



## Bars, Churches, and Other Third Places

*One day of prayin' and six nights of fun*

*The odds against goin' to heaven, six-to-one*

[Walk on the Wild Side: Words and Music by  
Mack David and Elmer Bernstein, 1962]

While we could find remnants of the old pioneers who had come to the area as farmers, loggers, and resort operators, in a very real sense, the Clifton-Fine community that we knew was to a large extent a product of the industries that brought economic prosperity. Its basic institutions owe their existence to the largess afforded by the mine and the paper mill that came to dominate the local economy and ultimately the community.

Local industries built the hospital and the school, and they provided a reliable source of funds to operate them. The more or less visible projects to aid in community development reported in *Gem of the Adirondacks; Star Lake, Benson Mines, and the Global Economy* were projects undertaken above and beyond the benefits of significant tax revenues the two industries brought to local governments and the added revenues provided by the increased wealth of the citizenry. Even the Sunny View housing development helped the community indirectly by adding to the property tax rolls.

Prosperity was to be shared by all, and there seemed to be a universal effort to build a community good enough for some of the most accomplished engineers and the highest-paid industrial workers in the world. While these industries



brought benefits to individuals in terms of the fruits of employment, what they brought to the public sector may have been more important to our growth as a community. In the parlance of the present, these would be categorized as “third places”—venues outside the workplace and the home that are the seats of community life (Oldenburg, 1999).

If in those days anyone in the Clifton-Fine community ever wondered what would happen when the last car of the gravy train pulled away, it has been nowhere recorded. But the event was certain; every industry was once a growth industry, every town once a boom town, and every family fortune but a generation or two removed from poverty. Of immediate interest here is prosperity and how it guided the way we lived and the way we thought.

To appreciate the feeling of the Clifton-Fine community in the fifties and sixties as something of a boomtown, it is necessary to understand that tillers of marginal farmland and lumberjacks had been catapulted to unprecedented and unexpected wealth soon after World War II. Riding the postwar boom, earning union wages that were the equivalent of those of Pittsburgh steel workers, and often able to live inexpensively in old farm dwellings or converted summer cottages, the residents of the region had an abundance of disposable income. Moreover, corporate taxes and corporate largess supported the community in general, keeping the personal tax burden low and providing ample resources for schools, churches, and other local institutions. Few bought fancy houses, but people ate expensive food and had TV sets, boats, and new cars. Kerr Brothers, the local automobile dealership, kept everyone supplied with a shiny new Dodge every two to three years, and those preferring other brands purchased their Chevrolets, Fords, and Pontiacs in the closest towns where there were franchises.

Perhaps nowhere was the prosperity so evident as in the various establishments serving alcoholic beverages. As in other places and other times, one of the easiest ways to dispose of unexpected disposable income was to increase one's time spent visiting a local saloon. Nowhere in the



**Former Star Lake Liquor Store.** Now in its second rebirth as a popular gift and antique shop, this building formerly housed a successful liquor store. Such a change might have seemed impossible in former decades, when local consumption of liquor was high.

region was one far from a place to get a drink, and the number of such places was in part due to the number of resort hotels, which over time gradually lost tourist business and reached the point where sales from behind the bar provided the only real source of income. Star Lake probably had the highest density of bars, with five going establishments to serve its 1,000 inhabitants, excepting those who might prefer to drive to a nearby town, perhaps as far as the five miles to Newton Falls or the 15 miles to Cranberry Lake to get a drink in some classier places, or at least places that were a bit more remote from home.

The traveler beginning on the west side of Star Lake, would first come to the Twin Lakes Hotel—“Rubyors,” “Mabel’s,” and later “Margaret’s.” Today it may be the last surviving remnant of the old once-thriving bar scene. Proceeding toward the center of town, one would next come to the Star Lake Inn—alcohol was undoubtedly served there, but it was still a posh summer resort still catering to wealthy seasonal clients; because it was not a local watering hole it does not add to our count of saloons. Never fear, however, for a scant few feet from the entrance road to the Inn was



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the Star Lake Hotel—“Clara’s,” a drinking establishment and actual boarding house that retained some semblance of its past existence as a hotel. Not much further was the Lake View Hotel—once “Ruth Patterson’s,” and “Malady’s.” In the fifties, it was a popular spot for an after-work beer, and a strange reversion to the inns of old times in that the lobby of the hotel seemed to double as the Malady family’s living room, with family pictures and other signs of hearth and home. Not far from Malady’s was O’Neill’s Grill—“Bill O’Neill’s,” a storefront with dim lights and dingy windows that was reputed to be the worst dive in town, despite the status of its namesake as a valued citizen of the hamlet. Further to the east and leaving the center of town one would see the Blue Bird Inn—“Chappelle’s,” with its stainless steel, diner-like patina affixed to the front of a decrepit hotel. It catered to a younger crowd and specialized in beer, although like all bars, it was required by state law to serve food. If none of these places suited and one preferred not to go as far as Newton Falls to get a drink, a stop in Benson Mines would do.

My father complained that the township snow plows were often late plowing out the little road—Hall Avenue—at the end of our driveway because the township workers spent too much time plowing out all the saloon parking lots. From the distance of several decades, it now seems that those who ran the snow plows may have had a better understanding of community than my father!

There was a State-licensed liquor store also, for those who preferred to drink at home. It was privately owned, and said to be a highly profitable business and a “plum” in the days when liquor licenses were obtained with large amounts of cash and it was widely believed, political pull. In fact, St. Hubert’s parish was also said to be a “plum” assignment for the priest stationed there, and doubtless many of the local businesses could themselves said also to be “plums”—one could earn a very good living just by having the concession on the candy machines at the mine plant. Perhaps those who worked in the school and hospital and owned filling stations, garages, and retail stores also were on easy street, although such terms were seldom used. Nevertheless, the



**Blue Spruce Restaurant.** This is one of the few new business to become established in Star Lake in recent decades; nevertheless, restaurants and bars are notably fewer in number than in the fifties. Moreover, this business is on the site of the Kerr Brothers automobile and appliance dealership, once the largest and most successful business in the hamlet.

bars were but one indication that money was abundant and we were all riding high.

The social structure of the Clifton-Fine community was complex. However as youths, we were either unaware of, or took for granted, things that in retrospect were highly visible and difficult to understand except by the agency of an elaborate, self-administering caste system. Social distinctions existed. Although all but invisible to us, as in cases elsewhere, there must have been a clear set of rules operating.

People segregated themselves by age and interests. The two churches in Star Lake were on different sides of a centuries-old divide, Nevertheless, even though the rift between the Roman and Protestant versions of Christianity represented one of the most enduring splits in Western Civilization, this division seemed to count for very little socially. Exceptions may have persisted in the few individuals who belonged to rosary societies, the Order of the Eastern Star, and similar devotional organizations. Many of the community's elite belonged to each of the churches, but a Knights of Columbus organization began only later and although active, a Masonic organization had a very low profile in the



community.

There might have been some distinction between natives and the outsiders who began coming to Star Lake during the Second World War, but like the churches, this could not have had a major effect socially. Given the general buoyancy produced by the industries, few failed to benefit and probably even fewer resented the change. One sensed that those who were the traditional aristocrats in the community before the influx of industry remained somehow on a higher plane than the yeomen and peasants.

The most obvious distinction was between labor and management at the community's two primary industries. "Management" may be too restrictive a term because, as Hoerr (1988) reported in his analysis of the decline of the American steel industry, the companies sought to emphasize and exploit the distinctions between hourly employees (i.e. union members) and salaried employees, and this may be closer to the true distinction of social consequence. To the ranks of managers were not only added many salaried workers in technical areas, but also a large array of persons in commerce or the professions, including teachers, most business owners, and occasional government employees. To the ranks of unionized labor were added others in menial jobs, be it working for the town highway department, cleaning out the school building, or working in a gas station. Here some of the complexity arises, because a heavy concentration of the managers, professionals, and technicians who made their livings in the community lived in its central area, either in Star Lake or Newton Falls, and a relatively greater portion of the hourly workers came from surrounding communities—many from as far as 50 or more miles away. Thus the relative numbers of the more elite and the less elite in the community itself were closer than one might at first expect.

Perhaps an insight into the organization of the community could have been gotten if one looked closely at the Clifton-Fine Lions Club. It was the only community service organization, and a roster of its membership of community leaders would perhaps say much about who belonged and

who was just tolerated by the community.

Members of what can loosely be described as the management and labor groups were cordial to one another, but they almost never socialized across groups and would have almost no reason ever to visit each other's houses. If they drank in bars at all, it tended to be in different bars, and if a person happened to be socially mobile by virtue of borderline professional status, drinking in certain bars was a sure method of self-selection—particularly if one's desire was to move down the social ladder. It might conceivably be possible to jump several rungs upward if, for example, one was a spectacular golfer, but I can think of no real cases to test this supposition.

My family came to Star Lake and moved into what would have been a borderline social area, but events conspired to have us warmly adopted by the elites. My father was in charge of security at the mine—surely one of the lowliest of the quasi-managerial positions. He wore a police uniform, supervised a cadre of security guards that numbered six at the most, and had the title of “Chief of Police.” Several years into the job economic conditions were less promising and the decision was made not to replace an individual who had retired, and with this change Father was required to occasionally work the shifts of employees who were ill or on vacation; this involved use of a watchman's punch clock, and certainly was not the kind of activity to move one up in the ranks of management.

We were accepted into the upper stratum for two primary reasons. Before coming to J&L, Father had been a senior detective with the State Police—a position with few amenities, but one commanding considerable respect. Also, both Mother and Farther were alert to the world, well dressed, and articulate, and not too long after our arrival, our family began to be regarded as important people in the community—this despite my parents' combined four years of post-primary education. We knew the names of most of the World leaders, had a homespun grasp of economics and geography, and possessed the humility to keep on trying to learn what we did not know.



Looking back, becoming part of the intellectual elite was a modest feat even for persons who were not trying in a place like Clifton-Fine where few had college degrees, and many—including the chief engineer at J&L, and some of our teachers it was rumored—were talented, effective, and also essentially self-taught. Did some, like the friends I acquired much later in the U.S. Virgin Islands, seek that place to avoid the competition of the mainstream? We children and adolescents were mostly oblivious to the social scene, but the lack of serious competition—if that is what it was that drew others to the community—may have had both positive and negative effects on us later.

We were aware that being a salaried employee at J&L was different and probably better than being an hourly wage-earner, and that this conveyed some social status. However, I remained unaware of how important this gulf was to those who worked in the industry until it was pointed out by Hoerr. The company did attempt to treat its salaried employees well, offering them stock options, paying bonuses, and sometimes even hiring their college-age sons in summer jobs. One year my parents were treated by the company to a “perquisite” normally reserved for company executives—luxury accommodations on a cruise through the Great Lakes via an ore boat traveling between Cleveland and Duluth.

There were a few inklings of tension that only now can be seen with any clarity. The father of one good friend was responsible for hiring and firing at the J&L and within the mine’s rather rigid labor and management structure, could be thought of as everyone’s boss. It happened that an assistant scoutmaster who was accompanying our troop to summer camp had an unresolved dispute with this boss and parent, over not having been hired some years in the past it appeared. Only after that apparent problem had been laid to rest by explanations and rationalizations on both sides was my friend allowed to go to camp that year.

Several years later when we were raising funds for a school trip, word came to me from someone else that another

classmate would not be involved in the senior-class magazine sale, and indeed had never been allowed to solicit for donations of any kind. The reason given was that the father wanted to avoid the unintended consequence of coercion or even the appearance that coercion might possibly be involved in the basically innocent activity. My first reaction was that this was ludicrous; the friend's father was a very nice man. Like many who go into personnel as a career, he probably did so because he liked people. Regardless, it was beyond my belief that anyone would accuse him of impropriety, let alone be afraid of him.

I could no more have grasped the tensions and fears caused by the stratification of our society than I could have imagined the raw adversarial atmosphere of the workplace. My belief was no doubt partly due to youth and naiveté, but also may have resulted from the phenomenon that makes those who feel they are victims of injustice much more aware of its manifestations than those who may unwittingly administer injustice to them. I am reminded again of my friends in the Virgin Islands. "No one here in the islands is the least bit aware of race," says my white, New England-born friend. "Except us black people," adds my island-born Creole friend.

Is it possible that a certain amount of social stratification is an invariable—or even essential—characteristic of any real community? Unfair to individuals, undemocratic, and quite at odds with our common conception of community life, perhaps all genuine communities convey within them such judgmental structures.

Star Lake's two churches, for most of the time we lived there were the Roman Catholic St. Hubert's and the Presbyterian "Western Adirondack Parish," which had mission churches in Newton Falls, Wanakena, and Cranberry Lake, although all but the Star Lake Presbyterian church ultimately became missions. St. Hubert's likewise had a mission church, St. Anthony's in Newton Falls. There were Baptist and Methodist churches in Oswegatchie, a Catholic church in Fine that was a mission of the larger Edwards parish, and a Protestant church in Fine.



Catholics seemed to have a decided majority in Star Lake and Newton Falls, at least, although it was said that if you counted all the Protestants whose denominations were not represented in local churches, numbers would prove to be nearly equal.

We attended St. Hubert's regularly, and occasionally St. Anthony's when the schedule of masses better fit our plans. Although the memory is of long hours spent in church, masses were seldom more than an hour; however, they never seemed to be short hours. Standout moments were few. The same people attended every Sunday, and more often than not sat in the same pew, or at least in the vicinity of their favorite places from which to participate in the proceedings. The few well-to-do people dropped their envelopes into the collection basket with a flourish, as if the act were truly an important one. I suppose the rest of us may have displayed attitudes also, but only memories of the significant acts remain. Our envelopes with our twenty cents were deposited when remembered, although often we forgot, and we had to be humiliated by seeing the basket pass us by with nothing deposited. The thought that others were depositing tens or twenties—dollars that is, seemed to heighten the humiliation in those instances.

Sometime in the late fifties, word came through that we were to get a new bishop. The seat of the Diocese was in Ogdensburg, some distance away, and the bishop had little or no effect on our lives, so this was far from exciting news. Nevertheless, there was some concern when word came out that our new bishop, James A. Navagh, was a southerner. Some concluded that he was sure to have a strict approach to religious duty after living with all those Baptists, and he would be unlikely to understand our more casual approach to religion. Indeed, he made his presence known like none of his predecessors. Seldom would a Sunday go by without a letter from the bishop admonishing us to avoid occasions of sin and encouraging acts of faith and duty. Eventually, they became a source of mild entertainment when our ironic pastor would announce in a tone of mock excitement: "We have a letter from the bishop." The letter would be read

with only faint and just barely perceptible eye-rolling, and when it was finished, the message in the letter would have a strangely warm and humorous tone through the agency of the pastor's bemused body language.

One bright and rather warm summer Sunday, we all sat in church with the windows open and the main doors to the highway open also, as it was hot and ventilation much to be desired. Mass was already underway when we heard a car pull up and someone get out. This car was not in one of St. Hubert's two parking areas or up and down the road where parishioners parked, but was right in front of the church steps, where the hearse or the bride and groom's getaway car would be. The few who turned around saw a strange apparition standing at the back of the crowded church. Those who did not got their shock at communion time when straight down the main aisle and up to the communion rail jauntily walked a short, athletic looking man dressed exquisitely in a white suit and carrying a panama hat. He was a stranger; he was dressed far better than most of us; he walked with authority; and most of all, he was a black man.

Jaws dropped, people stared in awe and then quickly, out of politeness, fought to regain their dignity. It is probable that in its 75 years of existence St. Hubert's had never been visited by a black man—at least not one who looked anything like this fellow. Black men came through town who were soldiers from a nearby National Guard training facility at Camp Drum, New York, and it was said that at one time visitors to Star Lake had brought black servants with them. Another story held that black servants of summer people had drowned in Star Lake. Nevertheless, one would have had to travel several hours to a city like Utica see the first black face, and the visitor to St. Hubert's could not have been a stranger sight than Elvis Presley, Mahatma Ghandi, Nikita Khrushchev, or even a little green Martian in his space suit walking down the aisle. He left before mass let out, but many curious eyes followed his shiny convertible as it sped down the highway toward the east.

There was much buzzing on the way out, and consensus was



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quickly reached that he must surely have been not a “Negro,” but instead a Creole from New Orleans, or someplace close, and probably a professional gambler. Whoever he was, he probably could never fathom the thrill he brought to the people of St. Hubert’s Church. The memory of the Creole visitor remains vivid, but not nearly as vivid as the looks on the faces of St. Hubert’s parishioners.

In Civil War days, most men were bearded, and it was considered a handicap if one could not grow a decent looking beard. Over the years men’s beards have gone into or out of style. In the 1950s they were particularly out of style. Rabbis, hobos, and others outside the mainstream were associated with beards, and perhaps wearing a beard was considered acceptable for European-born psychiatrists and others on the fringe of Main Street. Among most of us, wearing a beard was regarded as consciously making oneself ugly, and showing that ugly face to the world was not an easily accepted act. My father liked the music of Mitch Miller, but was taken aback when he first saw the bearded Miller on television. Father was able to rationalize his distaste and continue liking the music by concluding that Miller probably did not want to wear a beard, but found himself in a profession where looking different equated to money in one’s pocket. So beards were a bad, almost antisocial statement.

Strangely, in those days people thought no less of a man who having fathered four daughters, decided he would continue impregnating his wife until she had provided him with a son. A man in our church proceeded on just such a plan, and either before or just after the birth of a fifth daughter, became so frustrated and so disgusted that he resolved to grow a beard until he had successfully fathered a son. So, for a year—maybe two or three—or more a man with a full red beard and numerous clinging daughters could be seen on Sunday morning in St. Hubert’s. His wife’s overworked reproductive organs surely must have been getting tired and her health threatened. But persist he did. Although primarily a story of changing social mores, this one too has its lighter moments. One fine day as the church was filling, the bearded man and gaggle of female offspring were

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filing down the aisle with the buckles on multiple pairs of overshoes clinking harmoniously. This procession—and particularly the bearded man—were spotted by a little girl near the front. Everyone in the church clearly heard the little girl’s piercing voice say, “Mommy! Mommy, God is here!”

The Baptist church in Oswegatchie got a new minister who arrived in town about same time as my family, and the minister’s two sons began school when we did. The children were the object of some ridicule and occasional bullying. It certainly did not help that they were highly visible members of the community, and there were later indications of trouble within the church. The minister himself apparently was not easily adjusting to life in Oswegatchie. The end was quick; the minister had a breakdown and went off to a “rest home”, and other members of the family left Oswegatchie on very short notice to join relatives somewhere in a distant part of the county. The word from church members was that it was very sad, but there was nothing that could have been done about it. If the next minister had school-age children, they adapted totally, and as far as most of us knew, the problems of the past were never repeated.

The Presbyterian church in Star Lake was an old wood frame building of the kind that one still sees in small towns all over the country—not unique in design or pleasing to the eye, but with a certain grace and charm. It was small, however, and old fashioned, neither of which were desirable things to be in the sixties, and particularly in the modern and progressive community ours was striving to become.

One of my summer jobs in 1965 was working with the construction company that normally worked at the Benson Mines, but this time in a community development effort. We were busily remodeling and modernizing the Star Lake church—more or less in the workers’ spare times. In retrospect, what we did was much like was done so often in past centuries in Italy, where beautiful old Romanesque and renaissance churches were remodeled, with frescoes whitewashed and gilded to achieve the baroque styles of the seventeenth century. In Star Lake the nave was left intact



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and the roofline was extended to ground-level, converting what had been a traditional church into a quasi-modern A frame. The windows were covered by extension of the roof, so fluorescent lights were installed in the new crawl spaces to illuminate the stained-glass windows. The basement was extended to meet the larger footprint resulting from roof extension, creating new basement rooms for Sunday school classes. The result of this remarkable makeover was addition of needed space and more affirmation that this was a vital and growing community. The redesign of the church was the work of a family friend, who I am certain was instrumental in getting me the summer job. The church looks today much as it did when remodeling was complete in the mid-sixties. Much was gained in appearance and functionality by the renovations, although some traditionalists may have decried loss of the old facade.

In 1963 the old St. Anthony's in Newton Falls was replaced by a fresh new steel and masonry structure, most thought through the beneficence of Ron and Esther Hines, devout Catholics who respectively were manager and chief administrator of the Newton Falls Paper Mill. The old St. Anthony's was no larger than the Star Lake Presbyterian, and was a simple building with historical value but no distinctive architectural features. The new structure was built on the edge of what might have been considered the central square and, together with the Newton Falls Hotel dominated the center of the hamlet. The old building, scene of weddings, baptisms, funerals, and countless devotions, was deconsecrated, for a time used for storage, and later served as the church for an evangelical Protestant denomination.

In the seventies, a new St. Hubert's Church was built in idyllic surroundings on the shore of Star Lake. The old St. Hubert's and the adjacent rectory remain vacant and boarded up, a bleak reminder of days when hundreds flocked to the church and in doing so displayed their devotion to any and all who might pass while en route to the central Adirondacks.

Like every community, ours seems to have demanded one

copy of almost everything--the village idiot, the town drunk, the local intellectual, the local tycoon, etc. Added to the list is “juvenile delinquent”, a popular term of the fifties that encompassed the likelihood that at least some youths in our midst were destined for a life of criminality. We had one. Our poster-child juvenile delinquent was a young man—perhaps as old as 20 and no longer technically qualifying as a juvenile—who opted for the wild side. He drank too much, drove too fast, and was perennially in trouble with the law.

In August of 1960 there was a well-publicized murder in Star Lake, recorded by tabloids nationwide and more objectively by Jean Grimm in *Murder and the Miscellaneous*, Chapter 4. Unrecorded in the recount of the crime in both the national and local press was the shock episode gave to the community. The young woman had been raped and murdered, and days later when her body was found, a collection of police vehicles converged on the scene and officers began their investigation. Knowing little, the authorities had detained the “usual suspects”, including our own juvenile delinquent, who was soon thereafter proved to be innocent of the crime. Nevertheless, this simple mistake had profound and tragic effects on the young man’s family and was a significant blow the the community and its body politic. Though the murder and the fate of the brutally raped and strangled young woman and analysis of her assailant made the tabloids nationwide, locals said that the more pervasive effects went unnoticed by the world at large.