

HARVEYSLAKE.ORG

Sunset

The Sunset area was originally called Inlet because of a small winding stream entering the Lake at this point. Inlet, however, is a misnomer since the Lake is principally fed by springs welling from the bottom of the Lake. The original Inlet area was a large shallow basin. Bennet's Path reached the area before 1800, and the Worthingtons settled near Inlet in 1806. But the area was generally undeveloped until 1855 when the Rhoads Hotel was opened. At this time a long wooden bridge across the Inlet basin led to a crude road over the mountain to Outlet Mills.

Early Hotels

Rhodes Hotel

The earliest public house at the Lake was the Rhoads Hotel. Building of the hotel began in 1854 for owners Henry Hancock, Jonathon Husted and Almon Goss on land leased from Henry Worthington. The hotel, originally named the Lake House, was opened in early July 1855 with Thomas Totten of Centermoreland as the manager. The three-story structure, seventy-five feet in length and forty feet in depth, was located near the Lake's front where Carpenter Road now enters the Lake Road. The Lake House accommodated one hundred guests.

With the opening of the Lake House, a daily stage line to the Lake was also made available for the summer trade. The ride from Wilkes-Barre took at least two hours. Access to the Lake was severely hampered by poor roads that delayed the resort's development.

In November 1873 the Lake House was acquired by Washington Lee who apparently engaged James W. Rhoads as the manager for 1874. A Lake House post office was opened on July 29, 1874, with Rhoads as postmaster. A year later the Lake House post office was discontinued.

Lee sold the Lake House to James W. Rhoads in March 1875 for \$8,500.00. Rhoads was a retired Sheriff of Luzerne County, and under his management, the Lake House had increasing success. Rhoads renamed the hotel the Harvey's Lake Hotel, but eventually the hotel was simply called Rhoads Hotel.

After the death of James W. Rhoads in August 1886, the hotel was managed by his widow, Caroline Rhoads, aided by his brother, Frank Rhoads, and she managed the property until 1902. When the Shawanese post office opened at the hotel on January 12, 1892, Charles E. Rhoads was postmaster. Frank Rhoads later managed the hotel from 1902 to 1908.

On January 4, 1908, the Rhoads Hotel completely burned to the ground. A defective pipe in the furnace caused the fire, which spread rapidly due to a strong northerly wind. After the fire, Frank Rhoads converted the Rhoads tavern, a separate facility built in 1883, into a small hotel. However, Frank Rhoads died in the spring of 1909. His

daughter, Amy, managed the hotel and later married J.D. Carpenter. The hotel was eventually expanded into a two story twenty-room facility known as Carpenter's Hotel.

Lake Grove House

The Lake Grove House was built by Col. Jacob Rice in the spring of 1881. Rice, a Dallas merchant, was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the 115th Pennsylvania Militia, and later he served in the 53rd Pennsylvania Volunteers during the Civil War. The hotel, built on land leased from James Park, was on the site where the Hotel Oneonta would later be erected.

Before the extension of the Lehigh Valley Railroad in 1887, the Lake Grove House, like the Rhoads Hotel, depended on the stage lines for guests to reach the hotel. Because of the poor roads to the Lake, the stagecoach rides were unusually long. William L. Rice, a son of Col. Jacob Rice, served as the manager of the Lake Grove House. He began a stage line on June 1, 1886. A stage left the hotel at 7:00 A.M. and arrived in Wilkes-Barre three hours later; the stage left the city at 3:00 P.M. and arrived at the Lake four hours later. Because of the long stage rides, it was often necessary to make overnight accommodations at the Rhoads or Lake Grove House to enjoy the Lake. Samuel Gottfried purchased the Lake Grove House in 1891, and in April 1892 he made an addition to the hotel. On July 4, 1892, two hundred people were entertained at the hotel. Fireworks crowned the evening. By August Gottfried was planning major renovations to the hotel, and eventually Gottfried was also responsible for securing country funds to help support the townships costs to replace the wooden Inlet bridge with an iron bridge for the 1893 season.

The Lake Grove House was sold to the Harvey's Lake Hotel and Land Company in 1897, which wanted the site to build the Oneonta Hotel. The Lake Grove House was used by construction workers while the Oneonta was build behind the older hotel. In late May 1898, after the Oneonta Hotel was completed, the Lake Grove House was torn down.

Oneonta Hotel

The Harvey's Lake Hotel and Land Company was incorporated on April 20, 1897. The President of the company was Chris Stegmaier; other major stockholders were Peter Forve, John Graham, P.R. Raife, John B. Reynolds, Pierce Butler, Edward Gunster and A.A. Holbrook. The company purchased three parcels of land, including the site of the Lake Grove House. P.R. Raife, a well-known builder in Wilkes-Barre, was the general contractor for the new hotel, and McCormick and French were the architects.

Construction of the hotel began in October 1897.

The hotel was built on a hill behind the site of the Lake Grove House. It was two hundred feet from the edge of the Lake and occupied a plot 196 feet wide and 105 feet deep.

A formal inspection by the owners of the new hotel was held on April 14, 1898. At this time it was called the Hotel Graham, after one of the principal stockholders.

In the center of the hotel, a six foot wide main stairway reached from the basement to the fourth floor. The basement contained a barroom, café, barber shop, pastry kitchen,

wine cellar, laundry room, lavatories, billiard room and bicycle room.

The main entrance led to a hall thirteen feet wide and forty-four feet long. The hall passed through the center of the building. To the left, a large lobby, with paneled wainscoting and an open six and one-half foot fireplace, held the registration and office area. To the left of the office area, an archway led to a large parlor with another fireplace. At the end of the parlor a ten foot wide hall led to a thirty by fifty-five foot dance hall with two sets of large double doors opening to the side porch, a glorious promenade for evening dancing guests.

To the right of the main lobby a thirty-three by sixty foot dining room lined with plate glass windows overlooked the Lake. An adjoining area served as the nurses and children's dining room.

Seventy rooms filled the second and third floors with two sets of public baths and fireplaces. The fourth story was used for storage. The porch was sixteen feet wide and 343 feet long. The building was wired for electric lights and a fire alarm system. A power house, one hundred feet to the left of the hotel, was built to serve the hotel and the surrounding area. In March 1898 the owners of the hotel also incorporated the Harvey's Lake Light, Heat and Power Company to supply the hotel's power system. Electric current was sold to cottagers in a two mile area near the hotel. An electrical system to serve the rest of the Lake was twenty years away. Steam heating and a sewage treatment system were additional features of the new hotel.

In June 1898 the hotel was renamed the Oneonta, an Indian name meaning a "place of rest." On July 7, 1898, the Hotel Oneonta was opened for guests.

A line of sailboats was available for guests. A twenty foot flag was raised in front of the hotel and red shale paths were laid around the hotel grounds. The trolley brought crowds to the Oneonta, and its landing became the principal stop for the steamboats. Masses were held at the Oneonta on Sundays drawing summer guests, as well as servants and maids from the summer homes.

The Oneonta was a benchmark of the Lake's Golden Era. The hotel was open from late May to late September. Days in advance of the annual July 4 holiday, preparations began in Valley homes for the annual "basket picnic" at the Lake. Crowds would assemble on Public Square to catch the trolleys that ran to the Lake from 4:00 A.M. until 11:00 P.M.

The Oneonta's most famous guest was the former President, Theodore Roosevelt, who had dinner at the Lake hotel on August 22, 1912, while on a visit to the Valley. As the Lake's most celebrated time was ending, the manager at the time, James Poland, died on Christmas Eve 1918, and in six weeks the Oneonta would be lost to fire.

On Sunday, February 2, 1919, Mrs. James Poland and a few friends were visiting the Oneonta. In the early evening, at about 6:00 P.M. she left the hotel and was about to drive home when her party saw a blaze in the basement area. Within minutes the entire hotel was in flames. Farmers were aroused from the area to respond to the fire. Holes were cut in the ice, and a bucket brigade was formed to save neighboring buildings. The illuminated sky began to draw crowds from miles around, and the roads were filled with cars as the hotel became a destructive furnace. A high wind showered sparks that ignited trees and cottage roofs. The fire burned for more than three hours with no injuries to anyone, but nothing remained of the landmark hotel after the fire except a

brick chimney, fireplace, vault and foundation. For some time, the Oneonta company had been in default on the mortgage to the hotel. The cause of the fire was never determined, and the \$45,000.00 in fire insurance was inadequate to rebuild it. In August 1919 the Wyoming Valley Trust Company, which held the mortgage, foreclosed on the estate and sold it to John P. Schmitt, Peter Forve and P.R. Raife, who laid out the area in building lots.

Rise of Sunset

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the Inlet was known primarily for the Rhoads Hotel and Lake Grove House. The area began to bloom after the advent of both the Hotel Oneonta and the trolley line in 1898. By this time the Picnic Grounds had already received a decade's jump on the tourist trade with the construction of a Lehigh Valley Railroad branch line to Alderson in 1887.

The Hotel Oneonta and the trolley line stimulated the growth of the entire Inlet. The trolley company's grounds became Oneonta Park, where dances were held at the pavilion for two decades. In its later years the park was accented by a Merry-Go-Round. A well-known personality at Inlet was Martha "Grandma" Hill who maintained a rough wooden stand below the trolley station at the crest of Oneonta Hill.

She shared the business with a son, Harry E. Hill. About 1914 the Hills constructed a more substantial home and store near the station. Trolley riders frequently stopped at Hill's for candy or newspapers before the walk down the hill to the Hotel Oneonta or to the steamboat landing.

The 1915 season saw the dedication of a beautiful 315 foot long concrete bridge. The new bridge, resting on eleven piers, had been open for use since early December 1914.

In 1915 the Shawanese post office moved from Hill's Pavillion to Gosart's store on Old Lake Road.

In November 1919 a shore plot in front of the old bowling alley was purchased by L.S. Schwab who built a dance hall known as the Sunset Pavillion, giving Sunset its present name. The Sunset Pavillion had its grand opening on Decoration Day 1920 with the Temple Sextet Orchestra. A Sunset institution as the time was Art Templeton's photograph studio at the steamboat landing.

The massive development of Sunset occurred after George W. Bennethum created the Lake Improvement Company in January 1922. His partners were George H. Kline and George B. Martin. Bennethum purchased numerous lots at Sunset, and within a short time, he erected several other structures at Sunset while also improving the Lake's shoreline for swimming. He purchased fifteen World War I barracks from Cape May, New Jersey. He reassembled them along Hillside Avenue behind the Grotto area. They were named after the states and were popularly called the "state cottages," although Bennethum advertised the area as Bungalow City. A cottage rented for fifty dollars weekly or \$175.00 monthly.

The Lake Improvement Company stimulated the rapid development of Sunset. In 1922 a new restaurant, the Grotto Cot D'Azur, owned by Josephine Gwiazdowska, opened by the Bennethum bowling alley. Nearby, Carpenter's Hotel was a popular dinner site that provided chicken dinners for one dollar. The Bon Air restaurant, at the steamboat

landing, was completely remodeled in 1922 by new managers, Charles Groh and William Reiger. To encourage summer traffic, Thomas Pugh ran a private bus line every afternoon from Wilkes-Barre to the Lake.

With the emerging jazz-age, the historic site of the Hotel Oneonta would become one of the region's most popular dance halls. Following the loss of the Hotel Oneonta, lots were laid out on the Oneonta plot. Two lots at the bottom of the Oneonta Hill at the intersection with the Lake road were purchased in 1921 by Ted Pringos, who had a restaurant at Sunset. At the same time, a group of business men in Wilkes-Barre saw the site as ideal for a new dance pavilion.

The cabaret dance hall on the second floor of the Oneonta Pavillion was originally one hundred feet long and twenty feet wide. Seating areas were on the front extension at both ends of the dance floor. On the left side of the ground floor of the pavilion was a restaurant, and on the right was a beauty salon behind which a soda fountain faced the Oneonta Hill road. Opening night was May 27, 1922, with Kilgore's Orchestra. Dances were usually held five evenings a week with Wednesday and Saturday nights the largest draws.

Frank Devlin, owner of the Family Theatre in Wilkes-Barre, bought Wright's Lakeside cottage in 1919. He then purchased shoreline lots near the Sunset bridge where he built the Casino in the spring of 1924. The Casino, featuring the largest bowling ally in Northeastern Pennsylvania, opened Memorial Day 1924. Billiards and whirl o'ball provided entertainment, and a dining room and refreshment parlor accommodated 250 people. On the first floor there were a gift shop and grocery store; on the second floor of the Casino was a large dance hall.

In the same 1924 season the Grotto Cote D'Azur became the White Birch Inn, which was then owned by Ed Ambrose and Stanley Stogosky. A double-block boarding house, on Hillside Avenue, owned by D.R. Williams, was converted into a new Grotto restaurant by Stella E. Starr and Sophie Osko. The Grotto was later extended over the site of the old Williams store on the Lake front. Bennethum purchased the Lakeview restaurant and the revitalized landmark now offered French pastry under the management of Ted Pringos.

By 1926 the long concrete bridge was deteriorating rapidly due to winter ice damage. The county decided to build a short concrete bridge at Sunset. Additional filing of the Inlet basin occurred to build the present bridge at Sunset, which was opened in 1928.

Destruction of Sunset

On Sunday, June 24, 1928, a disastrous fire began to signal the end of a decade of phenomenal growth at Sunset. In the early morning, Willard Gosart, the night watchman for the new county bridge, discovered a fire in the lower story of the Belmont Restaurant next to the Oneonta Pavillion. Esther Ide, the night operator of the Commonwealth Exchange, signaled area cottagers to help fight the fire. Despite a steady rain, the fire spread rapidly from the restaurant to the Oneonta Pavillion and surrounding structures. Earlier in the year, the Oneonta Pavillion had been remodeled. A spacious veranda had been added on the lower floor, and the upper floor had been enclosed for year-round use. After the fire call, Sen. A.J. Sordoni, with the Lake

pumper, was the earliest to arrive, followed by the Kingston Independent Hose Company, which made the run to the Lake in twenty minutes. Rescuers smashed into the rear apartment of the dance pavilion to arouse James Hennihan and Albert Mason who were sleeping in the pavilion's apartment. Hennihan was a local prize fight referee who had assumed the management of the pavilion for the 1928 season; he had finished his first dance only hours earlier. The flames were furious, and four times the firemen had to douse flames that even threatened the Lake pumper, which stood near the steamboat landing. Rowland Newsbigle, one of the fire-fighters, was forced to jump into the Lake to avoid the snapping electric wires. By 6:00 P.M. the fire was under control. Lost were the reconstructed Oneonta Pavillion, the Belmont restaurant, Mundy's candy store and the Hochreiter cottage.

There was inadequate insurance to rebuild the dance hall, and the Oneonta Amusement Company went into insolvency. The Oneonta dance site was eventually sold to the Commonwealth Telephone Company for its large exchange building. A few stone steps from the Oneonta Pavillion still grace the property.

Within two months after the loss of the Oneonta Pavillion, another fire at Sunset had tragic results. On August 16, 1928, a fire broke out in the rear of the Casino bowling alley at 7:30 A.M. In the rear of the building was a boarding area for pinboys. Eight pinboys were aroused and escaped through the efforts of Andrew Kovatch, the Casino bowling manager. But as the boys were escaping the blinding smoke and heat, two of the eight teenage boys, Abraham Dymond and Matthew Yatko, apparently retreated to their room where they suffocated. The fire had started in the kitchen, to the left of the boys' bedroom. An oil stove had been started an hour before the fire. There were severe damages to the rear of the Casino and water damage to eight bowling alleys. The Grotto restaurant next door received slight damage by fire and water.

The following year, on August 26, 1929, the Lake experienced its greatest property loss in history to fire. Ten buildings between Hillside Avenue and Carpenter Road, which comprised most of the amusement section, were destroyed in a three-hour inferno. In the later afternoon, a fire started in the power plant of the Bennethum bowling alley. Fire extinguishers could not contain the blaze, and the flames shortly destroyed an adjoining boarding house used by the Bennethum employees. The bowling alley itself caught fire, and the flames spread to an adjoining store and office building. Fanned by a strong wind, the flames jumped the thirty-five foot front drive to the Sunset Pavillion and the Lake Improvement Company bathhouse. Dorothy Gunton, the telephone exchange operator, called local fire departments and then fled the exchange as fire enveloped the building, cutting all telephone service from the area.

All of Sunset was at risk in the fire. In a remarkable performance, Sen. A.J. Sordoni directed the sixty fire-fighters as they struggled to contain the huge blaze that was destroying Sunset. The firemen directed their hoses on the Grotto, Casino and Bungalow City near the bridge. They also saved the White Birch Inn and Carpenter's Hotel on the opposite side of the disaster. As President of the Harvey's Lake Light Company, Sordoni summoned four gangs of linemen. They cut the wire service to the area and rewired the lines around the fire zone, restoring light service to the area in forty-five minutes. Sordoni was also President of the Commonwealth Telephone Company, and he had the company's general manager, R.W. Kentzer, rushed to the

scene; in an hour a line to the Valley was opened. In less than six hours a new exchange and switchboard was in operation. Two Bell Telephone Company operators, Audrey Heatherly and Jean Hommick, were vacationing at the Lake. As they were observing the fire, they were pressed into volunteer service to manage the Commonwealth lines.

The fire damages totaled \$135,000.00, a devastating loss by the standards of the time. George Bennethum did not witness the disaster. The energetic developer died suddenly in April 1927, and the Sunset holdings were now managed by Estelle Bennethum. The Bennethum estate suffered the greatest loss in the fire. The bowling alley, candy store, office boarding house, warehouse and power plant were totally destroyed. The Sunset Pavillion and Bennethum bathhouse were also destroyed, along with a building that contained the telephone exchange and Garinger meat market. A restaurant on the Lake Road, owned by Thomas James, was also lost. Damaged in the fire was the saltwater taffy stand of William Hill, who had a small stand along the Lake shore above the Sunset Pavillion. He had retired a few years earlier from Hill's Pavillion at the bridge. Before the fire, both Hill brothers, William and Harry, continued their family trade and reopened stands at Sunset.

The Later Years

The Bennethum estate did not rebuild its losses at Sunset, although the area was continued as a popular recreation site for nearly three more decades. In 1930 the White Birth Inn became the Cotton Club Inn, which in its early years featured the popular twelve-piece Black orchestra of Pete Peterson and the Honey Boys. The band roomed at the Adam Smith boarding house at Sunset. Estelle Bennethum acquired a pavilion at the top of Oneonta Hill and used it for the reconstruction of the Lakeview Restaurant. The familiar twin peaks of the old restaurant were eliminated, and the structure was reopened as the Plantation Club on Memorial Day 1931. For its debut the new club advertises "6 red-hot cha cha girls" from Broadway and Atlantic City. The Plantation Club, however, did not survive, and in 1933 Ace Hoffman managed the site as a restaurant under his own name. Finally, in 1935 the landmark site, which had begun as Hill's Pavillion, became the La Casa, the name it retained for over two decades. For a number of years Estelle Bennethum continued to manage the family's Sunset holdings, including La Casa, the restaurant at the end of the bridge. The Casino, too, remained a popular attraction at Sunset, providing bowling, pool, dancing and refreshments. There was an extensive dock system for Sunset swimmers; it encircled the beach from the site of the old Sunset Pavillion to the bridge. There were two high-diving boards on the docks. On the beach in front of the Casino was a bathhouse and novelty stands. During the 1930's the swimming area was known as Crystal Beach. In later years, the Sunset area would experience great change and new summer institutions would emerge. A summer dwelling across from Harry's Hill's candy stand would be converted into Burke's restaurant. Carpenter's Hotel would become the tearoom of Kitty Walsh followed by Sloppy Tony's night club. The Cotton Club would eventually acquire the names Circle Inn and Top Shelf under the ownership of Peter Ambrose, and under later owners it would have the names Scarlet's Inn and Flagstone

House. Carpenter's Road would gradually be filled with a large cottage community and the "state cottages" would provide summer rentals well into the modern period. A significant change in the construction of the new Lake highway from Idetown to Sunset in 1941. Filling of the Inlet basin also contributed to the changed appearance of the area. The Bennethem holdings were eventually acquired by other interests, particularly Francis Ambrose who helped charter the development of Sunset during the modern era. By the late 1940s the brothers Peter and James ("Red") Ambrose were active at Sunset. "Red" Ambrose had the Sunset amusement park. Their activities were noted in *The Dallas Post* on May 13, 1949:

Peter Ambrose, proprietor of the Cotton Club at Sunset, is opening his inn tomorrow. Tonight he is entertaining Dallas Rotary at an auction dinner. He has turned the building half way around so it is lengthwise to the main road, moved it back twenty-seven feet, and has built a stone wall in front.

We were under the impression that he owned the grounds across from his inn that have been in the course of improvement for the past two years, but learned that his brother, Francis, is the one who is laying out another amusement park at the lake.

He is going about this slowly. He has already turned a swamp into a high dry ground, using plenty of red ash, which he states will later be covered with a finer fill. He leans toward the kids more than do the other parks. He already has a miniature auto ride, small train ride, hauled by a 40 and 8 engine, and a torpedo and airplane concession. He plans this summer to augment these amusements for kids with a small ferris wheel and a whip.

The Ambrose Brothers' ambition is to build up Sunset as it was in the days of the Oneonta Hotel.

Tommy O'Brien established the Harvey's Lake Diving School in 1955. A self-taught SCUBA (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) diver, he turned his hobby into a profession. He was born in New York City in November 1929, but O'Brien was raised in the Luzerne area. He periodically served with the Merchant Marines along the Great Lakes in 1945-1952, and he also worked in the Empire mine for the Glen Alden Company. He taught SCUBA at Mount Airy Lodge at Mt. Pocono from 1962 to 1975. He also worked at several Miami Beach hotels, including the Deauville and Casablanca, during the winter seasons. In the early 1980s a second generation of water enthusiasts was enjoying O'Brien's SCUBA rentals, his engaging manner, and fascinating stories of underwater exploration at the Lake. In the photograph O'Brien was testing

a helmet in a special diving suit.

Over 70 years have passed since the destructive fire of 1929. Although Sunset's appearance had changed dramatically over the years, the area still attracts a summer community to enjoy the remaining attractions. The Grotto basin provides slip rentals for boaters, and the bridge is a favorite haunt for youngsters who like to fish. The La Casa and Casino are now memories, but the old Bennethum garage, and the Flagstone House (now an expanded Villa Roma Pizza) formerly the Cotton Club, are reminders of a wonderfully short time in the 1920's when Sunset was in its glory.

In 1952 the Pagliante family opened its first pizza parlor in Plymouth and opened its second restaurant known as the Grotto at Sunset at the Lake in 1956. Thirty-two years later, on September 7, 1988, Joe's Grotto Pizza, which had expanded in previous years, was destroyed by fire. However, the Grotto was rebuilt in spectacular style and is now managed by the Grotto Development Corporation.

On Friday, July 6, 1984, at 6:45 P.M., a severe seventy-five mile per hour downburst, spawned as a tornado in Sweet Valley, swept Sunset at the Lake causing \$250,000.00 in damages. Hoss's Garden Center was blown off its foundation. Several homes were damaged; a cottage and a borough police cruiser were demolished.

Sunset remains the most public area of the Lake with the original and popular Villa Roma restaurant, and Jones' Potato Pancakes which opened in 1953. Former Burke's restaurant in more recent years has served as the Pier III and in 1991 as Damien's restaurant.

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