



### CHAPTER III CHESUNCOOK REGION LAKES

The lakes in the CHESUNCOOK REGION are located primarily in Piscataquis and Somerset Counties, but extend partway into Penobscot County.

UMBAZOOKSUS LAKE, whose name is Abenaki for "clear, gravelly outlet," is shown in a 1926 picture as having pulpwood piled high on the ice at the head of the lake, awaiting the spring thaws to start the drive. This spring-fed, clear-water lake was the terminal of the final railroad route from Eagle Lake, a route which eventually extended to CHESUNCOOK LAKE.

One translation of the Abenaki term "Chesuncook" is "place where many streams empty in," and this definition is valid because into Lake Chesuncook empty the waters of the Penobscot, the Umbazooksus, the Cusabesex, Red Brook, and other streams. Together they create a lake 18 to 20 miles long, yet at no point more than three miles wide. Another interpretation of the name is "the goose place."

Known as Chenbesec on John Mitchell's 1755 map of North America, the lake was later called Chenosbec; and still later, West Branch Bulge. Since the first of the twentieth century it has locally been known as "'Suncook."

Few persons can look at a picture of Lake Chesuncook without thinking of the Indian expression "forked tongue" because the long narrow body of water branches into a fork at its southern end.

Joseph Chadwick, a surveyor sent by His Majesty's Provincial Governor of Massachusetts in 1764 to map the territory, reported that "Gesuncook" had "very shale water and a mud bottom . . . our conos could not pass with a hundred rods of the shore."<sup>7</sup>

For many years the Chesuncook Region was known to only a few

people, for cars had to be left at Ripogenus Dam, and men took passage on the sturdy, small boats that carried mail, passengers, and freight. Even today, the only way to reach Chesuncook is by boat, seaplane, or snowmobile. The region is currently acknowledged as the starting point for the famous Allagash canoe trips. One such annual excursion is that of the St. Croix Voyageurs, a group organized in 1935 by Linwood L. Dwelley, Auburn, Maine. For seven weeks, 30 to 40 young male campers, accompanied by eight or ten counselors, hike, canoe, fish, seek fossils, and shoot game (with camera). They have found tools allied with a very early Indian race in the vicinity. Since 1955, a large log cabin has been available for indoctrination meetings and overnight breaks.

From the little village of Chesuncook, tugboats have towed great booms of logs for a distance of 24 miles, up the lake to the dam, where more than 10,000 logs have been put through the driveway daily. Wooden rails were greased for ease of promotion of the locomotive which bore the logs to mills northward of the lake. In the 1920's, presumably a steel railroad bed was laid, and two massive engines were brought to the place for more updated travel. Someone may know why these roadways and engines were never used.

In 1838, lands were cleared in Chesuncook village. In 1849, Ansel Smith established the first permanent settlement, an 80-foot log shanty with a spruce bark roof and several stone fireplaces. He failed in 1859, when his logs jammed and rotted.

He then built the 2½-story Chesuncook House, 1863, charging 35¢ a meal and \$3.50 weekly board "without bath." He also had a large barn, blacksmith shop, and sawmill on the premises.

During the early 1900's, Ansel Smith, Jr., became owner and host of the hotel, which is still standing. Being a highly popular and respected individual, he was alternately called "Saint of 'Suncook" and "Sage of Chesuncook," but was universally known as "Uncle Anse."<sup>8</sup>

In 1880, a small settlement of whites and Indians existed at the head of Chesuncook Lake. In 1913, the village, T5 R13, numbered about 30 dwellings, a hotel, general store, post office, schoolhouse, and lumber mill. Cutting and driving timber were the major industries. A population of 600 gave rise to an expectancy of a growth

to rival that of Bangor. Today, there are a few summer cottages and only one permanent resident family, the Bert McBurnies, who run Chesuncook Inn, adjacent to the old Chesuncook House where Thoreau once stayed.

Flood waters created by the construction of Ripogenus Dam have diminished Chesuncook's attraction for sportsmen. Its shores are lined with dri-ki and sandbanks. Gene LeTourneau, naturalist, sportsman, and syndicated columnist, describes the stumps as "so many monuments in the graveyard of time. Some have the appearance of being silicified, sprinkled with sand and as hard as the nearby ledges."

In late summer, 1971, the last logs were driven on the lake.

One of many tales connected with Lake Chesuncook is that of Mrs. Maurice Fortier, Narrows Pond Road, Winthrop, Maine. She claims that on July 4, 1963, she distinctly saw a "side-diving monster" in the waters. The creature was visible within 50 feet as she fished from the shore. According to Mrs. Fortier, the monster — neither fish nor mammal — looked at her for a short time and then dived back into the water and did not surface again. Other persons claim to have seen the freak, and some have termed it a feeding bluefin tuna. Exactly what the waters of Chesuncook hold within their dark recesses may never be known.

When the old *Caribou* steamer plied the lake, an inebriated gentleman boarded the boat and was, quite literally, thrown off. He pulled his gun and fired at the stern of the steamer. The report flashed to town: "*Caribou* shot." Upon its arrival at the dock, the steamer was boarded by all the game wardens in the region, representing the law and ready to uphold it. Shooting caribou was illegal.

George Cleveland based a story in the locale of Chesuncook Lake in his *Maine in Verse and Song* in which he manages to include a surprisingly large number of Maine lakes.

The construction of Ripogenus Dam, 400 feet long, 65 feet high, and 47 feet wide, made Chesuncook Lake one of a chain with Ripogenus and Caribou Lakes, Moose Pond, and Red Brook. It also created one lone, large island, Gero, about two miles long, where there are remnants of once active farms.

Since 1969 an air boat patrols 21 miles of the Penobscot River

between Northeast Carry and Chesuncook Lake to spot fires and to transport men to them with all possible speed.

Although primarily a calm lake, Chesuncook, as have most Maine lakes, has a temperament and a growing pollution problem. Gene LeTourneau once described the appearance of the lake during a gale as resembling a rising sea of mud. It has also been called "a lake shaped like a prone saurian with head uplifted" in a prideful stance.

According to a newspaper article by Lloyd Ferris, KJ-Sentinel News Service, in the 1880's a United States postage stamp was issued bearing the likeness of a moose; and above the antlers was printed "Chesuncook Lake."

SOWADNEHUNK LAKE lies in what was once Penobscot Indian territory in Piscataquis County on the western borderline of Baxter State Park. The chief of the tribe, Big Sebattis Mitchell, was lazy, shrewd, huge, wise, humorous, scheming, and known by his tribesmen as Ahwassus, "the Bear." In *The Penobscot Man*, Fannie Eckstorm writes that in 1870 the Penobscot tribe was the first to run the falls at Sowadnehunk (Sourdnahunk). Big Sebattis engaged a bowman, went over the falls, and would have sunk had he not rapidly bailed out the canoe, which had filled to the top with water. When white men came along and asked how he had succeeded, he stood nonchalantly leaning on his paddles and remarked, "Oh, va'y good; she took in lill' water mebbe." Not a scratch showed on his canoe. The white men, thereupon, tried to equal Big Sebattis' feat; two boats were smashed, eleven people were rescued, and one man drowned. In the words of the Maine poet, Holman Day, one might say that they had been "tossed by the Phantom of Sourdna-hunk."<sup>9</sup>

NESOWADNEHUNK LAKE, bearing an Abenaki name meaning "swift stream between mountains," or "swift stream in the mountain ravines," also lies in Piscataquis County. It was inhabited in 1895 by Albert McLain and his son William. They built a small cabin on the shore, fished, and trapped. The only times that they ventured into civilization were to stock up on provisions and to sell their furs and spruce gum. They lived like Indians and enjoyed life. Albert had followed his father's trade and could build rugged birch and

canvas canoes. Caribou and other wildlife surrounded them. The story sounds ideal except that, according to Elinor Walker, Mr. McLain had left his wife and seven other children at home.<sup>10</sup>

Many old trees are submerged in Lake Nesowadnehunk. Thick, tall evergreens line the entire shore. Even in 1968 moose were common inhabitants of the place. Within the waters are rainbow trout; and at the foot of the lake is Nesowadnehunk Wilderness Campground, with camping facilities provided by the Great Northern Paper Company which also maintains a local grocery store. Camp Phoenix, a nearby popular resort, commands a fine view of the lake.

The JO-MARY LAKES, in Piscataquis County, have had several spellings. Fannie Eckstorm calls the name a corruption of Joe Mary, a chief of the Penobscot Indian tribe that had hunting grounds from Pemadumcook Lake to beyond Patawaydjo. Joe was a skillful swimmer, but was always blowing and puffing water from his mouth after surfacing; therefore, a ridge in the vicinity was named Patawaydjo ("Whale") Mountain.

NORTH TWIN LAKE, not far from Millinocket, in Penobscot County, is where the steamers *Minnie Ha Ha*, *Gypsy*, *Annabelle*, and *Rainbow* served the Norcross Transportation Company in hauling freight, mail, loggers, and sportsmen, and in towing scows laden with supplies and horses. Up to 40 passengers could be accommodated.

The Norcross Hotel, property of the Great Northern Paper Company, was razed around 1970.

The big dam at North Twin Lake was built by the Penobscot Log Driving Company in connection with Chesuncook Lake. After 1849, the company collected toll for use of the dam, an uncommon levy. It also took charge of all logs of operators on West Branch waters, selling the drive to the lowest bidder by auction, who in turn would receive the drive and deliver it in boom. Only twice was there failure to get the logs into boom — once during 1861 when the Civil War had taken most of the operators into armed service and the other time when Chesuncook Dam "blowed," leaving the operators without a head of water upon a difficult location.

WASSATAQUOIK LAKE, a "clear, shining lake" (Abenaki), is

in what was once Abenaki territory, and the now moss-grown sluiceway was once a thundering uproar in the spring and a small lyric in the fall. The lake lies in Piscataquis County, near the Penobscot County line, and has been termed "Maine's finest example of the architecture of loneliness" as well as "the wildest log-driving stream in Maine."<sup>11</sup> It is a long, narrow lake flanked on both sides by mountains.

Several pine-clad islands, blamed partially for log jams, lost timber, and human tragedies, dot the waters of Wassataquoik where strong winds have bent permanently southward the limbs of the trees. The water is clear enough to see the bottom for a depth of 40 to 60 feet. White sandy shores extend to 15 feet out into the lake and then are met by dark, forbidding drop-offs. There is no adequate feed for fish life.

By the lake's shores, on Inscription Rock, a massive boulder too steep to scale without a ladder, men presumably from local camps years ago, chiseled commemorative lines to the Tracey-Love lumbering operations in a wilderness with not much else than camps, dams, floods, and deaths. The inscription begins thus:

TRACEY-LOVE  
commenced operation on  
WISSATAQUOIK, Oct. 1, 1883

Familiar nearby lakes include NAHMAKANTA, Abenaki for "plenty of fish"; RAINBOW, which forms a semi-circular arch-like winding course; RUSH, practically a bog now filled with thick lily-pads through which a boat can be navigated for only about a mile; RIPOGENUS, indicating "resting place," "gravel," or "gorge of the perpetual rainbow"; MILLINOCKET, (Abenaki) "this place is admirable," which boasts many islands, a fickle nature, rocky shoals, no road access, the famed Libby Camps, and a poetic tribute from John Greenleaf Whittier; QUAKISH, a favorite with log drivers; AMBEJEJUS, named for the two large, round rocks, one above the other, in the lake or (Abenaki) "two currents, one on either side"; PEMADUMCOOK, whose name means "lake with gravelly bottom" or (Malecite) "extended sandbar place," and which once (1920's) had steamer transportation to Ambejejus; WYMAN, created by the

high power dam at Moscow, the only man-made lake in the vicinity; CARIBOU; HARRINGTON; and the DEBSCONEAG LAKES, whose name means "ponds at the waterway" (Abenaki).

SMITH POND, slightly east of Pemadumcook Lake and south of Millinocket, in Piscataquis County, is included because it is the location for one of the three remaining natural ice cutting businesses in the State in 1972. Started by Alex Dionne, his son Norman (Bud) and children now cut, partly by hand, about 100,000 lbs. of at least 14-foot-thick ice each year between Christmas and New Year's Day, and retail it for 4c a pound, a far cry from the original lucrative business.