

HISTORY OF ONTARIO COUNTY: Honeoye Lake — In Others' Words

by Joy Lewis, Town of Richmond Historian

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Humble and unassuming, little Honeoye Lake, with its sheltering landscape, plays a significant role in half a dozen literary works of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the southern part of Richmond, Honeoye is one of three Finger Lakes within Ontario County: lying west of Canandaigua Lake, east of Canadice. It's "a shimmering, laughing lake, over whose waters a gentle breeze is generally blowing, that brushes up tiny wavelets, that catch upon their sides the diamond sunbeams of the god of day, and throw them out into space to fall upon and gladden some other world." Thus, does Thomas Alva Stubbins write of the lake in his 1908 novel "The Patriot."

For less than two years at the turn of the 20th century, Stubbins served as minister of the Honeoye Congregational Church. After moving to South Dakota, he wrote a sensational novel full of lurid details and exciting escapades set in an upstate New York town he called Richton. Only the scenery is a realistic picture of Honeoye Lake, which he further describes: "Toward the head of the lake the undulating hills become rugged, and push forward towering cliffs that overhang the water and glower at their images in the depths below. If, perchance, one is in a boat upon the placid waters as he nears the upper shore, the cliffs blot out the blue by shoving skyward a thousand feet of rolling emerald carpet, and he can see upon the steep sides of the hills the dashing brooks that leap and laugh with the joy of uncurbed youth. But the waters are not always placid, for sometimes, when the wind breaks through from the funnel-like valley above, the lake is lifted out of its calm, then the light water is heaped into great waves that fall upon and mark the unscarred sand with the foot-prints of an angry Almighty."

It may be that the most well-known author to use Honeoye Lake as a setting for her works is Mary Jane Holmes (1828-1907). In "Meadow Brook" is recorded the adventures of young Rosa Lee, transplanted from New England to "Rockland ... in the western part of Ontario county, and about fourteen miles from Canandaigua." Three charming hamlets populate Rockland: Laurel Hill, the Centre, and Flattville. But the central feature of the township is the lake, "renowned for its quiet beauty, and the picturesque wildness of its shores. Bounded on three sides by high hills, its waters sleep calmly in the sunlight of summer, or dash angrily upon the sandy beach, when moved by the chill breath of winter."

"Lena Rivers," though set in Kentucky, has a heroine who lives near a lake called "Honeoye" in whose waters swim "the tallest kind of fish." A third Holmes novel, set on the shores of "Honeoye Lake," is "Cousin Maud" -- "a captivating tale of love, passion, emotions, and family values." Dr. Kennedy lives in a stately house upon a hill: "In all the town there was not so delightful a location, for it commanded a view of the country for many miles around, while from the chamber windows was plainly discernable the sparkling Honeoye, whose waters slept so calmly 'mid the hills which lay to the southward."

Not so well known as Mrs. Holmes, but quite true-to-life in his detail, is John Nicholas Norton (1820-1888), who wrote "Allerton Parish." This "tale founded on fact" recounts his childhood and his family's experience in Allens Hill during the years his father, George Norton, was the minister at St. Paul Episcopal Church. Norton's description of a leisurely buggy ride from the top of the hill to the foot of the lake captures the scene: "Old Jolly turns round the corner by [the] pear orchard, and jogs onward towards the south. How beautiful the little lake looks, as we are slowly advancing towards it! ... Here are 'four corners,' as they call them, the road branching off in so many different directions, but we will keep straight on. Although so much nearer the lake, we do not see it half as distinctly as we did before leaving Allerton. The high ground there gives the eye a wide sweep."

"A wide sweep" of a view, as many besides Norton have observed. In 1824, the Marquise de Lafayette likened the area around Honeoye Lake to views he'd enjoyed in Switzerland.

A century later, writing a history of Richmond for the 50th anniversary edition of the Livonia Gazette, Mary Short concluded her piece with a word about the lake: "Always a pretty and attractive sheet of water, it is fast becoming a summer resort where people from Buffalo and Rochester, as well as near-by places, seek rest and recreation. Many cottages already line its shores and more are being constructed. While many changes ... have taken place during the fifty years past, one thing at least remains unchanged: the beauty of the hills surrounding our lake and the lovely

country of the Honeoye valley."

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Sources

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