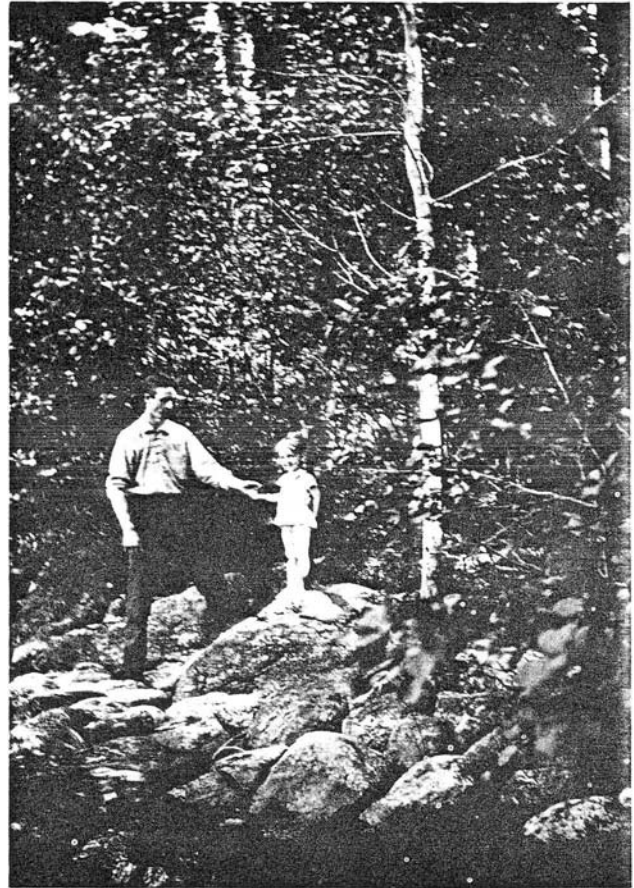


Farewell to Lake Sunapee

by Margery A. Todahl Blokhine

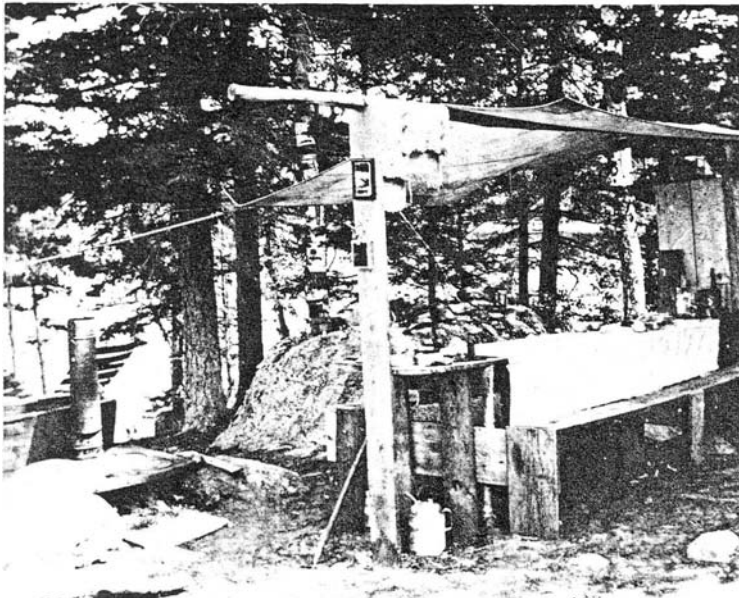
"GOD gave us memory that we might have roses in December." While there seems to be some confusion as to the source of this sentiment, there is not the shadow of a doubt as to its truth. Without this magic looking-glass through which to move like Lewis Carroll's immortal Alice, I could not recapture the circumstances of my dramatic farewell to Lake Sunapee and its primeval wilderness in 1910.

As if it were yesterday, I recall that last epochal trip by rail from Boston, when my parents and I were catapulted at a startling "mile a minute" (according to my uneasy father) toward our New Hampshire destination. I can still feel the teen-ager's sense of urgency, of mounting excitement as we sped, train rocking, toward Sunapee station. The Lake station, with its crowds and bustle! The hum of activity as travelers milled about identifying their paraphernalia, our cumbrous heavily-built chests padlocked against any contingency, receiving my father's scrupulous attention. Then, the climax for a



The author, age 4, and her father on the shore of Lake Sunapee.

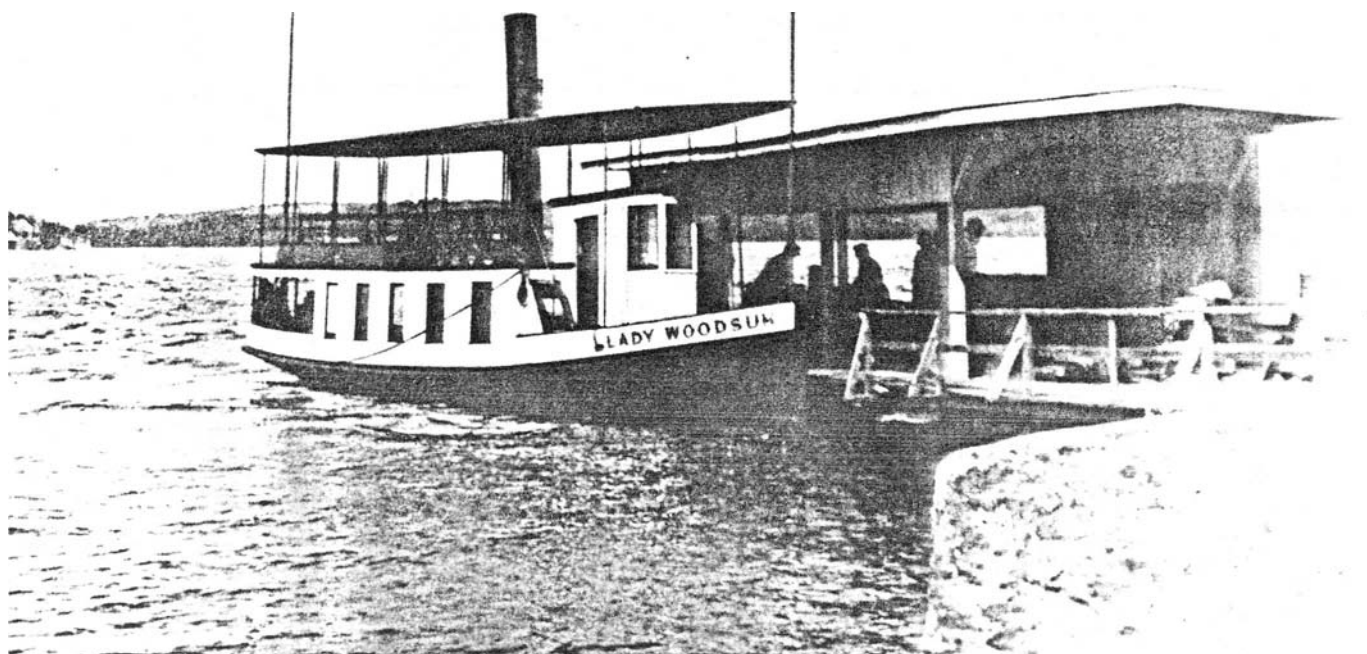
The dining room of the family's campsite, circa 1908.



landlubber, the waiting side-wheeler at the dock. Perhaps it would be the Kearsage, the Armenia White - I seem to recall that the Weetamoo was then out of commission - the Ascutney, or the small Lady Woodsum, in which we had once narrowly escaped disaster while making for Blodgett's Landing in a storm.

My ears retain the glorious thunder of baggage and kindred impedimenta being moved down the dock to the graceful white vessel. And again I stand waiting with my parents, impatient under a decorous mien, for that thrilling moment when we should ascend the gangplank and step aboard.

I see the dripping hawsers, hear their creak and strain, and as we cast off and the boat begins to move,



Sunapee began as a resort about 1875 when George W. Blodgett built his first cottages and Dan and Frank Woodsum began operating their first steamboat, the Lady Woodsum, shown here at the Blodgett Landing wharf. Photograph from Margaret Graham DeVeau collection.

feel the rhythmic powerful swish of propulsion. At last, we are waterborne!

Blodgett's Landing might as well have been Liverpool, and Lake Sunapee, the Atlantic ocean to my unsophisticated experience. Nor was the crossing a whit dampened by the knowledge that once landed, a further trip via humble row boat would be necessary to reach father's camp at Birch Point, called by the world at large, Atwood's Point.

Atwood's Point, bought when my father was a teen-ager visiting his uncle, Perley Coffin, passed from our family's name while I was in high school. My city-bred mother, who lacked enthusiasm for wilderness experience, responded with neither tears nor lamentations. Camping in what amounted to virgin

forest was literally for the birds (and the squirrels) as far as she was concerned. After the fantastic night in which our family was driven from camp by an unknown animal, I was inclined to agree.

Not that Mother and I objected to routine inconveniences. Indeed these were often recognized as blessings in disguise. Spring water, for instance, was a sparkling elixir, delicious and refreshing enough to outweigh the labor of hauling it through the woods from half a mile away. Couldn't one stop almost anywhere on the trail and eat his fill of high-bush huckleberries, big, black, and juicy? Cooking on a stove-top between two large flat rocks, although wearying to the spine, was certainly titillating to the nostrils. And periodic food shopping to supplement

supplies shipped ahead from S.S. Pierce, in Boston, was another plus versus minus. To be sure, it entailed a three-mile walk over a blazed trail, attended by seeming hazards to life and limb, but it brought one to that populous and popular hub of tourism, Blodgett's Landing.

Such junkets for food were occasionally varied by a long trek to the fragrant farmhouse and broad fields of Farmer Rowe. There I came within inches of falling down an abandoned well. But that's another story.

Blodgett's Landing and Farmer Rowe's - who wouldn't find either rewarding? The Landing boasted an hotel, The Forest House, hardly less primitive than those seen in subsequent Western movies. Nevertheless, it was - oh, magic word!

- a hotel. In addition, one side overlooked a so-called "camp ground" with tiers of crude pine benches facing a platform, the erstwhile scene of religious revival meetings, begun in the post-Civil War period.

Amid a field nearby, bubbled a crystalline "sulphur spring" from which all and sundry were pleased to quaff water supposedly beneficial to health. And not far distant, teetering at lakeside, rose a somewhat flimsy "Casino" for Saturday night festivities, dances, of course, being the lode star for the younger set.

To me, the most interesting feature anywhere about was the Shakers' little shop, which dealt in candied flagroot, horehound, "slippery elm" lozenges, and rock candy, as well as sweet-grass baskets, and birchbark trifles ornamented with porcupine quills, the work of Indians. I still have such a box intact, the ivory quills contrasting with the burnt sienna of the peeled bark. It bears eloquent witness to the artistic sensitivity and sound craftsmanship of an all but vanished people.

Yes, Blodgett's Landing was indeed an alluring Mecca. No less so were the ancient house and tillage of Farmer Rowe. But it was allure with a difference. A never-to-be-forgotten component was the agreeable unmistakable aroma built up from centuries of cooking over a wood fire - oak, maple, apple which pervaded the big sunny kitchen, the former "keeping-room" of the farmhouse. The throat of the wide fieldstone fireplace was beaded with glistening traces of the great joints, the hasty puddings, hoe cakes, and the like, once prepared therein. These essences, inextricably associated in my experience with ancient firesides, added a piquant savor to the meals that our family sometimes enjoyed with Farmer Rowe and his wife.

No, none of the inconveniences and incongruities of a camper's life disturbed Mother or me. How could they? It was the vagaries of our fellow travelers of fur and feather that kept us on edge. It was the hooting of owls, the sharp cry of hawks, the melancholy plaint of loons, and the sound of squirrels gamboling on the ridge pole and sliding down the tent's roof, that

exacerbated sensibilities.

Querulous complaints ensued, much to Father's amusement. Thus it went on the infrequent occasions when his ladies accompanied Father to his lair. Even the summer that complaints were followed by frightened reports of an inquisitive sniffing around the tent's edges - like the Spartan boy's too-often-repeated cry of "WOW" - they commanded scant attention and still less credibility.

Tempers became frayed. But when the pooh-poohed sniffing continued beyond a night or two, and the cover of a full stew-pot left over-night on the stove was distinctly heard to rattle in the wee, sma' hours, things began to change. The next day Father interposed a shallow but stout barricade of pine boughs between our tent and the outside world.

Toward night he observed casually, "Dang it. I'm sorry I brought only a revolver this year. I know you girls would've been much happier with a rifle along. Eh?"

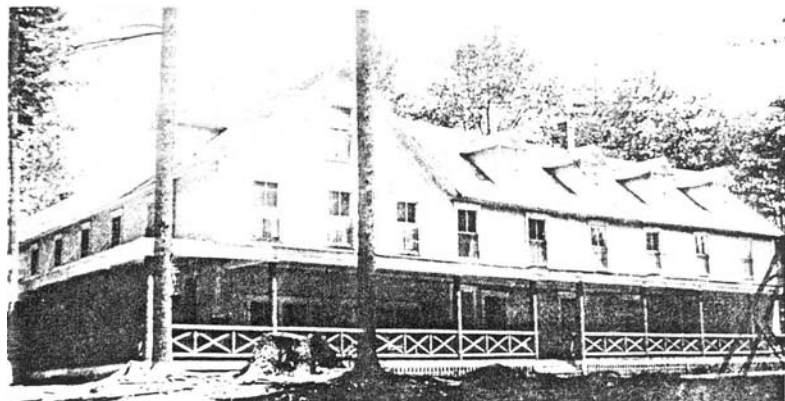
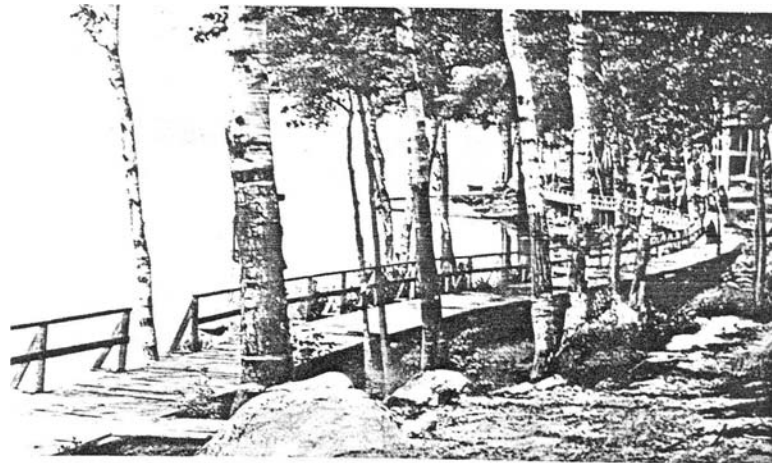
feminine

"Much happier, eh?" was correct.

For that was the night of the bizarre climax. How well I recollect it: a night of gathering storm that seemed to foreshadow catastrophe. To protect our rowboat from beating against the rocky point on which we camped, it had been moored in our distant but relatively quiet cove. And the half-mile trail to it led over Father's narrow hand-engineered bridge, minus guard rails, that spanned a rock-strewn ravine.

Father sat late beside the dying camp fire meditating, no doubt, upon the strange incompatibility of camping and women. Mother and I, in Our tent, prepared reluctantly enough, for an interlude on our cots that might knit up the raveled sleeve of care. I had just removed a sneaker when suddenly, through the dark, arose a cry of such mingled anguish and ferocity as is impossible to describe. Mother and I stood frozen, much as children do in the classic game of statues.

The next minute Father appeared



and said in a shaking voice, "Better get your things together, girls. We'll go to the hotel at the Landing." Without a word, we gathered a few necessities - at sixteen, a few beauty aids and a toothbrush comprised my baggage - and went outside.

Grim-faced, Father awaited us, revolver in one hand, and a lighted lantern in the other. This he thrust hurriedly into my trembling mother's hand, saying, "We've got to go through the woods to reach the boat. Maybe just where *he* is. It's the only way out. I'll go first; Margie next; and you last." Then he picked up his own lantern adding, "We'll keep swinging our lanterns, Maud. Wherever he is, and I suspect it's at the ravine, perhaps the lights will fend him off."

So our little procession started out - the least likely column of refugees ever to traverse the New Hampshire woods. First came Father, half crouching, as might have Daniel Boone himself; I came next with the one bag; and Mother, bravely swinging her lantern, last. Our wildly beating hearts brought our breath faster and faster, and with every

Breath, a century seemed to pass.

All went well until we reached the bridge at the ravine. Then - shall I ever forget it? - Mother stumbled and fell to her knees. I turned to help, expecting to see a wild beast, I knew not what, pawing her body. But no! Hand in mine, she struggled to her feet amid Father's frantic gyrations of his lantern. No thought was wasted on her torn stockings, gashed knees, and tumbled golden hair. We were only too thankful that she, as well as her lantern, had escaped attack by the mysterious animal that, even then, might be watching us.

Not a word, nor a cry, had been uttered; our throats were paralyzed with fear. But as we crept cautiously across the bridge, lanterns swinging, that savage, bloodcurdling scream again rent the blackness nearby, then nearer. We- tried to hurry, while grim visions of meeting a horrible fate on the rocks below tormented my mind and weakened my knees.

At long last, the ordeal was over; we reached the other side of the ravine. And slipping on pine nee-

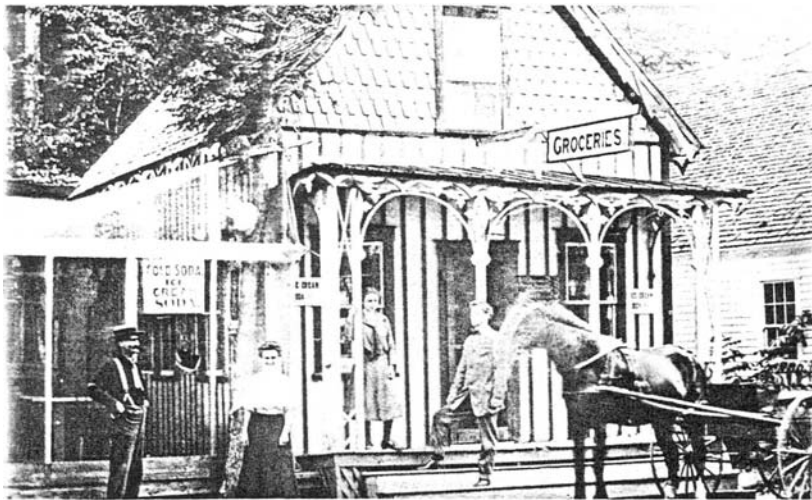
dles, and tripping over tangled roots, we painfully climbed the rise beyond. Thence, still slipping and sliding in our haste, we gained the mooring and somehow got into the boat.

As father pushed off into the calm waters of the cove - silence. Blessed silence throughout the world. I can still hear the drip of the oars as Father said in smothered tones, "That was a bobcat. I suspected as much the night he tried to get into the 'stew kettle. When I threw the axe and barely missed him, he spit at me."

"A bobcat? Who's afraid of him!" I interjected, hoping to introduce a lighter note.

"A bobcat on the loose is no laughing matter, Margie," answered Father solemnly. "'All's well that ends well,' and I'm deeply grateful for the protection we've had. But I realize I should never have allowed you girls to stay in camp as long as I did. If my axe had struck its mark, well - let's not think about that!"

It was the last time that Mother and I ever camped at Lake Sunapee.



(clockwise from left) Anglers camp, later known as the Blodgett Lodge, was torn down only a few years ago. The old wooden boardwalk lined with birches. The Croft family store, ca. 1908. Elmer Blodgett, long-time Blodgett Landing postmaster. DeVeau Collection.

