



*At the Benson Mines, August 7, 2014*

*OMG – shorthand for “Oh my God!” an expression used in texting language to indicate shock or awe.*

**OMG!** These three letters are stuck in my mind as I try to come to grips with the scene before me. Why didn't I expect this? Why had I expected so much less? I was familiar with many of the facts, I even wrote book about this place, and I came here expecting no more than what I already knew. How had I never really grasped the magnitude of the thing? After all, I worked in the mine plant for four summers, twice before I visited the shore of the new lake, I pored over aerial photographs, and possessed facts and figures about all the millions of tons of iron shipped over the decades. How could all of that have failed to prepare me for what I see now as I stand on this almost inconceivably immense pile of rocks and look out over this incredible landscape?

A wide ribbon of blue extends before me and curving off to the right, disappears around the bend. I've read that the lake is nearly two and a half miles long, up to a quarter mile wide, and is in places as much as 300 feet deep. But somehow that information conveys little of the impression I'm getting now. Looking to the limits of what I can make out, I barely glimpse on the far lakeshore a tiny light-colored speck nestled in all the green. I know it must be one of those massive concrete silos, the monuments of industry that are the most durable remnants of the ruined mine plant. The silo I see is probably the biggest, the one where the products of the aerofall mill were stored. The lake before me, of course, is the flooded pit of the Benson Mines. I was vaguely aware of all of this and knew that it was large, but until now I never really understood just how big it is.

It's the enormity that overwhelms me. Being at the center of it makes me feel like I'm in an IMAX theater, or an *in media res* scene in a movie, one of those where a character finds himself suspended in the middle of things. Here in this middle it seems that I should be able to dip my fingers in the water below, and reach up and touch the puffy clouds that float overhead. The scene fills up my consciousness, and I see before me the answer to a question I never got around to asking. Given enough explosives, shovels, trucks, crushers, grinders, and pumps, what can as many as 1,000 men working 24 hours a day, 50 weeks a year for several decades do to a landscape? I recall sometime in the early sixties my father coming home from work and reporting that on that day the mine plant had shipped out 58 cars – railway coal cars – loaded with sinter and iron ore concentrate. He was clearly impressed. The numbers and the drama with which he reported them seemed impressive to me too, but only now that I'm looking out over the remains am I beginning to understand how big a thing it was.

Turning around I look toward Newton Falls, but can see none of it except the top of the blue-painted water tower. I remember in the fifties and sixties driving by the newer "upper" cluster of company houses in Newton Falls and seeing the growing heap on which I now stand. It loomed close behind the houses as groaning and belching outsized "eukes" – Euclid trucks – dumped ton after ton of rocks upon rocks. Though I can't see those houses, I know that they're still there, and some are looking decrepit. If I had a good enough throwing arm, I think I might be able to pick up one of the fist-sized rocks at my feet and lob it onto a rooftop.

In the distance and to the left of the new lake and beyond where I know the highway and railroad pass unseen is an immense rock wall extending almost across the horizon. I recognize this as the berm – the mile and a half long wall of waste rock that forms part of a basin built to contain the sea of ground rock mine tailings that were mixed with water and pumped up from the mine plant.

The scale of the destruction is impressive, and it gives me a new, almost visceral understanding, not only of what was done to the landscape, but also by extension, the scale of what was lost by the hundreds of families and their communities when it all came to an end.

There is more, of course. My feelings are complex; beliefs, values, and emotions conflict, and I can't characterize the scene or my reaction to it in any simple terms. There's ugliness enough, but what I see here has a certain undeniable beauty, and this too toys with my thoughts and my mood. The shimmering blue lake is surrounded by an almost uninterrupted mantle of green, nestled within a far border of pale purple mountains. Anyone not looking too closely and unaware of the history might take this scene for anywhere in the Adirondacks. Aside from the distant, barely visible silo and that water tower, no obvious works of man are in sight. Nature has again taken charge, and the place is re-wilding. The mostly bare rock surface under my feet may take millennia to return to nature, but mosses, lichens, weeds, and the first struggling pioneer trees – mostly gray birches – are beginning the long process of turning rock into soil that someday will support a thick blanket of forest.

I recall the old saying that nature abhors a vacuum, and I see plainly before me that she clearly also abhors massive cavities gouged in bedrock, and thus has made this one into a lake. The lake is a nice reminder that renewal is all around.

My thoughts return to the people, and particularly those in the Clifton-Fine community, of which this place with its defunct iron mine and adjacent shuttered paper mill were once the heart and lungs. What about their renewal? Have the people and their communities, as surely as the scarred land I see, begun the process of renewal? And if so, how is it going? And I wonder if that new blue lake will ever become known as another Gem of the Adirondacks?

I am here on a mission to find out.