

Visiting Hinsdale, N. Y., is a bit surreal

Despite many difference between the two Hinsdales, the communities share key similarity

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Seeing the name “Hinsdale” on signs that didn’t relate to our Hinsdale was a tough adjustment for me throughout our visit to Hinsdale, N.Y.

Hinsdale is a Hinsdale is a Hinsdale is a Hinsdale.

I have to take issue with (and offer my deep apologies to) Gertrude Stein, but things are not what they seem when you see the word “Hinsdale” on a sign that isn’t here in Hinsdale, Illinois.

Hinsdale Central Bobcats? Hinsdale Fire District? Hinsdale Cemetery? Town of Hinsdale?

And to compound my uneasiness there is another sign, “Welcome to Hinsdale, founded 1820.” With a rose. There you go, Ms. Stein — rose is a rose right there on the sign.

It is a strange feeling, not an out-of-body type of strange, but I’m left unsettled as I visit Hinsdale, N.Y., for the first time. I knew I was going to this Hinsdale along with my wife, Ilene — we had spent two days traveling America’s tiny highways to reach our destination.

In our Hinsdale, a difference of opinion exists as to how the town was named. On one side, in 1869 the Hinsdale postmaster, Isaac S. Bush, said he named it after his birthplace of Hinsdale, N.Y. On the other side, we’re told a Burlington Northern executive named it after a prominent merchant, H. W. Hinsdale. No one can confirm he ever set foot in our Hinsdale.

Residents of Hinsdale, N.Y., don’t have to wonder where its name came from. In Lila Cooper’s 600-page book “Hinsdale ... My Home Town,” it’s documented with no disagreement whatsoever. Elial Foote was a state assemblyman in New York in 1820 when the Town of Hinsdale was formed.

In a letter dated 1873, he explained the process to the then town clerk of Hinsdale. Settlers had been coming to the area since 1802, and by 1820 there were enough to incorporate the town.

“Mr. Foote knew that a large portion of the people were either New Englanders or descendants from the eastern states, so he was “determined to give it the name of an old and respectable New England town” and the name of Hinsdale occurred to him because Hinsdale, New Hampshire, was the birthplace of his beloved mother.

“He said it was easily written and pronounced and at that time there were only two towns of that name in the United States and none in Europe, so the name Hinsdale was inserted.”

Hinsdale, New Hampshire, was named after Col. Ebenezer Hinsdale and was incorporated in 1755.

It’s a town, no it’s a hamlet

The hamlet of Hinsdale is in the Town of Hinsdale, which is in Cattaraugus County. Several other hamlets are located in the Town of Hinsdale, which covers almost 25,000 acres or roughly 38



Today, Main Street in Hinsdale is residential, with some of the original buildings still in place. The building on the right has housed a bank, a doctor’s office and a repair shop. The second story was added when the building became residential. Jim Eckstrom is the editor of the Olean Times Herald which covers Hinsdale. (Jim Slonoff photos)

square miles. (Compare that to our 4.5 square miles.) Its population comes in at 2,168 versus ours of 17,466.

The Town of Hinsdale is located in western New York, in an area called the “enchanted mountains.” And while I doubt they are mountains, there is no doubt they are enchanted. The landscape of rolling hills seems to go on forever. Each one is filled with trees — beautiful lush greenery as far as the eye can see. The views must be amazing in the fall. As you travel on some of the “hollows” — winding roads between the hills — you come across valleys filled with various crops until the next hill comes into view and it starts all over.

Main Street runs through the hamlet, running parallel to Route 16, and in the distance you can see the Southern Tier Expressway Interstate 86. They all roughly follow the Olean Creek, which meanders through the area.

As you enter the hamlet, the Hinsdale Central School is the first building you see on Main Street. (And in a strange coincidence the brick resembles that of Hinsdale Central High School). Banners proclaim “Welcome to Hinsdale Home of the Bobcats.”

At one time the hamlet was bustling and on track to be much larger. A hotel, bank, general store and churches all lined Main Street. Today it’s mostly homes.

The Methodist church still stands in the center of town with the fire department next door. A beautiful park with large, stately trees and a white gazebo are on Main Street. The Diocese closed the Catholic church years ago, and the

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This is the second in a four-part series on our visit to Hinsdale, N.Y.

buildings now house the food pantry, history museum and a private home. Nearby on Route 16 you’ll find auto repair shops, a small motel, a gas station, the American Legion and a new Dollar General going up.

Discovering a different Hinsdale

To immerse myself in this Hinsdale, I visited with Jim Eckstrom, managing editor of the Olean Times Herald in Olean, which is about 10 minutes from Hinsdale on Route 16. Eckstrom began his career at the Times on Sept. 10, 2001 as a reporter. The first week on the job at the daily newspaper is one he will always remember. The issue that covered the events of Sept. 11, although yellowed now, still hangs from his bulletin board in his office.

The Times covers southwestern New York and Northwestern Pennsylvania and of course the Hinsdale area. That’s 94 communities according to their map in the reception area.

“Today’s edition was the first time, in a long time, that we actually had two stories about Hinsdale, There is not a lot of news out of there,” Eckstrom said. The headlines, “Hinsdale school hearing on budget plays to two,” and “Proposed children’s home in Hinsdale faces skepticism,” made it on Page 1.

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The meeting about the group home did have a much higher turnout.

Describing the town as usually quiet, he said the top stories lately have been related to the Hinsdale Haunted House and the school board vote. I don't do scary movies, so I'm certainly not getting close to a haunted house.

Before the Times, Hinsdale did have its own newspapers through the years. According to Cooper, they included The Hinsdale Democrat in 1837, People's Gazette in 1840, The Expositor in 1845 and Hinsdale News in 1908. Today it's just the Times.

Eckstrom also brought up that Hinsdale, N.Y., had some ties to the Chicago area.

"During Prohibition the area was known as 'Little Chicago.' Route 16, which used to be a wagon trail, was the primary route for moving liquor from Canada into this country," he said. "Al Capone was known to visit the Hinsdale area and drank at a local inn owned by Al Ritchie."

Others related that Capone had a summer home in the area as well.

A dynamic duo of information

On the north end of Route 16 I came across a large red building with a sign that says, "Town of Hinsdale — Highway Department, Justice Department, Town Board Room." Seemed like a Hinsdale trifecta, so I decided to drop in and see what I could learn.

Jackpot! Inside I met Sue Putt, the town assessor, and Walt Putt, the building inspector. Both are residents of the hamlet of Hinsdale, both attended Hinsdale Central School and both have lived their whole lives in Hinsdale. And yes, they are husband and wife.

Walt graduated HCS in 1966, with Sue following in 1967. They raised four children and now have some grandchildren attending their alma mater.

"The biggest change lately is we have natural gas coming to town,"



Walt Putt, building inspector for Hinsdale, and his wife, Sue, the town's assessor, both attended Hinsdale Central School. Stephen Clute, the president of the Hinsdale Historical Society did as well.

Sue said. "Prior to that residents would use either oil or propane to heat their homes. Cell towers was a biggie as well."

The Putts have seen the number of homes on their street increase over the years.

"There isn't really much commercial property available. So we're basically residential, but we've grown tremendously residential, looking at our road alone." Sue said.

"I think probably, I would guess a good third," Walt chimed in. "And we've got the lowest taxes in the immediate area here."

And while there are almost 25,000 acres of land in the town, agriculture isn't as prevalent as it once was.

"It used to be, years ago back when I was a kid, there was probably five times as many farms as there are now," Walt said.

"We've had two of our larger farms sell and be divided off, turned into camps and five-acre lots. We did get a few houses out of it," Sue said.

"What we do have is a lot of people come down from the city, (Buffalo) and they'll buy a chunk of land,"

Walt said. "Put a cabin on it and it's their hunting property. And then when they retire they do actually move down."

"We've seen a lot of land sales where several of them get together and buy 50 acres," Sue said. "So they'll have 50 acres or so to hunt on. And because of that land, values are beginning to skyrocket."

A history lesson

It's a hot afternoon the Wednesday of my trip, cooler in the shade of the gazebo. I'm listening to a fourth-grade class from Hinsdale Central School on a field trip — well, actually, a walk down Main Street to the park. They are learning about the history of their own Hinsdale. Stephen Clute, president of the Hinsdale Historical Society, leads the discussion, with several society members pitching in. This is a first for the members of the historical society, and judging by the kids' reaction, it should be an annual event.

Clute turns the table on me for



a moment, and asks the kids if they've ever heard of Hinsdale, Illinois. Surprisingly many say yes. And then he turns the lecture over to me. Thanks. The kids are pretty impressed with how many bathrooms are being built in the new homes in our Hinsdale and how many children attend our Hinsdale Central High School — almost seven times as many as Hinsdale Central School's 450 (and that's pre-K through senior year of high school).

Clute and 10 other members have gathered an impressive collection of items to showcase in their History Museum on Main Street. He, like so many other people I interviewed, attended Hinsdale Central School, graduating in 1978. His class was one of the biggest, numbering about 70.

Clute remembers hunting and trapping raccoon and fox with his best friend during his youth, sometimes earning as much as \$5 for their efforts. He laughs as he tells the story and how they felt rich. He also spent time working at one of the area's several dairies. He'd deliver milk first thing in the morning and then hit the hay fields in the afternoon.

And while much has changed over the years, one thing has not — and that's the people who call Hinsdale home.

"We've held a regatta here in Hinsdale for the last 10 years. Now were doing a Horseradish Festival. But one of the comments you get from a lot of people is how enjoyable the people are from Hinsdale. You know, whether you're broke down or stranded or you need a hand with this or you're cold and need a jacket, somebody's always there you know to help you out. And I think the community in general you know is that way."

Turns out Hinsdale is a Hinsdale after all.



Brittany Skiver is serving as the temporary postmaster of Hinsdale. Although she grew up in nearby Portville, she did live in Hinsdale for five years. The Hinsdale Post Office is on Main Street and, like much of Hinsdale, has an 'enchanted mountain' for a back yard. (Jim Slonoff photos)

