

## Lakenwild

(Excerpt from Bruce Belmore's *Early History of Princeton, Maine*)

ALTHOUGH the Lakenwild development lay well outside the limits of Princeton, nevertheless while it lasted it affected the town too intimately not to acquire at least a passing word in any story of the section.

One day in 1883 the good townspeople were electrified by the news that an enterprising outsider with much cash had been impressed with the beauty and commercial future of the Princeton environs and was about to build a big town on the De Lue Simpson property up on the shores of Big Lake contiguous to Governor's Point. At first the news seemed much too good to be true, but shortly men actually began to build a road from the Grand Lake Stream highway over the Musquash marshes to the mainland at a point about where John Robinson, mentioned some pages back, had in early days built his modest cabin; a residence, splendid and spacious for these parts, actually began to take shape at a spot near where said Simpson lived for some years; and still more reassuring was the fact that the genial outsider responsible for all these marvels began to be much in evidence in Lon Rolfe's store and the village post-office. In due time surveyors began to lay out the new development into numberless lots twenty-five by one hundred feet in dimension, and to plot streets and boulevards bearing names familiar and names exotic but all of them lovely beyond words. Then appeared documentary proof of all these great doings in the form of literature gaudy and grandiose.

We have before us as we write a sample copy of the big map and the bigger folder which were sent by thousands to all parts of the country. The copy at hand was sent as a teaser to one Miss M. Lord of 18 Union Street, Concord, New Hampshire, but sent in vain for it was returned undelivered; and that is how we happen to have preserved to us and to all posterity this priceless relic of former greatness, with thanks always to Claire Plaisted who found it in her father's post-office and guarded it down through the years. The covers of the folder are made of paper meant to look like birch-bark. On the front cover appears the legend, "Birch Bark from Lakenwild," which takes up all the space except enough for a huge seal of the sovereign state of Maine, quite irrelevant but quite intriguing. Incidentally, all that hundreds ever received for their good cash was this counterfeit birch-bark and a lovely big deed with more big seals. On the back cover was a picture, benign and likewise intriguing of "Nathan S. Read, Justice of the Peace and Quorum, Princeton, Maine, Projector of Lakenwild". Projectors in these latter days are plentiful and commonplace; but in 1883 if Mr. Read was not the only one in existence, he was one of a very few. That word "quorum" doubtless sold lots of lots but it cost the projector a mere five dollar bill contributed to the exchequer of said sovereign state. Filling up the rest of the rear cover was a heterogeneous mixture of guns, fishing tackle, game and fish. Under the projector's likeness appeared a coat of arms, his or whose not then nor since divulged; and over the top of this heraldic emblem was a crow or an American eagle with wide spreading wings resembling those from turkeys used by our grandmothers to brush dirt into dust pans.

Inside those lovely covers are pages of facts and fancies smartly mixed and well calculated to sell lots of lots, each at only two dollars down and two monthly for four short months; yes, a mere ten dollars for a home in hustling, bustling Lakenwild where in the distant past first settled one "David Cass, half-brother of Lewis Cass, senator for years from Michigan and candidate for President in opposition to Zachary Taylor. Cass. .. foreseeing the advantages of this spot and its chances for the future in a commercial point of view together with the picturesque beauty built his log hut upon the very spot where now

stands the residence of N. S. Read, J. P. Other families gathered around him and formed the nucleus for a settlement. How marked are the changes since this wild rover first pitched his tent upon these shores, and how great the improvements of the past three years. These lots are situated in the beautiful town of Lakenwild . . . over and beyond the placid water tall, towering hills proudly rear their heads till the fir-clad perspective reaches the horizon . . . We are in a well-settled, prosperous busy section replete with saw mills, tanneries, woolen mills and all branches of industry with a population of over fifteen hundred." The "we are" refers to Lakenwild which is some six or more miles from Princeton. Princeton had but one tannery and one woolen mill, by no means all industries, and never had a population in excess of ten hundred and ninety-four the figure reached in the year 1900.

To quote further: "This season still more extensive improvements will be made in the town [meaning Lakenwild] than heretofore, many new buildings erected, the town hall completed . . . and the price of lots will rise accordingly. . . . What happened in Bar Harbor will likely happen here . . . Blocks nos. 113 to 144 inclusive have just been added to Lakenwild by a concession of the Governor and his Council of State and form a most desirable part of the town . . . but seven hundred and forty-eight lots in this part of the settlement." Reference is here made to what the projector called South Lakenwild, a tract of land on the opposite side of the lake from the De Lue Simpson tract and some two or three miles away. "The Schoodic House, Lakenwild, Maine will be open for accommodation of visitors for the season of 1891.... The steamer E. A. Barnard . . . under the management of Captain John McCurdy lands you at Lakenwild wharf where genial hosts welcome you ... A book full of references could be given if required but space will not permit."

Mr. Read began his operations in 1883, and began to sell his lots as soon as his literature could be sent abroad. By 1888 his original purchase of land was sold out and "Read's First Addition to Lakenwild was laid out along the Musquash River comprising nine hundred lots." Then, as stated above, South Lakenwild, three miles away, was added, comprising seven hundred and forty-eight lots. In 1891 Mr. Read was able to report the sale of over six thousand four hundred lots up to May first of that year. In this year he offered one lot free for every lot sold and reported "steady boom". Multiply 6400 by 10 and you have \$64,000 for Mr. Read. You do not need to discount this magnificent figure because of defaults in payments, for as the story has it, many lots were sold three and four times. It is said that the First Addition mentioned above was not along Musquash River but rather in it, and that some owners had to be taken in canoes to see their lots. Aqueous lots they were, lying paddle's length below the canoe.

Now let us take a glance at the map which accompanied the folder. In addition to the lots and streets and boulevards, there was a public park. A large building is shown where Mr. Read's residence actually was, the town hall, the Schoodic House, and two wharves. At one of these wharves a large steamer, with two decks and side-wheels, is docked; and anchored in the harbor nearby are two single-masted ships and one three-masted one. No town hall or hotel was ever built there; only one small wharf was there; and of course there were no double-decked steamers or double-masted schooners this side of Calais. Mr. Read most certainly was "genial," and genial host enough to be described in the plural without exaggeration. The writer remembers Mr. Read very well. He was short and fat with round pink cheeks and well-groomed hair. He was dressy with gay neckties and diamonds. His flushed countenance was always wreathed in smiles superlatively benevolent and convincing. His smiles were not the kind that come and go; they rested eternally like a painted halo on those rosy cheeks. Mr. Read was sociable; he liked people and wished them to be happy. His employees were well paid and devoted to him. In his said folder he declared, "I cannot afford to have a lot owner dissatisfied in any way;" and according to the

stories, he had this declaration put to the test on several occasions. For instance, at one time a blacksmith, and at another time a druggist landed at the railway station in Princeton fully equipped to set up business forthwith in the town of Lakenwild. Mr. Read met such as these with a smile and sent them satisfied away to where they came from.

So heavy was the mail during the Lakenwild boom that the Princeton post-office was boosted from fourth class to third class, only to tumble back when Mr. Read's town was sold out. Mr. Read is said to have landed in St. Stephen, New Brunswick from somewhere in Pennsylvania; there he remained a short time, shorter some said than he had planned; and from there he hid himself to the obscure shores of Big Lake. After all the lots were sold out, his work was done, and he withdrew to Calais, there to enjoy the fruits of his genius. Projector Read had ability.

What about the lots of lots up Musquash way? Well, the land is still there and to-day the whole area presents much the same appearance it did over half a century ago. There are in very truth to-day just as many hotels, town halls, wharves and schooners as there were then; but it would be difficult, very, to find Rolfe Boulevard or Robinson Street. Because of the inability of anyone to give a good title to this land, it bumped along for years and years until a saleable title was procured through tax sales. As far as is known Mr. Read never suffered any financial loss or other inconvenience from his many grantees. They all lived at great distances from their holdings, and good business frowned on sending many good dollars after ten bad ones.

One day in the summer of 1936 the writer happened to be in the Forest Office talking with his brother Albert, when a car drove up and a middle-aged woman walked in. Did we ever hear of a town named Lakenwild? She was glad that we replied in the affirmative because the authorities in Augusta and in Machias had told her they had never heard of such a town in Maine. She called to her sister and aged father to join her in the office. The old gentleman explained that he had only a few years to live and was trying to get his property in shape so that his daughters would have the least trouble possible when he died; that his daughters, both schoolteachers, were using their vacation period to look into matters pertaining to his estate; and finally that he had been told that Bert Belmore in Princeton might possibly know about this Lakenwild if there ever was one.

The old gentleman produced two deeds covering twelve lots in Lakenwild, and four bonds in the fantasmal Schoodic House. We looked them over with interest. Besides the big seals, now faded but still persuasive looking, were the signatures needful for the proper execution of such documents, signatures well known to Princetonians of fifty years ago and less; and they were persuasive too and meant to be. The old gentleman with trembling fingers folded the worthless paper and replaced it carefully in his pocket. For a lifetime he had held them as valuable; it would take a while to get used to the truth about them. The old man had listened to the story of Lakenwild with evident emotion. The daughters were inclined to make light of the affair. The three decided to drive up to the old Simpson place and take a look at what was Lakenwild. They did not call on their way back.