

Eagle Lake Beginnings
George Conklin

"In the early days, in the 1880's, there was just the lake, the road and a farmer who lived near the end of the lake. The lake had originally been called Long Pond, later Chilson Lake and then finally, about 1910, it acquired the name Eagle Lake. The road connected Ticonderoga with the Schroon River valley, crossing the lake on a driven pile causeway. The farmer's name was Anson Moore. He owned a thriving dairy farm, selling produce in Chilson and Ticonderoga, eight miles to the east.

Isaac Harris discovered the lake in the 1880's(1894) and was the first to build a summer home on its shore. It was a typical large Victorian mansion with wide porches overlooking the lake, high ceilings, grand staircases, and a cone shaped turret. In the 1960's it was removed to be replaced by a more modern and winterized house by its owners, Carl and Caroline Harris, Carl being the grandson of Isaac

In the 1880's there was also built a small house, little more than a shack, midway down south shore of the lake and opposite what would become know as "Charles Island." This building's owners, a Mr. and Mrs. Bly, were soon to sell (1887) to a Mr. Houghtaling, including 160 acres of land and water. George Houghtaling later choose a nearby point of land, (later the Spalding property and now Frank Smith), as the site for his inn. He catered to the city folk who came to escape the heat of the cities, to sportsmen and lovers of nature. Mrs. Houghtaling it appeared was an excellent cook and the 'inn' soon became a Mecca of sorts. From year to year Houghtaling added on additional rooms and verandas of the type to have recently gained such popularity among mid-Victorian vacationers.

It was this bucolic setting that there came, in the summer of 1892, a Mrs. Charles Schmidlapp and her daughter Iola of Cincinnati, Ohio. Iola's governess, a Miss Mary Swasey, had been piano teacher for the Isaac Harris boys, Wilson and Woods, and it was she who had recommended the "inn" as a summer retreat for Mrs. Schmidlapp, who had recently lost her husband. The romantic young lady of nineteen, Iola immediately fell in love with Eagle Lake and everything about it. Rowing, hiking, picnicking were the order of the day and quite naturally the Harris boys, Wilson and Woods, became her constant companions. Meanwhile her mother and the senior Harris became fast friends and the two families have retained this friendship to the present day.

During the each of the next few seasons Mrs. Schmidlapp acquired some parcel of land at Eagle Lake - 'Charles Island,' which was named for her late husband; a large portion of the hillside to the south, which she named after her daughter: 'Mount Iola,' a spring with lake frontage, the spring being named 'Aqua Salute' because of its pure water and being noted for its health-giving properties, and finally a high Cliff promontory across the bay from the Harris property. Here Mrs. Schmidlapp intended to build her summer home. Early in the 1890's she did in fact build a two-story boathouse near the foot of the cliff as well as steps to the proposed house site above. The boathouse sheltered her two immaculately kept rowboats, the 'Margaret' and a light skiff as well as Iola's own much-loved rowboat, the 'Lorelei. The latter equipped with wide stationary rowlocks, the latest wrinkle for the use of spoon oars which might be 'feathered' on the top of the water after each forward stroke. Rowing was an elegant sport, carefully studied and mastered, and a far cry from the careless, off-hand swivel of today's boaters more attuned to the motor age.

A complete picture of a summer residents life at Eagle Lake, (then Chilson Lake), in the 1890's is somewhat hard to grasp. Photographs of the era can help one visualize the outings by horse and carriage or by water, picnics at some remote pond - Gooseneck or 'Puts' - the ladies all in their long skirts, the men in knickers acting the part of woodsmen, outdoorsmen, equipped with hatchets and all the other paraphernalia

believed so important in holding nature at bay. Yet a certain perseverance was needed to trek back into the hinterlands through a country that was still partly unexplored and where help was not readily available should any unforeseen occur.

By the late 1890's the Schmidlapp clan had expanded to include Mrs. Schmidlapp's three sisters and some of their children and families. Edmund Luthy, Margaret Schmidlapp's favorite nephew, bought the Bly 'cottage' from Houghtaling and added onto it from year to year. (See Edmund Luthy's article in the Ticonderoga Sentinel printed in the 1930's). This spot was the center of countless summers of sports and frivolities, 'Cousin Edmund' being a hearty Swiss gentleman who loved nothing as much as making children enjoy themselves. The house flowed over, during the long summer evenings, with virtually no end of all kinds of music and games. (One of Edmund Luthy's instruments was a Chinese boombas - a combination string and percussion instrument equipped with, drum, cymbals, and bells.)

When Iola Schmidlapp married William H. Conklin in Rome, Italy, in April 1906, Iola's mother gave the young couple Charles Island as a wedding present. The groom had visited Eagle Lake a year or two earlier so was acquainted with the island and envisioned it as the site of a summerhouse. In fact on his return trip to the States with Iola he drew a sketch of what the new house would look like and in the course of the summer construction on the island got underway. As originally designed the house consisted of a forty-foot-long living room with a huge fireplace in the middle of the long side. At one end of the room was a stair that led up to the five bedrooms and a bath above. Later the house was expanded with kitchen, two dining rooms, several additional bedrooms and baths, a tower rising over fifty feet and whose top floor was level with the tops of the trees. The exterior of the building was faced with half - cut cedar logs, many of them with a diameter of 18 or 20 inches. It was a unique structure taking special advantage of the site and it's views. As few of the large pines were cut as possible and in certain instances, rather than remove the trees, porches and other parts of the structure were built around them.

The house on Charles Island stood for fifty years and was the summer home of a growing Conklin Clan. Grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles and countless children with everyone's friends came and went. Each year that the family spent the summer at the lake the large living room was the scene of many parties, many colorful and memorable. The eldest Conklin son, Charles, was married on the island in September of 1930 with all the fanfare of a formal wedding, best man and ushers in cut-aways and dozens of boats bringing the out-of-town guests over from the mainland. This was in those days before the Great Depression had taken a firm hold. Few foresaw the crash of '29 as the start of a prolonged tailspin.

1929 had been a heyday in more ways than one. That was when all of the young people at the lake, as well as some of their elders banded together to write and produce a musical comedy called 'The Yellow Hat.' Jessie Griggs, a professional from the Seagal music colony at Schroon, was a major force in helping put the production together, as was Jack O'Connor, a Dartmouth classmate of George and William Conklin. Jack was a talented actor also soon to become professional. The play was produced in the Charles Island living room on two successive nights, proceeds going to the Moses-Ludington Hospital in Ticonderoga. Among the participants were members of the Lodge, Runge, Fisher, Rodgers, and Conklin families. A program is included here within.

The old Houghtaling 'inn', the first residence of Margaret and Iola Schmidlapp, had burned to the ground two years previously. Eliot Spalding bought the property and built a large year-round house somewhat on the order of the Conklin's house on the island. It was handsomely furnished, had elegant paintings by Ridgeway Knight on the walls and was equipped with two swimming pools, one indoors and one out. The building as well as the boathouse and a garage and apartment structure still stand.

The house on Charles Island was struck by lightning during a violent thunderstorm during the summer of 1956. Everything possible was done to try and save this wonderful structure - on the Conklin children called 'the castle' - but there was no possibility of quenching the flames once the timbers in the tower ignited and live coals dropped into the main quarters and rooms below. The Ticonderoga fire department fire department did its utmost, but it was a losing battle. At the end only the gutted remains of Iola's beloved square piano continued to smolder; and a grandson, in tears, who had been vainly dousing the remnants, had almost forcibly to be urged away.

The extent of the loss of this structure - one that meant so much to so many - is even yet difficult to assess. One thinks of the great living room, its formidable stone fireplace graced with two stained glass windows, its fine hardwood floors, its outlook in all four directions, its wide porches - which had been a hub of activity both for the family and much of the lake as well. One also thinks of the countless memorabilia - furnishings, pictures, artifacts, many of them gathered over the years in distant countries or presented as gifts by family and friends - all to vanish in flames in the short space of an hour or two. For those of the family who were at the scene the fire can only have been the experience that one never forgets.

Iola Conklin had died the previous December 83 and her husband three years before. It is well that both were spared the trauma of knowing that what had been a part of their lives for fifty years was suddenly destroyed.

Yet even so Charles Island remained undaunted. Though its entire eastern half was severely scarred, it wasn't long before new growth began to cover the gutted ruins; and now after some 23 years, sizeable trees have again sprung up, thereby returning this spot of land to its unique natural grandeur and artless form.

In the meanwhile it devolved on the third generation to carry on, saving or picking up the pieces. Charles Schmidlapp Conklin, the eldest, a banker in Atlanta, Georgia had married Elizabeth Barnum and they had two children, Charles II and Joy as well as currently four grandchildren - one of whom Charles III, is now the proud owner of Charles Island. The other grandchildren are Christina Conklin and Margaret and Elizabeth Ellison, Joy's children. A second son of William and Iola Conklin, George, (who is assembling the facts for this account) is an architect in New Haven, Connecticut. Married to Anne Thomas in 1944 they have two daughters, Holly (christened Margaret Anne) Fitzgerald and Mimi (christened Iola Schmidlapp) Benedict. Their children are Megan and Aiden Fitzgerald and Liza and Jared Benedict. A third son, William Schmidlapp Conklin, a physician and surgeon of Portland, Oregon, married Elizabeth Blair and they have two children, Robert Conklin a lawyer, and Carol Conklin Ochsner, teacher. Their children are Christina and Elizabeth Conklin and John and Elizabeth Ochsner. Doctor William Conklin died in 1974. A fourth child of William and Iola Conklin, Margaret Elizabeth, lived in Santa Barbara, California, not far from where their parents had for years maintained their permanent residence. Margaret never married. However she was always very much a part of the Conklin scene, frequently visiting Eagle Lake, attending almost all the more important Conklin events, writing and recording family happenings and accomplishments, (it was she who typed and put together several copies of Iola's autobiography including photos and pictures), remembering anniversaries, in particular those of her great-nieces and nephews, to all of whom she was most devoted. Margaret died in 1978 - the culmination of an interesting and unusual life encompassing many friends, intermittent travels and, in the face of recurring ill - health, an apparently boundless good - sportsmanship.

This third generation thus carries on - to the fourth and now the fifth. During the twenty-three years since the disastrous Charles Island fire what has been known as 'the lodge' - it originally served as a garage and boathouse on the mainland and a landing for access to the island - has been used for the summer camp.

William Conklin had built there a large 'playroom' with a sizeable stone fireplace as well as an apartment with kitchen, bedrooms and bath. This has been altered from time to time to meet the changing needs and to maintain the structure's durability. With its porch overlooking the lake this lodge has served the family well and countless memories of summers extending days and evenings remain.

Yet times move on. What was once a quiet country road becomes a much-traveled highway with the accompanying annoyance of traffic and noise. With some reluctance to leave the vantage spot opposite Charles Island it was finally determined to seek out a more suitable alternative and build a more useful year-round camp. In this the Harris and Archbald families had already showed the way. The site was chosen by far the most appropriate - that parcel or promontory that Margaret Schmidlapp had acquired from Houghtaling in the early 1889's upon which she herself had once hoped to build. Unfortunately her little green boathouse had long since had to be removed, but now a new one was erected with a porch to overlook the lake, the 'turtle' and Charles Island.

Years before William Conklin, Iola's husband, had begun a road to the site above and had even, with some idea of constructing a house himself, bought a load of bricks which lay on the property unused for thirty years. An additional incentive, to carry forward a project a total of some eighty-five years in the planning stage. Meanwhile costs have risen, needs have changed and new forms in architecture were constantly evolving. The solution: a compact all weather, well-insulated house to be built by a long time friend of the family who lives near-by on Eagle Lake: Graham Davis. As this is being written, in the fall of 1979, this house nears completion and it is expected some use of it will be made even before the snow flies.

It is interesting to surmise what the future holds for this family whose connections at Eagle Lake have so well endured. During this past summer two new arrivals appeared on the scene: Aiden Elizabeth FitzGerald and Jared Conklin Benedict - great-grand children of Iola Conklin and great-great-grand-children of Margaret Schmidlapp. Since 1892 when his mother and daughter first came up the long Chilson Hill by stagecoach, having alighted from their train at the Ticonderoga railway station, many changes have taken place. Nor is every change necessarily the hoped-for improvement. Nevertheless, here as elsewhere, a few things have remained, not unsurprisingly, unchanged and constant. Among these most notably, perhaps, is the uniquely beautiful lake itself with its high gray cliffs, its three unusual islands and that striking silhouette, the Camels Head, stretched out along its northern rim - just as enduring, it's possible to say as the mountains of the moon.

One day a long time ago, in May of 1943, Iola Conklin wrote for her husband a short account of the earlier days at Eagle Lake and of their lasting impressions. For this she chose what is both a description and wholly appropriate title: 'A Place of Beauty - A Joy Forever.'