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Living

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A letter from Thompson's Po

This quiet summer community reveals history on shores of Lake Champlain

Editor's Note: Today's story on Thompson's Point is part of a series running from time to time, focusing on Lake Champlain's history, environment, people and special places.

By SALLY JOHNSON
Staff Writer

CHARLOTTE — From the north side of Thompson's Point, you can see forever — or at least as far as Canada. That's an illusion, of course; the horizon interferes long before the eye can reach from Charlotte, where we are, to Canada. The *trompe l'oeil* is created by the powerful sweep of the Adirondacks rising above the New York State shoreline as Lake Champlain extends north to the international border.

Nature is a spectator sport here. The sunsets are blazing panoramas of pink, orange and purple. The wind blows most of the time, sometimes gently but usually aggressively, whipping down the lake from the northwest, battering trees and power lines with its force.



For much of July, the wind blew late-day thunderstorms down the lake, rolling spectacles of light and sound that flash and boom their way along Champlain, lingering here and there for a time to put on a special display of raw power.

The Point, too, is a force of nature — an ecosystem that evolved over centuries in response to physical, social and economic forces. Like all great summer communities, this one is not intentional, not planned. There is not a condo in sight, and the closest thing to a yacht club is Point Bay Marina just down the road. The Thompson's Point Tennis Club is less than its name implies — a weathered clubhouse with two clay courts and a hardtop court, which does double duty as a basketball court for the weekly pickup game.

Most of the people who come here now return for the spirit of their childhoods, the rituals and memories that were formed on the Point, woven over time into an intergenerational mesh of families, all of whom seem to know every detail of each other's business and like it that way.

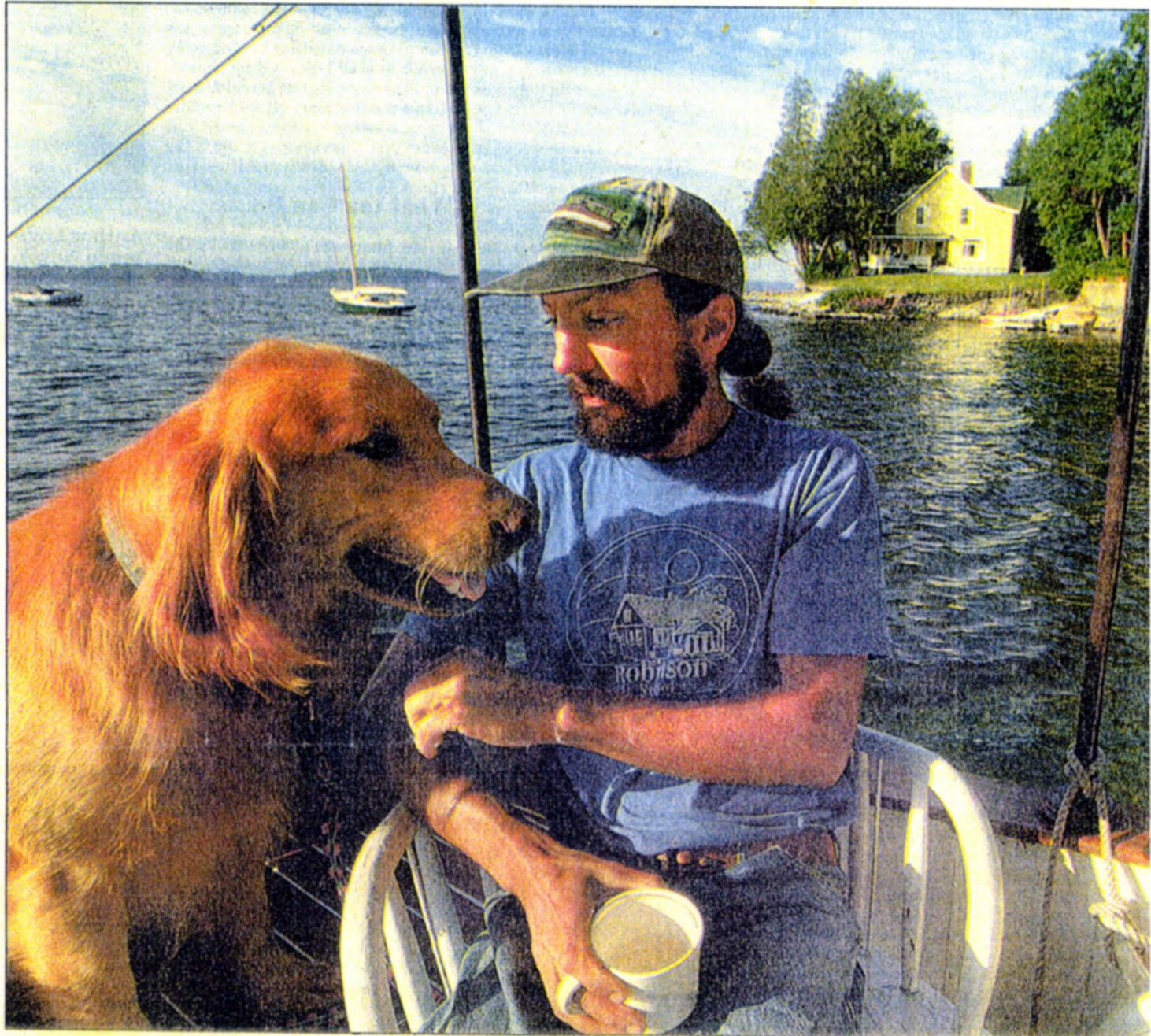
The point of Thompson's Point is 31 summer camps. Orientation is a northeast-southwest axis. North-siders look across at Split Rock in New York State. South-siders look at Town Farm Bay, so named for the town Poor Farm once located there. Although the status of the only child-friendly sandy beach, which is on the south side, has been a point of contention — who gets to use it and for what purpose — it seems widely understood that north-siders are entitled to swim there just as south-siders are entitled to cluster on the north-side cliffs to watch sunsets.

The Point is redolent of money — old money, that is, the kind that is loathe even to suggest its presence. Hence, the camps are weather-beaten, the boats antique, the lots left *au naturel* with scrubby cedars and patchy grass.

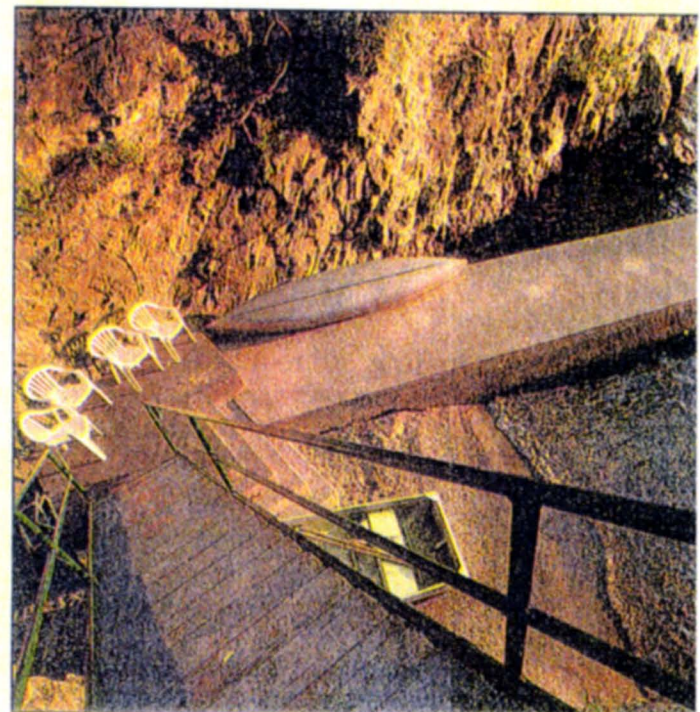
But these days the smell of money is something of an illusion — if most Pointers were once wealthy, many residents these days are working Vermonters for whom the combination of land-lease fees and property taxes can be financially onerous, particularly since they must also foot the bill for a sewage treatment plant built by the Thompson's Point Association about five years ago.

Because their leases with the Town of Charlotte force them to vacate the Point from November through April, they cannot recoup their costs by renting during the winter months, a stratagem commonly employed by summer lake dwellers elsewhere.

The finances of camp-owning here being what they are, renting to non-Pointers has become an increasingly common fact of life, a necessity that can test the boundaries of Point etiquette, a code written nowhere but widely understood by the old-timers. The newcomers, on the other hand, don't always understand which paths to follow to the beach and whether the tennis courts are public. (The sign on the clubhouse gate, discreet but pointed, reads: "Members only." On the other hand, most



Thompson's Point has been a summer refuge on more than a century. Above, Bobby Paul enjoys coffee with his dog, Dirk, aboard his 1902 Elco Cru kind on the lake. Paul's summer home on Thompson's Point has been in the family for generations. At left, painted rocking chairs on the porch of the Thompson's Point Tennis Club. Below, a long flight of stairs leads to a dock on the north side of the Point.



(See Thompson's Point, Page 4)

Thompson's Point

(Continued from Page 1)

people have learned that money usually can buy you admission, if not love.)

Other realities of life in the 1990s — working mothers, geographic distance between children and their parents — have altered the summer population patterns: people come less often, stay a shorter time. Still, the sense of the camaraderie remains palpable here in the Fourth of July bash; in the annual Thompson's Point Association members' pot-luck supper; in the Wednesday afternoon ladies' lunch, a convention of women, aged 30 to 90, who gather on a different front porch each week for sandwiches (bring your own), drinks and dessert (the hostess provides).

The ladies' tradition began as an informal, post-tennis luncheon. Tennis was — but no longer is — *de rigueur*. Still, the women gather to talk about their children, their grandchildren, their spouses, their jobs, their homes, their lives. Invited, I went, sipped white zinfandel with a grape, ate lime Jello salad and observed this remarkable intergenerational gabfest — a too-rare sight in these age-segregated times.

It's the sort of tradition that bridges the gap from the late 1990s to the late 1800s — indeed, the late 1700s. The history of the Point is as old as the history of the state, dating back even to the time of the Hampshire Grants. There are two detailed accounts of the Point's history, one by Jessie Gibbs and the other by Katherine Teetor and Morris Glenn. A few gleanings from those accountings:

— The Point originally was part of two Hampshire Grants bestowed in 1762 by New Hampshire Gov. Benning Wentworth on two settlers by the names of McNeil and Ferris. Ferris deeded half his land to a man named Scovil, land described as "lying on the south side of Thompson's Point joining the Great Bay," with one boundary extending "to a dry cedar on Thompson's Point." That deed, dated 1787, was the first recorded mention of the point.

— The identity of Mr. Thompson remains a mystery, although Charlotte town records indicate that part of the McNeil Grant was involved in a quit-claim deed given by one Abel Thompson, who may or may not be the Thompson of Thompson's Point.

— In 1839, Charlotte purchased the land on the Point as well as some adjacent land for \$4,200 — a purchase that set the stage for tensions between the residents of East Charlotte and West Charlotte that exist to this day. Point residents "rent" the land from the town, paying fees based on the assessed value of the real property, says Town Clerk Mary Bown. Currently, the lifespan of a lease is 20 years. In addition, Point residents pay property taxes based on the value of their camps.

— In those pre-Civil War years, the area was used for hunting and fishing camps. The Point colony per se began its semi-official existence as a sportsmen's club. The first clubhouse, built in 1870, was a tent with board walls and bunks for eight.

— In 1874, John Thorpe built a wooden frame cottage. Numerous camps sprang up over the next decade or two. Thorpe would sit on his front porch and salute the lake steamer "Chateaugay" as she passed

The night in 1902 that Teddy Roosevelt slept here was one of the high-water marks of Point history.

his front door each morning and night.

— By the late 19th century, the Point was sufficiently populated that Rowland E. Robinson publicly chastised "the effete Pointers who frightened off the wildlife with croquet and tea parties."

— Drinking water has been a persistent problem here from the beginning. In the earliest days, Point residents would carry their pails to the lake. They later installed farm kitchen-style pumps to draw water. In 1896, 14 campers contributed a total of \$420 to build a windmill to pump water from Champlain. Most Point residents now drink lake water that's been purified at a treatment plant built by the Thompson's Point Association. In addition, the town offers free water at a site near the elementary school.

— Lake steamers were the main form of transportation: Chateaugay (1888) and Ticonderoga (1906), operated by the Champlain Transportation Co. The Ti would leave Westport, N.Y., at 6:30 a.m. on a circuit that included stops at Essex and Plattsburgh, N.Y., as well as Basin Harbor, Cedar Beach, Burlington and Thompson's Point on the Vermont side, bringing both visitors and the U.S. mail.

— To accommodate the steamers, a dock was built in 1892, followed by a second in 1920, constructed of local timber blown down by the hurricane of 1918. The Ti docked at the Point for the last time in August 1924. All that exists of the old dock now is a crumbling concrete structure that juts out into the water where the road dead-ends between two cottages.

— The first hotel was built in 1896. Hotel Charlotte (which later became the Glenwood Inn) promoted fishing, steam yachting and fresh air. The ads promised that "People troubled with malaria (sic) will find this place a great benefit to them." "Transcient (sic) guests" were charged \$2 per day or \$7 to \$11 by the week by proprietor William E. Hosford. The Glenwood Inn also doubled as a post office until the introduction of rural delivery routes in 1921.

— The Point's first caretaker was an Abenaki named Simon Obomsawin, who arrived one evening by steamer with his wife, Agnes, and stayed on the Point until he died.

— The night in 1902 that Teddy Roosevelt slept here was one of the high-water marks of Point history. The affiliation with official Washington began when U.S. Supreme Court Justice David Brewer became a summer resident in 1895. His presence drew other Washingtonians, among them Treasury Secretary Leslie M. Shaw, Roosevelt's host for the sleepover.

Fully cognizant of the importance of the occasion, the histories say, the residents went all out, stringing the porches of their cottages with Japanese lanterns and colored kerosene lamps in blue, red and green. The event culminated in a torchlight parade, the grand effect spoiled only slightly by one inebriated local who yelled at the top of his lungs "Hooray for Cleveland!"



The Point's Past

Thompson's Point is a summer community with a rich history. Above, the steamboat Chateaugay stops at the Point at the turn of the century. At right, a couple relaxes at the Carroll Camp in 1910 or so. Below, an aerial photograph shows all of Thompson's Point, jutting out into Lake Champlain.

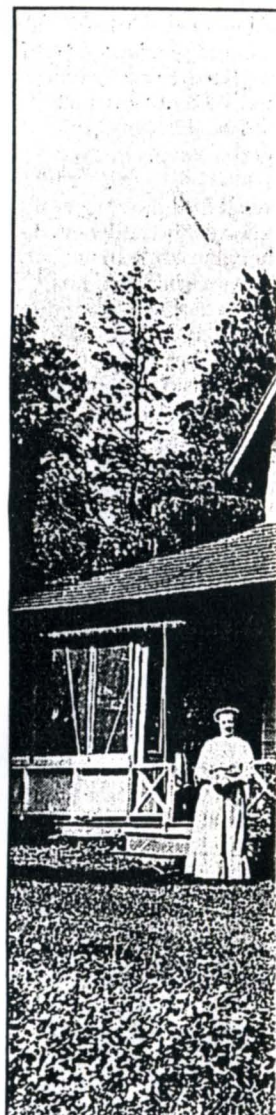
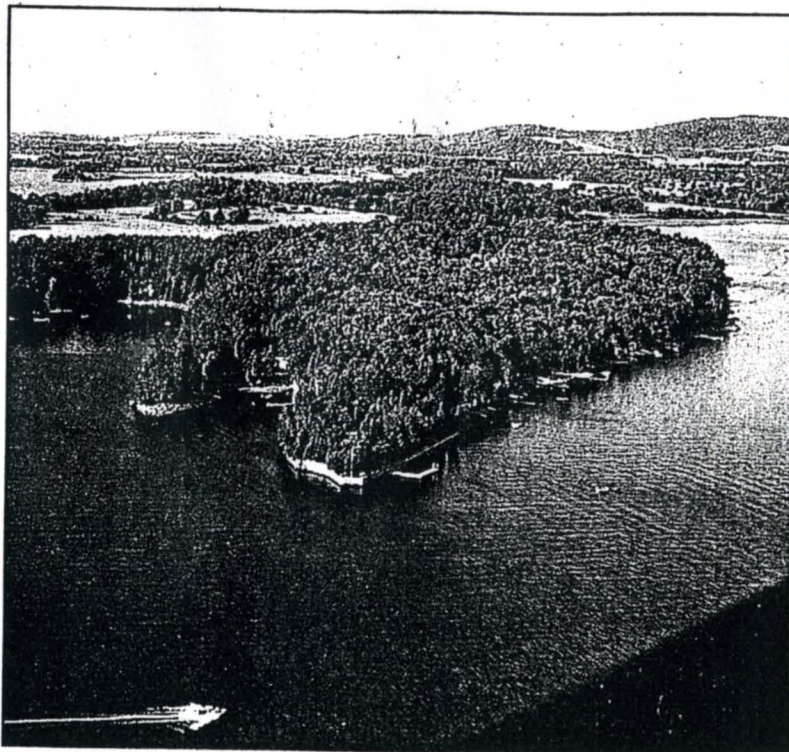


Photo courtesy of the Thompson's Point Club