping.

But in an unpublished manuscript he bequeathed to the Adirondack Museum, in Blue Mountain Lake, the late David Ackerman disputes the legend, positing that the road surveyed was several miles from the place that would come to be known as Benson Mines.

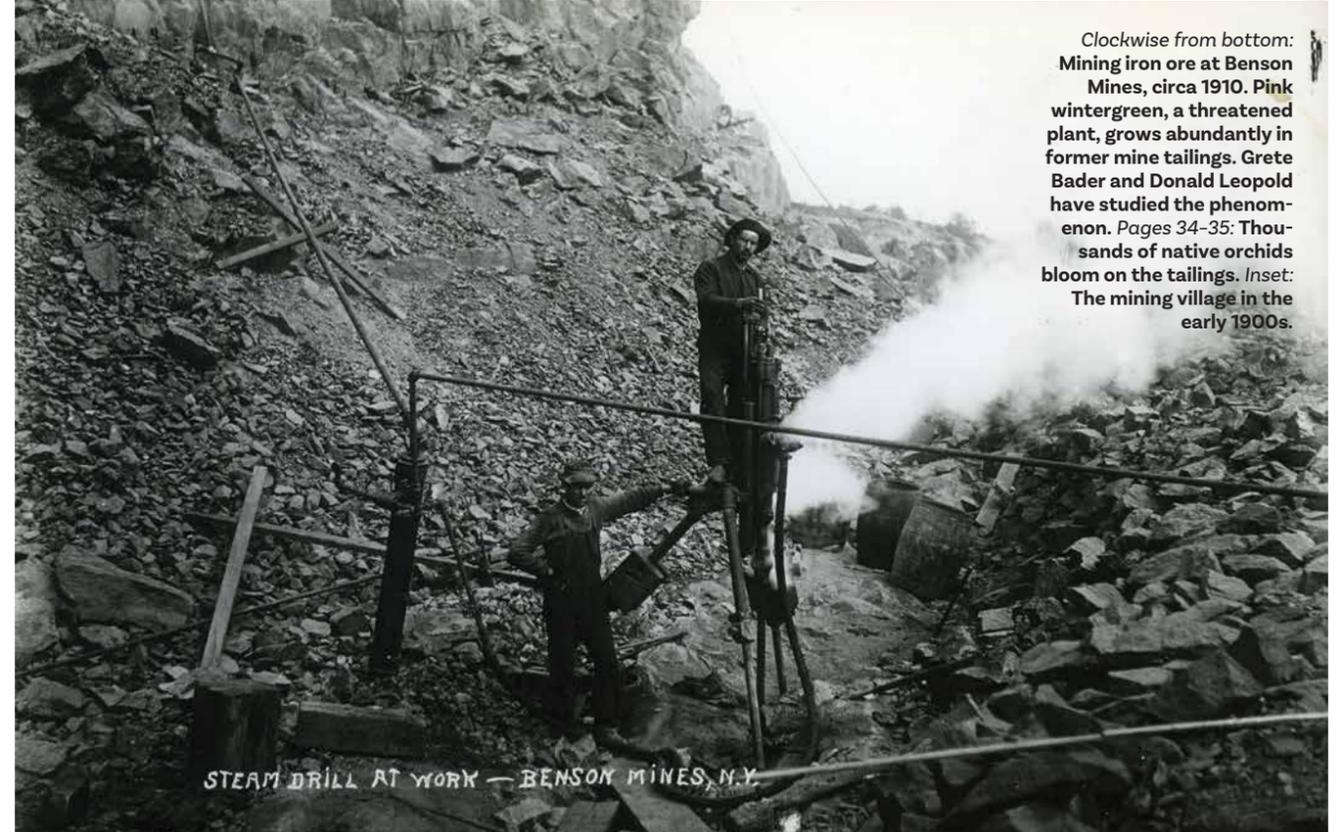
Whatever the date of its discovery, by 1883 the presence of a large, crescent-shaped ore body just north of Star Lake was public knowledge. Ackerman's great-grandfather Byron D. Benson, an oilman from Pennsylvania, helped found the Magnetic Iron Ore Company, which built railroads and opened up the area for mining iron ore. Benson died in February 1888, but the following year, with his son William S. Benson as general manager, operations at Benson Mines began. Ackerman based part of his history of the early days of the company on the letters of William, his grandfather.

William met with steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie in hopes of forming a partnership, but it wasn't to be. He wrote of the meeting, "The interview lasted two hours and a half and of all the egotistical cheeky men I never saw the like. He wanted to have us give him half our property simply to get them to go up in that country and compete with us."

A more pressing issue was the labor shortage, exacerbated by the remote location of the mine. In 1891, Benson wrote, "We have a padrone out looking for 25 Italians, but with little success so far. ... Rob sent 35 from New York who arrived here Monday. Wednesday morning 24 of them left. We did what we could to get them back, especially as we had advanced their fares from New York; but could only find six of them."

By 1892, the workforce was abundant enough that the *Ogdensburg Journal* described "a veritable 'city in the woods'" springing up around the mines: "Already this season sixteen new houses are approaching completion, the frame for a large company store is up, and a handsome new school will be dedicated to the cause of education on Monday next. The foundation for a new church was finished last week."

There were amenities for the less pious, too. In the 1890s,



Clockwise from bottom: Mining iron ore at Benson Mines, circa 1910. Pink wintergreen, a threatened plant, grows abundantly in former mine tailings. Grete Bader and Donald Leopold have studied the phenomenon. Pages 34-35: Thousands of native orchids bloom on the tailings. Inset: The mining village in the early 1900s.

PINK WINTERGREEN PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF GRETE BADER. DONALD LEOPOLD AND GRETE BADER PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENDAN WILTSE. STEAM DRILL PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE ADIRONDACK MUSEUM, BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE

Ackerman writes, "There were between 13 and 20 bars within a short distance and not all were the orderly sort of establishments with which we are familiar today."

According to Ackerman, community life centered around the boardinghouses where most of the workers stayed, including his grandfather. Describing the scene at a place he called Bellanger's (though Ackerman corrected it

to Boulanger's), Benson wrote, "There were over thirty men at supper tonight. They all talk and swear alike, and, as the partition between their 'setten' room and mine is so thin and the cracks so wide, I hear it all... There is a drunken galoot in the next room on one side and a Jew pack peddler, in the room on the other side, trying to sell Mde. Bellanger 'something sheep'."



Grass pink. Clockwise from top right: Hooded lady's tresses. Rose pogonia. Miners in the early 1900s. The iron-rich soil of the mine tailings.



SOIL AND GRASS PINK PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENDAN WILTSE (2). HOODED LADY'S TRESSES AND ROSE POGONIA PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF GRETE BADER (2). MINER PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE ADIRONDACK MUSEUM

When the population grew large enough to support a bigger general store, its motto of "Everything, from the Cradle to the Grave" was no boast—among the offerings were the services of undertaker Dempster Montando.

By newspaper accounts, it appears Montando did a brisk business. The Benson Mines (named in the plural, some writers have suggested, because multiple pits may have originally been dug and eventually joined into one) was an open-pit or strip mine, but that didn't necessarily make it less hazardous than its underground counterparts. Workers dealing with heavy machinery and explosives—decades before workplace safety laws—occasionally lost a limb, their eyesight or worse.

The most serious of these accidents occurred on August 15, 1908, when a premature explosion in the open pit killed four men and injured several others. One survivor, Joseph King, wanted nothing to do with blasting after the explosion threw him high in the air. But his appointment with the undertaker wasn't postponed for long; less than two years later, while working as a temporary brakeman on a train crew in the pit, King fell between two ore cars and died as a result of the injuries.

Dangerous, dirty and difficult as it was, the men were fortunate to have jobs at all. From the 1890s until the outbreak of World War II, the mine opened and closed multiple times as the market for steel fluctuated.

The surest source of job security was war and its demand for tanks, guns, ships and planes, all of them requiring a steady supply of steel. After the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated in 1914, setting off World War I, the mine operated round the clock to meet demand. But when all went quiet on the Western Front, four years later, the bottom dropped out of the steel market. The mine closed within a few weeks of the war's end.

It took another world war to get the mine back in business. In 1941, the Jones & Laughlin Steel Company, based in Pittsburgh, leased the mining rights from the Benson Iron Company, and the following year the U. S. government invested millions of dollars on a new, expanded plant for processing the ore. Because the ore vein continued under the Benson Mines settlement, several dozen buildings had to be moved to Star Lake, including homes and a Catholic church. "The developing of the ancient mines, now reputed holding hundreds of millions of dollars of valuable ore, is sounding like a Gabriel's trumpet in the southern section of St. Lawrence County," enthused the *Commercial Advertiser* of Potsdam Junction that July.

At 1,300 feet long, 200 feet wide and about 50 feet deep, the Benson Mines pit was for a time the largest open quarry magnetite iron-ore mine in the world.

In the decades between the wars, the area's population had thinned out again, and finding an adequate supply of labor was a challenge.

**AMONG THOSE ANSWERING** the call was a young David Ackerman, who was then a junior at Northwood

School, in Lake Placid. In February 1942, Ackerman's father wrote to Jones & Laughlin to inquire about a summer job for his son at Benson Mines, noting, "You doubtless know that I am VP of the Benson Iron Company from whom you are leasing the property."

In his journal from that summer, Ackerman described helping to take magnetic readings on the "mountain" with a miner's compass. "I received my first pay-check for \$20.15 which includes the reduction of 20 cents for that dam [sic] federal old age benefits tax," he wrote.

This time around, thanks in part to the booming post-war automobile market, the declaration of peace didn't lead to a crash in demand for steel, and Benson Mines—along with the paper mill at Newton Falls, about four miles to the north—helped support what became a thriving community in Star Lake. The operation even expanded, adding a gravity plant in 1952 that allowed for processing of the non-magnetic iron ore known as martite. A 1952 J & L ad in Gouverneur's *Tribune Press* touted the company's investment in the new Clifton-Fine Central School, where "tomorrow's men of steel are being molded today."

One of those future "men of steel" was Russell Hall, the son of a miner whose 2005 book *Gem of the Adirondacks: Star Lake, Benson Mines & the Global Economy* describes growing up there in the 1950s and '60s. After graduating from high school and going to college, Hall spent summers back home working in the sinter plant, where pulverized iron ore, separated from other minerals, was fused back together into chunks that could be thrown in a blast furnace. The work was dull and the plant "seemed one of the dirtiest places on earth," Hall writes, so it's hardly surprising that he eventually sought greener pastures, becoming a biologist in Maryland and elsewhere. He didn't return to Star Lake until a schoolmate he had kept in touch with convinced him to attend their 40th class reunion, in 2002.

What Hall saw on that visit shocked him. By the early 1960s, competition from cheaper labor in Africa, Chile and Brazil was already putting a dent in Jones & Laughlin's profitability, and in 1978, after years of diminishing output, the Star Lake operation closed for good. Dealing a further economic blow to the region, the Newton Falls paper plant closed in 2001. (Though it would reopen several more times in the next decade and a half, in 2013 it closed for the final time, its equipment sold off.)

"A brief first visit to the 'downtown' area provided stark evidence that things had changed drastically," Hall writes of his 2002 return to Star Lake. "What had been thriving businesses were now vacant and ramshackle structures or more commonly, empty lots gaped where familiar buildings once lined the street. And the changes in the village, which even in the best times had traces of shabbiness, did not prepare me for the ruins of the Benson Mines plant."

Aside from being an eyesore, the abandoned property is an environmental albatross. In the late 1980s, a million gallons of oil, traced to the plant, leaked into the Little River. Long afterward, locals noticed a (Continued on page 69)

## FROM ORE TO ORCHIDS

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diesel taste in fish caught there. After years of unpaid taxes, St. Lawrence County took ownership of the 56-acre plant property (the Benson Mines Trust continues to own the site of the tailings and the quarry pit, now filled with water). In 2013, the St. Lawrence County Industrial Development Agency was awarded an \$87,500 regional economic development grant to clean up and redevelop the site, with the Department of Environmental Conservation and the EPA involved in demolition and remediation.

Over the years, a number of ideas have been floated to make use of part of the Benson Mines property and bring jobs back to the community, including a refuse- and wood-fired electrical generating facility, a commercial wind farm, and various schemes to utilize the piles of already mined ore and other rock. Most recently, the county industrial development agency received a \$9.9 million economic development grant to rehabilitate a 43-mile railroad between Carthage and Newton Falls in hopes that it could spur redevelopment of the J & L and paper mill sites.

In the meantime, the 2010 census found 809 permanent residents in the hamlet of Star Lake, down from 1,092 in 1990. With only a smattering of businesses—including a gas station, a coffee shop that opened in 2015, and a small supermarket that opened last year, a few months after its predecessor closed unexpectedly—many residents work at the hospital, the school, or in local government.

**WHILE THE STAR LAKE** community tries to rebound from the loss of its biggest employers, nature has been busy regenerating the tailings site for decades.

Donald Leopold, who teaches environmental and forestry biology at SUNY-ESF, first learned of the population of orchids growing on the tailings pile some 30 years ago. Though he had mentioned it to many of his classes over the years, Grete Bader was the first to take an interest in researching the site and what allowed the flowers

to grow so abundantly here.

One factor is likely the barrenness of the site itself. “Orchids are able to thrive in low nutrient habitats,” Bader explains in her thesis, “partially due to their associations with mycorrhizal fungi, on which they are dependent for nutrients as seedlings.”

For her study, Bader collected soil samples at 30 wetland plots and analyzed them for organic matter and groundwater pH, then cross-referenced them with the species that were found on each plot. She also took thin cross-sections of the flowers’ roots to look for fungal infection.

She concluded that the abundance of the particular species of orchids (as well as the pink wintergreen) may be due, in part, to the presence of one or more “keystone” species of fungus. She writes, “Perhaps soil conditions create microsites where orchid mycorrhizal fungi are unusually abundant at Benson Mines, corresponding to greater orchid abundance.”

Further studies would be needed to fully explain why these particular species are thriving at Benson Mines, but during our walk, Bader and Leopold point out one reason for haste. At the margins of the wetland, phragmites, an invasive reed, is beginning to take hold. Left unchecked, it will someday crowd out the native plants. In any case, the natural succession of the landscape will eventually lead this area to convert to a black spruce and tamarack bog community, Bader explains, causing the orchid species that don’t do well in shade to decline in population.

In *Gem of the Adirondacks*, Russell Hall proposes that the entire Benson Mines site be turned into an “industrial and natural heritage park” where visitors could learn about the region’s mining legacy. They could marvel at the enormity of the human enterprise and witness firsthand its environmental costs, as well as the rewilding of the landscape—yet another chapter in this epic story. “And despite the devastation of the past,” he writes, “the visitor would be left with little question that nature is now in charge.” ▲



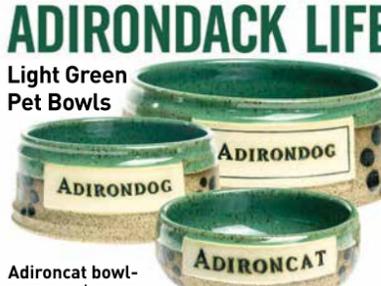
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