

Art, Education and the Adirondacks

BY NAJ WIKOFF

Something has been missing in the economic round tables in the Adirondack region.

Several years ago I was invited to serve on the Economic Development Subcommittee of the Lake Placid-North Elba Master Plan Task Force. A considerable amount of work had been accomplished prior to my joining the committee, therefore I was able to take a fresh look at the initial draft of their economic report. As might be expected in a community like Lake Placid the major thrust of the recommendations had to do with encouraging tourism. What struck me as missing was the economic value of education and the arts to the community. With the number of educational institutions located within the Town of North Elba, and in the entire Tri-Lakes High Peaks region, the arts and education seemed a major industry to me, an industry that is often overlooked.

At the time North Country Community College was about to build a new dorm, Paul Smith's was expanding from a two to a four year college, the National Sports Academy and Northwood School were renovating their facilities and both Keene Central and Saranac Lake Central were considering major upgrades of their buildings.

I then contacted the heads of various educational institutions to ask if they

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would be willing to participate in an economic study. Dr. George Miller, the President of Paul Smith's College, offered to help facilitate the study and host a meeting to share the results. Fifteen educational institutions participated: BOCES Adirondack Educational Center, Holy Ghost Academy, Keene Central School, Lake Placid Central School, the Lake

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Placid Institute, the National Sports Academy, North Country Community College, North Country School, Northwood School, Paul Smith's College, Saranac Lake Central School, St. Agnes Parochial School, St. Bernard's School, St. Francis Academy, and Tupper Lake Central School.

The results were impressive. Together the institutions had combined operating budgets of \$68,731,269. Using a modest 1.8 multiplier yields an economic impact of \$130,589,311. They serve a total of 7,216 students, of which 1,370 come from outside the area. They employ

1,132 full time and 253 part time employees which translates into the second largest industry after tourism and represents 10.75% of the work force.

Still more impressive is the fact that the education industry is growing in our area. Paul Smith's student population will increase from 750 to 1,000 over the next three years. The National Sports Academy has had a 50% increase in enrollment and the Lake Placid Institute summer programs have increased their enrollment by 25%. These schools are in the midst of a building boom that is putting many more people to work, resulting in more year round jobs.

Saranac Lake Central has launched a \$8.9 million capital improvement project. Paul Smith's is investing \$4.5 million in their facilities plus an \$8.6 million library. North Country Community College is spending approximately \$1.25 million on their new dorm. Keene Central will be investing \$5.8 million upgrading their plant, and both National Sports Academy and Northwood School are refurbishing and expanding their facilities. And Lake Placid Central recently secured a \$11.5 million renovation plan.

Education creates job stability. In contrast to the typical tourist, who spends on average two days in a community, the 'guests' of many of our educational institutions stay up to four years plus they attract friends and family to visit them for special events. Their long stays mean many things. They are spending money in the community over a longer period of time, which creates job stability for

employees in the education industry and supports restaurants, shops, and other businesses throughout the year.

The study was presented to the heads of these institutions at a meeting on May 14, 1998. It seems evident that many benefits could result from a continued collaboration among the schools — collaboration not just on the senior level, but among business managers, faculty, coaches, and marketing staff. A follow up meeting was held at North Country School in early July to discuss the issues and opportunities facing the education industry. Out of that session, led by Cali Brooks of the Adirondack Project, the High Peaks Educational Consortium



Paul Smith's College is increasing the size of its student body and investing several million dollars in new facilities.

was formed including a wide range of educational institutions, public and private, college and elementary.

This educational community is really part of a larger education, arts and humanities umbrella that has other components equally as compelling such as Fort Ticonderoga, the Adirondack Museum at Blue Mountain Lake and the Visitors Interpretive Centers at Paul Smiths and Newcomb. Both Fort Ticonderoga and the Adirondack Museum annually attract over 100,000 visitors. Neither is particularly easy to get to, yet they have attracted a public willing to drive long distances for a quality experience. Both institutions are upgrading their facilities and expanding their staffs, meaning more year round jobs as well as strong seasonal employment. They give proof to the value of developing tourist destinations with an arts and educational component.

Important steps are already being

made in that direction. The Village of Tupper Lake recently hosted a kick-off for the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks to be based there. Assemblyman Chris Ortloff raised the idea of turning

part of the former Plattsburgh Air Force Base into a historic site to commemorate the War of 1812 ('Battle of Plattsburgh') and the Cold War. Last fall a community meeting was held to turn that vision into a reality. With the Saratoga Battlefield and Fort William Henry on the south, Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point in the middle, and Plattsburgh to the north, the entire Champlain Valley corridor, including Lake George Valley, could become a destination draw leading visitors to the many smaller but

no less exciting historical sites such as John Brown's Farm and the 1812 Homestead.

The arts have long been an attractive asset of our region as well. Two books on the Adirondacks by photographer Nathan Farb are probably one of the best forms of advertising the region has ever had. A hundred years ago the Town of Keene was given a huge shot in the arm by the Hudson River School painters who flocked to the beauty of the 'Flats' and created a demand for rooming houses and summer residences — an economic stimulus that benefits the community to this day. That tradition continues with a new influx of creative individuals ranging from painters and writers to dancers, sculptors, musicians, and pho-

tographers. Each of them shops in stores, patronizes local restaurants, and sends their children to local schools. The magic of the Internet and the convenience of express mail services makes year round living in the Adirondacks possible.

The Lake Placid Center for the Arts, the Arts Center of Old Forge, and the Adirondack Center for the Arts in Blue Mountain Lake have also been leaders in bringing the arts to Adirondack communities and with them increased job opportunities. Relatively new on the scene is the Lake Placid Institute for the Arts & Humanities. In a very short time it has had a significant impact in the region. It brings more than 200 of the world's finest musicians to the region each summer to study and expand their musical repertoire. Its faculty includes the legends in their discipline. Already it has established a partnership with the Royal Academy of Music of London, one of the world's leading music conservatories. The Institute's activities are not relegated to music alone, but include residencies for playwrights, poetry contests, and seminars on ethics. The Institute has brought added visibility, created new jobs, and pumped money into the economy. It runs its programs in cooperation with other institutions further benefiting the local economy and economic stability of others.

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Another addition to the musical arts is the Adirondack Ensemble based in Wevertown. Forsaking the traditional path of concert musicians, violinist Michael Dabroski and pianist Lisa Spilde decided to set roots and establish an ensemble in a small Adirondack village. The success of that venture is manifested in sold out concerts in Keene Valley, Old Forge and Wevertown, summer music camps for area children, and an expanding schedule of school residencies.



The Lake Placid Center for the Arts

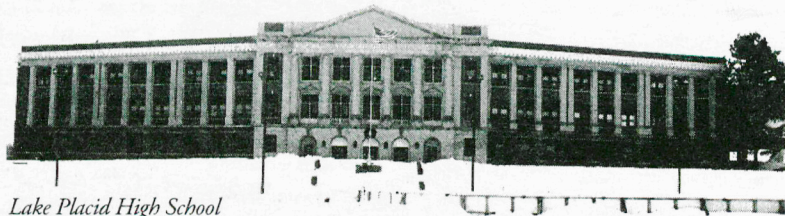


Saranac Lake High School



The Northwood School

The Arts and Education in and around the Sara-Placid Area.



Lake Placid High School

A leader in the recent growth of the arts is Pendragon Theater in Saranac Lake. This theater has evolved from a second story closet theater to an institution capable of hosting a full season of plays and school residencies. Three years ago, in partnership with the Lake Placid Institute and North Country Community College, Pendragon launched the Festival of the Lakes, an art festival that showcases more than 80 events in three days in the three communities of Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake. A recent \$100,000 grant to their endowment reflects a growing recognition that the arts are becoming a vital and cherished part of community life.

Reflecting increased collaboration among arts and educational institutions is the newly established Adirondack Center for Writing based at Paul Smith's College. The Center was launched under the auspices of North Country Public Radio with a grant from the New York State

Council on the Arts. Initially a region-wide needs assessment survey and three focus groups were held to gather recommendations from writers, storytellers, educators and directors of arts institutions. Currently the Center is planning a wide variety of activities designed to build audiences for writing and support the writers and storytellers throughout the region — activities that will be organized in partnership with cultural and educational institutions throughout the Park.

Another sign of an even broader level of cooperation is reflected in the mix of delegates from the Adirondacks that visited the Abruzzo Park in Italy this past fall. The purpose of the trip was to learn from the experiences of others and explore possible partnerships with our sister park. The delegation included not only the expected mix of people representing local government, state regulatory agencies, economic development and

environmental protection agencies, but also representatives from the arts, education, and historic sites. Already participants on the trip are beginning to work with each other in new and exciting ways that promises much for the future.

Partnering the arts and education with other assets of the Adirondacks is proving to be a recipe for developing a sustainable economy as well as fostering community and making the region more enjoyable for visitors and residents alike. An additional benefit of the arts, from the building-a-sustainable-society standpoint, is that they are light on the land. Few things are more benign than a poet sitting under a tree typing a poem on his or her portable computer, or a photographer zeroing in on a lily pad, or a singer welcoming the dawn with a song. True a song at dawn may not be everyone's cup of tea, but it does dissipate and dissolve like the morning mist leaving but a cherished memory.