

## **Massawepie and the Sykes Family: 1917 – 1951**

**by Peter Collinge**

Who occupied the Massawepie property (between Cranberry Lake and Tupper Lake) before the Boy Scouts? The Childwold Park Hotel operated on the shores of Massawepie Lake for twenty years starting in 1890. After the 1909 season the hotel, then under the ownership of a group including Major Henry Dorr, closed permanently. In 1917 William L. Sykes, president of the Emporium Forestry Company, purchased the property from Massawepie Park, Inc., whose incorporators included Ferris J. Meigs of Tupper Lake, Williamsburg & Dorr (Boston attorneys), and Charles I. Marvin (a New York City realtor). The property was divided, with the southeastern section (surrounding Dead Creek and the stage road from Massawepie to Childwold Station) being transferred to the Emporium Forestry Company, and the remaining 2900 acres around Massawepie Lake and the nearby ponds being retained in Mr. Sykes' private ownership.

W.L. Sykes had started in the lumber business by building his first sawmill in Pennsylvania in 1882, and establishing the Emporium Lumber Company there in 1892 with partner William Cafilich. In 1910, with available timber in Pennsylvania diminishing, he purchased the sawmill of George A. McCoy and Sons in Conifer (southeast of Massawepie). He also purchased A. A. Low's Bog River sawmill, planing mill and wood mill, which were used to retrofit the Conifer property. By 1911, Sykes had moved his base of operations to Conifer to take advantage of the large amount of available hardwood timber in the area. In 1912 he incorporated the Emporium Forestry Company, which took over the Adirondack operations from the Emporium Lumber Company and shared its same group of owners. The Pennsylvania mills gradually shut down between 1913 and 1916 as the New York operation grew.

To transport harvested timber within the Emporium property, and to connect the Conifer operation with a planned new mill at Cranberry Lake (later opened in 1917 along the northwest bank of Silver Lake), Sykes decided to build a railroad. Construction started in 1911, and by 1913 the 16-mile main line was completed. Frank Greco of North Carolina built this line for \$2560 per mile. The main line ran from Childwold Station, where it connected with the Adirondack Division of the New York Central (formerly the Mohawk and Malone) one mile east of Conifer, through Conifer and on to Cranberry Lake. Along the way, the line paralleled Dead Creek briefly, and later followed the South Branch of the Grasse River from the Massawepie Mire to just north of Silver Lake, then followed the northwest shore of Silver Lake to Cranberry Lake. The railroad made Cranberry Lake much more accessible to the outside world, and in 1915 the main line from Childwold Station to Cranberry Lake was incorporated as the Grasse River Railroad, a common carrier of passengers and freight.

The Emporium Forestry Company thrived. At its peak it employed 280 people and owned over 125,000 acres, along with almost 150 dwellings and two hotels in Cranberry Lake and in Conifer. Conifer was essentially an old-style company town. Much of the land near Cranberry Lake had been purchased from International Paper Company, which had previously logged it for softwood pulpwood. The Grasse River Railroad had almost 100 miles of line at its peak, with 23 locomotives and 150 log cars. The railroad's Conifer shop also created several hybrid vehicles to serve the passenger side of the business. These included self-propelled railroad cars made from a 1905 "Thomas Flyer" automobile, from an old Pullman car, and from an old rail interurban car. But the most memorable was probably "No. 11", an old converted White bus that made many of the passenger runs between Cranberry Lake and Conifer.

The Emporium Forestry Company cut and processed a total of over 450 million board feet of lumber from 1911-1949, earning W. L. Sykes the title of "Hardwood King" of the Adirondacks. Sykes was considered a progressive forestry operator who followed the "scientific forestry" methods of his friend Gifford Pinchot.

During this era, the Sykes family lived in Conifer, and used Massawepie and its old hotel buildings as a private Adirondack “camp”. As a family preserve, Massawepie was spared from logging. W.L. Sykes and family stayed in the “Big Cottage” (the hotel’s Wahigun Cottage) near Massawepie Lake, just south of the hotel. The Big Cottage contained 10 bedrooms, 22 beds, 5 bathrooms, and a huge central living room. Some of the other cottages were rented periodically to paying guests, typically to families that returned year after year. These families included Brigadier General William Verbeck, head of St. John’s School in Manlius; Warren Smith and family; and Methodist Bishop Charles Flint of Syracuse, who used a cottage near the hotel bowling alley.

During the summers of 1920-21, Gen. Verbeck and his son Col. Guido Verbeck arranged for St. John’s School to hold a summer camp for boys at Massawepie. The camp emphasized outdoor sports, swimming, forestry and woodcraft, physical training, games and singing. The campers used the old hotel casino as a recreation center. The fee for Camp Mas-sa-we-pie was \$40 per week per boy, or \$275 for July and August. (It is interesting to note that more than thirty years later in 1952 the weekly fee for Boy Scouts, including transportation from Rochester, was approximately half that of the earlier camp.) Tutoring was available for an additional \$2 per hour.

The Sykes family members and guests took advantage of the many recreational opportunities on the property and nearby in the Adirondacks. There was canoeing, sailing, bathing, and fishing for brook trout and lake trout on Massawepie Lake and the nearby ponds. Hiking and some horseback riding was available on the property. Excursions away from Massawepie offered mountain climbing, golfing, fishing for bass and pike on the Raquette River, and even shopping.

Across the town road from the old hotel, near the old hotel golf course toward Catamount Pond, was the large Guide House (later known as the Park House). The Sykes family usually ate in the Park House, where meals were announced by a large bell that could be heard in the outlying cottages. A hired couple generally lived in the Park House, with the husband acting as caretaker and the wife serving meals to the Sykes and to the guests for a small fee. The longest-serving of these couples was probably Fred and Carrie Jebo. The last caretaker couple, Elizabeth and Rolland Lee, worked from 1947-1951. Mrs. Lee, like her predecessors, was known for serving hearty and ample meals to a variety of guests. After the Scouts purchased Massawepie the Lees moved into a house near Route 3 just off the property. (The paving of Route 3 from Sevey’s Corners to Tupper Lake in 1927 had made Massawepie more easily accessible by automobile.)

When W.L. Sykes’ children had their own families, each family initially used one of the bedrooms in the Big Cottage, while W.L. and his wife occupied their own separate apartment. As the families grew, they began using other buildings. Roy Sykes and family used “Number Three”, three doors south of the Big Cottage. The George Sykes family stayed in a cottage north of the hotel, between Camp Sorghum (which was still sometimes occupied by former hotel owner Major Henry G. Dorr) and the Dorr Cottage further north (which was decorated in white and occupied by Major Dorr’s wife). Camp Sorghum was named after the dismal prison camp in South Carolina where Major Dorr and fellow Union officers were held captive during the late years of the Civil War. Clyde Sykes and family used “Number Fourteen” at the far north end of the row of cabins. When W. L.’s wife later needed nursing care, he moved with her to the Park House, leaving his daughters Ruth and Grace and their families to share the Big Cottage. During this era, the Park House meals became a prime “family time” for the entire Sykes clan, along with evening gatherings at the “Big Cottage”.

A few other buildings saw some use during that era including the hotel boathouses, but not the hotel itself, which sat abandoned but with furnishings nearly intact. Local tradesmen were hired to do some repair work on the occupied buildings, but the other buildings saw little or no maintenance. After the death of W. L. Sykes in 1941, Clyde Sykes dealt with Massawepie cottage rentals and maintenance, while George Sykes kept the books. George had assumed primary responsibility for operating the Emporium Forestry Company along with Clyde, while Roy was superintendent of the Grasse River Railroad.

The woods operations had become less profitable since the Depression reduced demand. The Cranberry Lake mill closed in 1927. Starting in 1930, Emporium sold almost half of its land in order to reduce its corporate debt, including large sales to Tri-River Power Corporation and New York State. In 1945, Emporium sold most of its remaining land, 72,000 acres, to the Draper Corporation. Most of the land being sold off had been logged and was in a regrowth period. By 1948, the Grasse River Railroad had removed all of its rails except two miles from the Childwold Station through Conifer and about one mile to the west. In April, 1949, the remaining Emporium Forestry land and property and the railroad were sold to furniture-maker Heywood-Wakefield Company of Gardner, Massachusetts. In 1950 the Emporium Forestry Company was dissolved.

As more of the Sykes family began spending most of its time outside of the Adirondacks, there was less agreement about the wisdom of maintaining Massawepie as a family property. For years the expenses of maintaining and operating Massawepie had exceeded the relatively minor income from cottage rental and meals. Dr. Richard Sherwood, husband of W. L. Sykes' daughter Ruth, in particular questioned the Massawepie operation. Ruth Sherwood's sister, Grace Wheaton, sometimes agreed with Dr. Sherwood.

In 1946, when building materials were in short supply after World War II, the family sold the old Childwold Park Hotel building to Mahoney & Mackey of Norwood to be dismantled for scrap lumber and fittings. Afterwards, at least two "camps" in the Higley Flow area between Massawepie and Potsdam were built and trimmed with Massawepie lumber by Len Mackey.

By 1949, Clyde Sykes had begun to make serious efforts to sell Massawepie. The original asking price was \$150,000, but when the Rochester Boy Scouts' Otetiana Council offered \$65,000 Clyde countered with a \$125,000 price for the property except that the family would reserve mineral rights and a strip of land along Townline Pond. After extended negotiations, made more complicated by the resistance of Dr. Sherwood, the Massawepie property was transferred to the Scouts with no reservations in September, 1951, for \$105,000. The Sykes era at Massawepie had ended, and thousands of Boy Scouts would be next to enjoy this unique property.