

An Adirondack legacy

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Great Escape's announcement a week ago that it would build a resort hotel complete with its own indoor aquatic park positioned the region to be at the forefront of a trend in the travel and tourism industry.

It was another example of the area's long legacy of breaking new ground in vacation offerings - from Adirondack great camps to lakefront resorts, Warren County has a reputation as being one of the Northeast's premier vacation spots.

It owes much of that legacy to an Ohio man who came to the county more than 80 years ago and, through force of will and uncanny timing, was the driving force behind the creation of a type of resort for which the region became legendary - dude ranches.

"You can't know anything about dude ranches unless you know about Earl Woodward," said Lake Luzerne town Historian Beatrice Evens.

Evens' life is tied to the history of Warren County's dude ranches. She came as a guest one summer and ended up meeting a local man, marrying and remaining in Warren County.

According to a history of Woodward provided by the Hadley-Luzerne Historical Society, Woodward was a teacher and farmer who came to Warren County from Forest, Ohio, in the 1920s. He purchased 222 acres of land with a farmhouse on it in Stony Creek.

After hiring local men and logging the land for a few years, Woodward put a small ad in the back of Field and Stream, offering an Adirondack experience for those who wanted to come and rough it in the mountains.

The response to Woodward's offer was overwhelming, and visitors from up and down the East Coast flocked to Stony Creek to experience Woodward's Adirondack adventure, and an industry was born.

Woodward went on to own other parcels of land in Stony Creek, including the Stony

Creek Dude Ranch, which had been the Stony Creek Country Club. But perhaps his most ambitious accomplishments were in neighboring Luzerne, where Woodward in 1928 bought 1,400 acres of land across from Lake Vanare that included an old farmhouse.

Along with his partner Earl Sebald and crews of local men, Woodward worked to dam a stream to create Lake Allure and Lake Forest. The crews built several log cabins around Lake Allure, a venture that marked the beginning of Luzerne's dude ranch legacy.

According to Sebald's son Don, who still lives in one of the many log cabins built in the area off Route 9N in Lake Luzerne, Woodward's original thought was to dam the Hudson River.

"The dam never got built," Sebald said. "The '30s were not a real big boon for him. He wasn't able to pay back the Ohio investors. But he was sitting on several lumberyards full of cut lumber. He sold the lumber to the government and progressed into the dude ranch business."

Woodward owned and developed several properties in the Hadley-Luzerne area. He named his first true dude ranch "The Northwoods." What was then the main lodge of The Northwoods Dude Ranch is now home to the Heritage Steakhouse.

"For \$4 per day or \$20-\$26 per week, you could enjoy horseback riding, swimming, tennis, fishing and more," Evens wrote in a brief history of Woodward.

After selling The Northwoods, Woodward built Rocky Ridge Dude Ranch, whose main lodge is now home to Ciro's Restaurant. He went on to build perhaps his most famous dude ranch, Hidden Valley, which is now the Double H Hole in the Woods Ranch.

Route 9N between Luzerne and Lake George became a hub for dude ranch vacationers. Before the Northway went in, 9N was the preferred shortcut to bypass Glens Falls when traveling between Lake George and Saratoga Springs.

"There were bars and restaurants all up and down the road - the Hitching Post, Rustic Inn, Cabin in the Pines, many others," Sebald said. "You had to see it to believe it. I guess a good comparison might be what Lake George is like now."

From the mid-'30s on, the dude ranches lured people from the urban East Coast population centers to the Adirondacks for a rustic summer adventure.

'A busy, busy place'

"The dude ranches were everywhere," said Margaret "Elaine" Kane, who grew up in Rochester and came one summer to work at Hidden Valley. "It was a busy, busy place. Lots of fun, dancing, riding, all kinds of things. It was a great place to socialize. All the

ranches, we all knew each other. The Hitching Post was a gathering place, a big attraction - a great big bar and restaurant and the fireplace was so big you could stand up inside it."

Kane returned the following summer, going to work at Rocky Ridge. Ultimately, she ended up marrying and staying in Luzerne, teaching school.

Don Sebald was born in Luzerne and grew up working with his father and Earl Woodward.

"I guess when I got old enough, the thing I remember most is going to the dances," Sebald said. "It was a lot of entertainment and a lot of fun. That's what attracted me and a whole lot of other folks. They'd come from New York City, Albany, Boston. They wanted to get up in the woods in a little different atmosphere."

Sebald said many of those visiting the dude ranches were women, especially during World War II.

"They were metropolitan types, secretaries and the like," Sebald said. "They'd save up so they could come up here for a week or two to ride horses and have fun in the Adirondacks."

That, in turn, attracted a lot of local men. Horseback riding was a big thing, Sebald said.

"Square dances, cookouts, rodeos, each ranch almost had their own rodeo," he added. "Not as big as what Painted Pony has now, but they were nice."

'Where East meets West'

For three decades, the dude ranches thrived, offering people weary of the urban grind a chance to experience what Woodward called "a place where East meets West."

An integral part of the experience at an Earl Woodward-owned dude ranch was Woodward's ability to charm guests and make their experience unforgettable. Walter Isaacson, in his autobiographical history of Painted Pony Ranch, described his first experience with Woodward at Rocky Ridge Ranch.

Isaacson and his wife came to Rocky Ridge in late 1943 to meet with Woodward in hopes of acquiring property upon which to build their own dude ranch. Woodward hosted the Isaacsons at his expense, as he was known to do with prospective clients.

"We arose at 6 the next morning," Isaacson wrote. "Mr. Woodward was there in the dining room to greet and introduce all of us. He was a very friendly man with a loud deep voice and a laugh that was hearty and infectious and guaranteed to win friends and influence people. He invited us to all sit at a long ranch-type table seating 12 people

while he sat at the head where he could see and speak to all of us about the properties he had to offer. We were served platters of pancakes, biscuits, ham and eggs and gallons of hot coffee."

Though the Isaacsons didn't purchase any property on that trip, Woodward sent them home with several pounds of butter, a commodity that was scarce during World War II.

The Isaacsons returned the following weekend and made a deal with Woodward to purchase a large parcel of land upon which they built Painted Pony, a dude ranch of considerable fame and success in its own right.

Woodward went on to purchase, develop and or sell substantial parcels of land and housing on Route 9N between Lake George, further enhancing his legacy and earning him the nickname "the Baron of Bolton."

Demise of the dude ranch

The county's dude ranch industry thrived for more than 30 years. But just as dude ranches were born and prospered because of a generation's need to find a new vacation experience, the advent of affordable air travel and an improved highway system spelled their demise.

"When I was young, traveling from New York City or Rochester was a big thing," Kane said. "People wanted an escape for their vacations and going to the Adirondack dude ranches was that. But traveling became easier and people wanted to go farther - out West or Europe for their vacations. I think that was the death knell for the dude ranches."

Some have survived and others have been reincarnated. Places such as Thousand Acres, Roaring Brook, Riding Hi Ranch, the Bit and Bridle and the Painted Pony Rodeo had their origins in the glory days of Warren County dude ranches.

But they pale compared to the dude ranches that dotted Warren County in Luzerne, Stony Creek, Warrensburg, Thurman, Johnsburg and Lake George.

"It was really something," Evens said. "You'd have had to see it to believe it."

Woodward's impact on the county's dude ranch legacy cannot be overstated. In a biographical essay on Woodward written in 1982, author Carolyn Hart Tower relayed the following anecdote:

One warm June Sunday in 1950, Earl (Woodward) sat on a terrace overlooking Lake George, reading The New York Times. He turned to the 'Resorts - New York State' section and perused the ads.

"How many of those places have you owned?" queried a visitor sitting near by.

Earl took out his pen and began checking off those advertised.

"Here," Woodward said. "Some I sold the property for. Some I built. But I've had a hand in all of them."

There were 20 check marks on the page - Alpine Village, Sunnybrook Acres, Blythewood Village, Shangri-La Village, Melody Manor, Earl Woodward's Village, Dunham's Bay Lodge, Frontier Village, Arrowhead Lodge, Blue Water Manor, Holiday House, Sun Canyon, Thunderbird Ranch, Northwoods Dude Ranch, Painted Pony Ranch, Hidden Valley, White Horse Dude Ranch and Rocky Ridge.

It was an impressive list. But a complete list certainly would have been longer.

To those who knew him, Earl Woodward was larger than life.

"He was quite a fella," Sebald said. "Quite a fella."

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