

The Naming of Van Cleef Lake

The completion of Locks 2 and 3, with their raise of about 49 feet, in summer 1915 created an artificial body of water in the village of Seneca Falls that is known today as Van Cleef Lake. That name, however, did not come about easily.

One complication was using the word “lake” to refer to this body of water. The New York State Board of Geographic Names was on record as not favoring the adoption of the term “lake” for any of the new backwater or artificial water bodies that have been created in the course of construction operations for the barge canal. This Board expressed a preference and established a precedent for the application of the term “pool” or possibly “pond” to such bodies of water, as in the case of Niskayuna Pool at Crescent. Perhaps simply as a result of that recommendation, some local residents offered up “Park Lake” and later “Park Pool” as the new name to adopt. Obviously, this name did not win out.

That same Board suggested that the name “should not be merely euphonious, but should have some distinctive association either with the history, scenery or other natural features of the locality in question.” An example of this is the suggested name of “Ioka” for our new body of water. That suggestion prompted one writer of a letter to the editor of the *Reveille* to say that it was “euphonious, though lacking somewhat in distinctive significance.”

There were many names referring to something of the local history that came forward as serious suggestions. One such name suggested was “Silsby Lake.” *The Press* (what became known as the *Seneca County Press*) was referring to this new-created body of water as Silsby Lake, named after the Silsby of the Silsby Manufacturing Company, the last fire engine company still operating in Seneca Falls at the time. Apparently, at least for a period of time, the water body was actually referred to as Silsby Lake. This is illustrated in this postcard, provided courtesy of Kay Irland:

Some Seneca Falls resident who was concerned about this “Silsby Lake” name contacted Charles R. Skinner, the State Librarian. Mr. Skinner wrote back that he was unable to find any reference anywhere to “Silsby lake” or to any lake in this village. He went on to say that if the village owns the lake or the land around it, the village’s board of trustees may give the



lake any name it pleased. He added that if the trustees “desire a name of more ancient origin perhaps they can find some appropriate name in the early records of Seneca County.” The

Reveille's response to Skinner's comments was, "It is immaterial what name is given to it, but it should become legally fixed."

Several Indian names were being considered. In the nomenclature of lakes, it was very common to make use of some Indian word, be it ethnic or descriptive of some natural geographic feature (like "Cascade Lake" or "Twin Lakes"). Someone suggested the name "Mingos Lake" which was a kind of acronym of the various Iroquois tribes. The *Reveille* was urging the adoption of "Redjacket Pool." (Note that the suggestion was one word, not the usual first and last name of this famous Iroquois Indian). The *Reveille* in an editorial in 1916 referred to the State's not favoring the designation of these new artificial bodies of water being created as lakes. That editorial went on to say that "Pond hardly appeals to our aesthetic tastes, so why not pool? And how can we better perpetuate the name of a great warrior and keep alive our Indian history and tradition than by selecting the name of Redjacket?" The editorial concluded with the quote, "Their names are on our waters and ye may not wash them out."

The *Reveille's* editorial position prompted strong opposition. (One can only imagine the opposition that would be verbalized in recent years, given the developments in the Cayuga Indian land claim dispute, if the name Redjacket Pool, or any Iroquois name, had actually been selected.) Even those who favored some Indian tradition name did not favor specifically the name of Red Jacket. One letter to the editor of the *Reveille* said,

"Red Jacket Pool," however, is not euphonious and the water to be christened is not a pool. Neither is it a lake, a pond or a basin, but is really the Seneca River widened for barge canal purposes. Then why not "Seneca Widewaters," so that the Indian tradition may survive in a name linked to our lands and waters and this joined with a distinctive word highly and descriptive. The name would be pleasing and "The Widewaters" would be well adapted to colloquial use.

Mynderse Van Cleef, a former Seneca Falls resident who was then living in Ithaca, offered to the Seneca Falls board of trustees a \$500 contribution toward improving the surroundings of this body of water if they would permit him to select the name for this new village lake. In a subsequent letter to the editor of *The Reveille*, an opponent of this suggestion pointed out that the "lakes of our State are not known by the names of persons or families, though mill ponds frequently, are so designated. For Seneca Falls to break over the custom of the country would be most inappropriate." Commenting specifically on the offer of \$500 for naming rights, the letter went on to say this:

A proposal has been made to the board of trustees that a non-resident of Seneca Falls buy the right to name our little lake. This would seem unworthy. Among our own citizens are many who pay in taxes every year more than the amount offered. An appropriate name is worth more than five hundred dollars. By all means let us have the dignity to select for the lake a name which will be an ornament to our community and a pleasure to our people."

The *Reveille* echoed editorial support with the comments, "The citizens of the village will doubtless have something to say about naming the lake. It would seem quite inappropriate to sell this privilege to a non-resident of the town."

A *Syracuse Post-Standard* article dated January 5, 1917, tells how the name of this water body became officially known as Van Cleef Lake. John M. Clarke, secretary and executive director of the State Board of Geographic Names sent a letter dated October 27, 1916, to Village Clerk Charles W. Combs that the state board had chosen this name largely because it had been approved by the village board of trustees.

The Van Cleef name is very important to the early history of Seneca Falls. Lawrence Van Cleef is credited as being the first European American to settle permanently (1789) in what is today Seneca Falls. Lawrence had been part of about 100 men order by General Sullivan late in his campaign of destruction to proceed east from Geneva towards Albany. Having camped the first night on the north bank of the Seneca River at Seneca Falls, Van Cleef was impressed with the beauty and natural advantages for settlement. Upon discharge from his army service, he returned in the spring of 1789. Buying Job Smith's one hundred acre claim, Van Cleef set up settlement on the flats, erecting a double log house. His early efforts at growing corn were disrupted by the Indians, who were jealous of the intrusion upon their ancestral lands. That fall, he returned to Albany to bring the rest of his family to his new home in Seneca Falls. Van Cleef became famous for piloting boats over the rapids of the Seneca River. He continued this business until the locks were built in 1815, and he boasted that he never lost or injured a boat—unlike many other pilots.



Significantly, however, the lake is not named after Lawrence Van Cleef. According to the historic marker that was erected along the lake bank just northeast of the Trinity Episcopal Church, the lake is named after Lawrence's son George Cunningham Van Cleef. The historic marker's wording is "named for George Cunningham Van Cleef, one of first white children born in Seneca County, 1797." The *Syracuse Post Standard* article referred to above also reported that the village had accepted the donation offered by Mynderse Van Cleef for use to improve the appearance of the land around the lake.

Although the creation of Van Cleef Lake came at the expense of the total demise of The Flats, the flourishing industrial hub of the village prior to 1915, this water body has become one of the most photographed sights in all of New York State. The most typical picture incorporates a view of the lake with the Trinity Episcopal Church in the background.

