

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 22, 2010

My First Visit to Cooperstown, 1955: As a young man in Cooperstown, Abner Doubleday is credited with inventing baseball in 1839. Nearly a quarter century later, he was a general in the Union Army and one of the heroes of the Battle of Gettysburg. His hometown was named for early settlers named Cooper, of whom James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) was the most famous. On the shore of Lake Otsego, it is a most scenic spot, with overflow from the lake forming the east branch of the Susquehanna River.

Dr. Leo Behrendt was a German-American musician who became head of the music department at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Marrying a native Marylander whose family had settled in Lord Baltimore's colony, they had two sons, Norbert (1917–1980) and Waldemar "Wally" (1919–1976?). Norbert was written up in the *Weekly News* of November 10, 2008. In the 1950s, Norbert would take his parents to a little house on the shore of Otsego Lake for two weeks in August to get away from Washington's summer heat. In 1955, he invited me to join them for two days or so. I had a new Chrysler Windsor, and I looked forward to the trip.

It rained a lot in the summer of 1955. Traveling alone, I had planned the under-300-mile trip in a day, which should have been easy even without interstate highways. The first problem occurred in the vicinity of Wind Gap (Pennsylvania), where a washed-out bridge had the road closed ahead. No one seemed to know how to get around the wash-out, and we soon learned that this was one of many bridges in the area that were washed from their footings. Along with a number of other cars, I sat there for nearly an hour when a man said, "I know the area well and travel it all the time, follow me!" For the next two or more hours I did indeed follow him, and we took every back road in Monroe and Luzerne counties and finally came to the Susquehanna between Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. I did not realize that I crossed the river there and headed north just before that bridge was under water and closed for several days. The rest of my trip to Cooperstown was uneventful, but to the southeast, the Delaware River was on such a rampage that it washed out a Girl Scout camp on the New Jersey side above the Delaware Water Gap, and many girls were drowned.

The Behrendt cottage was about 5 miles north of Cooperstown on the west side of the lake. There was a dock opposite where Norbert had a little boat with an outboard motor. Less than a mile away was a rustic but very nice restaurant where we dined once or twice during my stay. Around Cooperstown were several attractions, the Baseball Hall of Fame being the best known. A beautiful building along the lake on property formerly owned by James Fenimore Cooper housed the New York State Historical Society. The Farm Museum was also a very fine facility for the 1950s, and there was a "forest museum" or something similar that had a small steam logging railroad running ½ mile along a hillside through the woods (this latter place was out of business in the 1990s). Norbert took us to Richfield Springs, probably 20 miles distant, with its gazebo in the center of town being the only reminder of the grand days in the mid-19th century when special trains brought vacationers to a spa that rivaled Saratoga.

Cooperstown had fine hotels, too. The Otesaga was a grand hotel facing Otsego Lake. The Cooper Inn was one of the first Treadway Inns, and there were bed and breakfast places in the heart of this attractive town. For many years, the annual induction ceremonies for the Baseball Hall of Fame in late July has brought a host of major-leaguers to town, and there is always a ball game in the park about two blocks from the Hall of Fame building. The stars stay at the Otesaga, which is still going strong. I left in 1955 with many fond memories and an uneventful trip home with the detours well-marked and one bridge open through the Scranton area. I've been lucky enough to go back in 1962, 1973, and twice in 1997 when Ruth and I ran a Finger Lakes Steam Car Tour that spent two nights in Cooperstown.