

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CAMP OTETIANA
OPERATED BY THE ROCHESTER COUNCIL,
BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA,
1918-1926

Camping is the heart of Scouting. Sometime after the first Rochester region troop was organized at the Y.M.C.A. in 1910, leaders began thinking about camping with their boys.

By 1912 several more troops had been formed and Troop 15, of Brick Presbyterian Church used Camp Iola, the Y.M.C.A. camp at Tichenor's Point on Canandaigua Lake for the first time. Seventy Scouts camped at Iola that year. News of its availability spread, and the following year the numbers increased to one hundred campers.

The arrangement for Scouts to use Camp Iola was difficult since they were not able to use the facility until after the end of the "Y" camping season. In 1913 the Rochester Council was chartered and by 1916 there was a strong desire for the council to obtain its own facilities that could be operated during the regular summer camping season and for year-round activities. The Rochester Council annual report of that year expressed a need for at least two campsites, "one within a short distance of the city for weekend or overnight hikes, another to be located some distance from the city, preferably near a body of water for camps of longer duration." Additionally, a new guidebook entitled "Rules and Suggestions for Conduct of Scout Camps" was adopted by the council. The following year was the last season for Scouts at Iola.

In 1917, with financial help from the Chamber of Commerce, the Rochester Council purchased four and one half acres of land on the northeast side of Canandaigua Lake, about three miles from the City of Canandaigua, on East Lake Road, for the site of a camp to be opened the following year. A contest to name the new camp was held, and Scout William Leonard of the Parsells Avenue Baptist Church Troop 33 was the winner, proposing the name "Otetiana." Bill was awarded a free period at camp. Bill's suggestion deeply impacted the future of Rochester Scouting. The name Otetiana is a variant of the name Otetiani, meaning "Always Ready" and equates to the Boy Scout motto "Be Prepared." Otetiani was the boyhood name of the Seneca-Iroquois orator who was also known as Sagoyewatha, meaning "He keeps them awake." Many people, however, now know him as Red Jacket, a name he received during the Revolutionary War. Shortly after the Rochester Council was formed, Scouts to the west of the city formed Red

Jacket Council. Later, in 1936, while searching for a name for the new Order of the Arrow lodge, Scouts visited Dr. Arthur Parker, director of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences who was a Seneca. Parker suggested the Seneca name Ty-Ohni, meaning “wolf,” possibly due to the fact that Red Jacket was a member of the Wolf Clan.

A few years later, in 1943, Rochester Council merged with Red Jacket Council to form Otetiana Council. For some time Otetiana Council had a Red Jacket District. The name inspired the council’s contingent to the 1953 National Jamboree to purchase red wool Pendleton jackets at McCurdy’s department store in Northgate Plaza. The jackets attracted much attention to the group and led to the BSA adopting a red wool coat as the official jacket. When Otetiana Council designed their first council shoulder patch (CSP) in the 1970’s, a traditional Iroquois design was chosen and was used until the council merged with the Finger Lakes Council in 2009. Bill’s name proposal impacted Scouting in the area for many years.

Camp Otetiana opened in 1918 under the leadership of Director W. Arthur McKinney. He had previously served as physical education instructor at East High School and as Scoutmaster of Brick Presbyterian Church Troop 12. McKinney had started a professional Scouting career in Rochester the previous April.

The campsite was a vast open space with only a few trees, most of which were located along one portion of the shoreline. It became very hot on sunny days. During its first few years camp was extremely rustic. Scouts lived in a single row of tents which backed-up to the edge of the lake forming the camp street. The tents were pyramidal shaped surplus World War I army squad tents that stood about ten feet high. They had elevated wooden floors and vents at the top which could be closed by ropes attached to a canvas cover. Up to twelve Scouts and one leader slept in each tent on double-decker bunks made of canvas and 2x4s without the aid of sleeping bags.

A Scout’s tent was his home away from home. Living with so many boys to a tent was sometimes confusing for new Scouts. However, they soon became familiar with the other campers and a good time was had.

The number of tents varied from ten to fourteen, depending on the number of campers. Personal and tent inspections were held daily, with all troops lined up outside. Felt banners were awarded to the winners each day, and competition was intense with one tent sometimes winning both.

Behind each tent was a path down the bank to the lake, worn there by many Scouts going to the water to wash their hands and faces and clean their teeth. The smell of carbolic acid from the Lifebuoy Soap they used was quite strong in the early morning hours. The lake was used for personal hygiene since there was no shower facility and only one latrine. That facility was located near the eastern edge of camp and known as the "Better Ole." In later years the original latrine was replaced by a larger one called "Gen-un-da-wah," named after a well known nine-hole golf course. The short name "Genun" was in use for quite a few years in later council camps.

Other features of Camp Otetiana were a basketball court, a baseball diamond, the campfire amphitheater, the water front and the mess hall in the Beach House that had sleeping facilities on the second floor for the camp staff. Another attraction was the signal tower, which was built by campers and climbed by almost every Scout at one time or another. To improve physical fitness, setting up exercises were conducted every morning on the basketball court. The tradition dated back to the summers spent at the Y.M.C.A. camp. Radio was in its infancy and one of the staff, "Foggy" Hopkins, had a crystal set in the upstairs of Stein Lodge (previously the Beach House) which could be used to listen to music. A goat was another attraction at camp. The understanding was that it belonged to Central Presbyterian Church Troop 16, but no one would claim ownership, as that would entail policing the grounds around the goat.

There were many opportunities unique to campers on Canandaigua Lake. During the days of Camp Otetiana, two motor launches made daily trips up and down the lake, delivering groceries and supplies and picking up people at the docks along the lake. The launches were the Oriana and the Eastern Star.

Once each period of camp one of the launches would come to Otetiana's dock and take any Scout who wanted to go to the South end of the lake. They would dock near Woodville on the West side of the lake and the trip cost approximately one dollar. The Scouts and leaders would hike to and up Mentice Glen, climbing along the banks of the creek. The walking was wet and slippery in spots but at the top of the glen was a pretty waterfall. The group would then head back down the glen and find a welcome rest at the bottom of the hill. Soon the Oriana would pull into the dock, followed by the Eastern Star, and all would head back to camp after a great afternoon learning more about Canandaigua Lake and its environs.

There were many outstanding hiking opportunities. Another hike, popular with Scouts

working toward the rank of First Class, was to trek to and from Bare Hill. The hill was located about seven miles south of camp on the East side of Canandaigua Lake near Vine Valley. One of the requirements for First Class was to hike fourteen miles and report on the things one saw and did on the way.

A typical day hike started after breakfast. The camp cook would furnish the Scout and a buddy a lunch and they would start out. They traveled along East Lake Road, which was a dirt road and fairly close to the lake, with no traffic to bother them. The scenery was beautiful with the lake and the trees and here and there a gully running down the hills to the lake. There were very few cottages along the lake shore and few people could be seen.

Near the bottom of Bare Hill lived the Fisher family. They did some farming and had a large old farmhouse with a pump in the side yard where the Scouts could get a drink of ice cold water. The Fishers were always glad to see them.

Once the Scouts reached the top of the hill they could see why it was called Bare Hill, as very few trees grew there. They would then head back to camp for dinner. Everyone would be tired, but glad that their fourteen mile hike was completed. The legends and lessons learned during the hike were fascinating, especially those concerning the strange stones at the hill known as "Oolites:"

THE HILL ON WHICH NOTHING EVER GROWS

One day the Creator caused the earth to open and the tribe of the Senecas came forth. They lived in peace for a time. Then one day one of the boys found a snake in the woods and took it home for a pet. He fed it the choicest deer meat and soon its hunger knew no bounds. It grew to incredible size. The people of the tribe soon began to fear the snake as a monster— and their fears were justified. One day the reptile encircled the hill and barred the gate back into the earth with opened jaws. One by one the members of the tribe were eaten until only the boy and his sister were left. Then one night the boy had a dream, He dreamt that his sister's hair held a fatal charm. If he would string his bow with her hair, the arrows shot from it would kill the monster. So he did as the dream told him. The snake was mortally wounded and went writhing down the hill, tearing up all the trees in its path. Finally it slid into the lake but not before it disgorged the many skulls of the Senecas it had eaten.

To this day stones can be found on Bare Hill which strangely resemble human heads! And nothing has ever grown in the path of the snake down the ancient hill.

Another popular hike was to Canandaigua and the “Chocolate Shop” where Ray Stokes and his wife had ice cream sodas and three beautiful daughters. Scouts would obtain permission to hike into town and of course were only interested in getting a soda.

Evenings in camp were full of activity. After supper a baseball game would be held and around dark everyone would gather in the amphitheater for a campfire. This was a pit, with sloping sides, dug out of the bank along the lake. It ran down to the shore where a totem pole stood. Skits were performed, campfire stories were told and new Scouts learned the legend of Bare Hill. Colonel S.P. Moulthrop, Chief Scoutmaster of the Rochester Council, was a very popular story teller, usually ending with a Men-om-i-nee Indian war whoop. Scouts would head for their tents looking for an Indian in every shadow.

In 1919 the Rochester Council was officially incorporated. Camp Otetiana doubled in size to nine acres and was attended by about 20% of the eligible Scouts. Both troops from the independent Brockport Council also attended. The summer season was divided into five periods with a maximum of 72 Scouts per period. The Scout fee was \$5.50 per week with the fee reduced by \$.25 if eight or more Scouts attended with their Scoutmaster. Transportation to Canandaigua was made available for an additional \$1.70 via the Rochester and Eastern Railroad. It was a three mile hike to camp from Canandaigua, but gear transportation was provided.

The 1920 season was packed with 320 Scouts under the directorship of Earle E. Brown. A wireless radio was set up to provide communication between camp and Rochester, which was 28 miles away. Troop 22, which was sponsored by Charles House (the Catholic settlement house), attended for the first time. The Troop was composed entirely of boys of Italian parentage, most of whom were in poor circumstances. Camping on a lake was a new experience since the majority of the Troop had never even seen a living fish until a trip to Lake Ontario a few weeks before camp. They also had the distinction of being the first Catholic troop in Rochester to attend summer camp (most Troops at the time were sponsored by Protestant Churches). The Troop had the regulation number of members (32), and its popularity in that portion of the city was astounding as it had 86 names on the waiting list.

By 1921 interest in camp was so strong that numbers had to be strictly limited to the increased number of 120 boys per period. Simon N. Stein of the Rochester Council Executive

Committee gave \$3,000 to construct a new dining hall addition to the existing Beach House, which if completed in time would allow for more campers. The popularity of Scouting in Rochester continued to increase and Christ Episcopal Church Troop 32 under Scoutmaster Jack Williams had twelve active Eagle Scouts (claimed as a national record).

By the 1922 season Stein Lodge was ready for use. It made a terrific addition to camp as it had a dining hall that could seat 240, a large kitchen, refrigerator room, office, storage room, hospital, dark room and a lounge. Fifteen of the surplus Army tents were now in use, and camp could accommodate 150 campers per session.

In 1923 the amphitheater, which had been a bowl shaped area dug out of the side of a hill near the edge of the lake, was improved. Massive quantities of stone were used to build a beautiful wall and staircase, and wooden benches were added to improve the seating. Another major change was the replacement of the old pyramidal army tents with A-frame cabin tents.

The need for higher camper capacity was a continual issue. In 1924 Raymond Phillips served as Camp Director. More cottages continued to be built and automobile traffic increased along the nearby road. Additional equipment was obtained and four separate groups of tents were established.

In the same year a new camp badge was introduced. It featured the intertwined letters C and O, which stood for Camp Otetiana and Co Operation. Eagle Scout Ashton Phillips of Brick Church Troop 8 was the first to earn the badge for which he had to complete a series of requirements. His two brothers, Walter and Dorr, were instructors at the Camp and also Eagle Scouts. To have three active Eagles in one family was a record only known to be matched by one other family in the nation outside of Rochester. Amazingly, Rochester had two other families who also had three active Eagle Scout brothers.

1926 was the final season of Camp Otetiana. Additional space to house larger numbers of campers each session was needed, and expansion of the existing site was cost prohibitive. The area had become a very popular location for constructing summer cottages, which with each passing season were built closer and closer to camp. Automobile traffic on the nearby highway had also increased and detracted from the camp atmosphere. Through much effort by Council President Henry Morgan, the necessary funds were raised to purchase 165 acres for a new camp near Dresden on Seneca Lake. By the end of 1926 construction had already begun on Camp Pioneer, and Otetiana faded into memory.

“The trees have grown tall, the tents are gone and cottages have taken their place, no Scouts play “Capture the Flag,” the signal tower is missing, the basketball court and baseball diamond have disappeared. Good old Ge-nun-da-wah has been replaced by septic tanks and sleek looking automobiles drive in and out instead of the old camp truck. In the words of Walt Hastings, ‘It really was a shame to abandon Otetiana, it WAS such a good camp, but it had to be done. Morning dips, traditionally done without the aid of swimming togs, was becoming more and more an object of interest on the part of our neighbors, some of whom would get out on their front porches to avoid the rush and sometimes used binoculars. Yes, it was a case of further encroachment by the forces of civilization– at any rate, it meant the end of Camp Otetiana.’ Word has come that we will have a better and larger camp on another lake. Again what will the future bring? The site of Otetiana will still be there and the lake remains the same.”

(Quote from Freeman Boyer)

Today the previous location of Camp Otetiana is known as Otetiana Point. Its history is well known by area residents and is even included as part of the history of Canandaigua Lake summer boat tours. During the past few years many of the old cottages which caused difficulty for the camp have been purchased by wealthy area residents who demolish them in groups to build vast and luxurious multi-million dollar estates. However, if you stand near the gnarled old tree at the Point and look out toward the lake you can still hear the sounds of Otetiana.

Robert Del Cunningham,
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Principle Sources:

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