

Cozy Hinsdale, Mass., charms visitors

Tucked away in the Berkshires, old mill town on Housatonic awash in history

By Ken Knutson

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"This ... is Hinsdale?!" came the indignant voice from the backseat.

I had tried to prepare my 7-year-old for the 2,000-population scale of the town in western Massachusetts where we'd be spending the next two days.

"What am I supposed to do here?" Wyatt asked.

Lacking a sufficient answer, I reminded him of the tent camping we'd be doing. That worked against me, too, as rain audibly pelted our SUV. Let's rewind a few hours.

Last night's clear conditions had given way to dyspeptic morning skies, chilly temps and drenching rains. I peeled myself out of the Pittsfield hotel bed and wondered momentarily if we should abandon the booked camp site and extend our stay here.

And forfeit the \$60 charge? That's not how I roll.

Rousting Wyatt required turning on a favorite cartoon and the promise of doughnuts.

I prayed that the weather would get a shot of meteorological caffeine as I got mine. It didn't, but we needed to get to Hinsdale for the first stage of this expedition. We gathered provisions at a supermarket, which included the essential toy suction dart gun for wilderness protection, and drove the 20 minutes to our destination.

"Look at the mountains!" I exclaimed, trying to stoke Wyatt's interest in the rolling Berkshires terrain.

"THWAP!" was all I heard as a dart met the window.

Up a steep grade and down the other side brought us into a cluster of homes planted along the Housatonic River. The town's center comprises a small collection of buildings — a post office, a restaurant, a real estate office. It was Saturday and raining, but parking scarcity clearly was an issue here.

This was Hinsdale, Mass. Wyatt was not impressed,

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This is the second in a six-part series on visits to towns named Hinsdale in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

although he did notice the striking Tudor-style library building just across the river. I spied a plaque under a gnarled pine tree in front.

"Rev. Theodore Hinsdale," it read. "Early community leader through whose efforts the town was organized and chartered (1804), then named in his honor."

Namesake mystery solved! Wyatt was positively underwhelmed. And it was still raining.

Hinsdale is one of the "hill towns" that ring Pittsfield, home to river-powered woolen mills a century ago.

We drove out past the elementary school and village hall and, well, that was about it. By default, lunch

was at Glenn's Hinsdale General Store. I grabbed a handful of giveaway pens and headed in, eager to engage the local denizens.

Inside we met store employee Robert and were led back to the dining area. I ordered two slices of pepperoni pizza.

A Pittsfield native, 20-something Robert started working at the store six months ago, but his connection to it predates that.

"Actually my aunt used to own this back in the day. So it's kind of weird how I'm working here," he said.

Hinsdale's population, and consequently sales revenue, swells in summer thanks to youth camps and vacationers drawn to the two town lakes, Robert remarked.

Appetites sated, we walked up to the front counter manned by retiree Tom. A native Californian, Tom moved to Hinsdale in 2005 with General Dynamics, but federal spending cuts spelled the end of his entire office in 2013.

"I tried looking for a job for about six months and then I decided to retire,



and I just haven't left," Tom said.

His prior habitat of Anaheim may have the Magic Kingdom, but he prefers this region's veritable wild kingdom.

"It's my first time ever living in, what I call, the country. I like the trees. I see a lot of wild animals," he said of his 1.2-acre property near Lake Ashmere, among which are black bears and turkeys.

The rain was abating, so we headed for Fernwood Forest Campground via GPS. No luck.

Wyatt's tolerance was flagging, but I wanted to see Lake Ashmere. Shrouded in mist, it was the picture of bucolic charm before the coming summer storm. We passed an obviously once stately vintage home perched on a bluff now marred by decades of neglect. A testament to the affluence that once coursed through here.

I called for campground directions. Not surprisingly, we have our pick of tent sites. The rain has stopped, and thankfully the thick tree canopy has kept them becoming mud holes.

"This one! It's got a fire

pit," shouted a revived Wyatt.

I looked back and nodded, cringing at how our strategically packed vehicle was morphing into a kind of teenager's traveling bedroom.

Tent up, we head over the campground's party shelter and learn it's chili cook-off night. Many there are seasonal residents, forming their own pseudo-community and well-known to owners Ward and Marion Tinney. Marion said they bought the 115-acre site 22 years ago in an auction when Ward's career was in limbo.

"We wanted some place to live that had a little income to it," she said, recalling its rough shape after sitting unused for 12 years. "Now we're both retired, so it's the perfect job for us. It's a really good life."

Wyatt wouldn't be sampling any of the seven competing chili submissions, but he linked up with a couple of older girls on the nearby playground.

"Dad, have you seen those girls?" he asked some time later.

Probably getting ready for

Hinsdale, Mass.

got its name from an early religious leader, as Ken and Wyatt Knutson discovered under a tree outside the historic Hinsdale Public Library. A rainy June day didn't dampen fun on the playground at Fernwood Forest Campground, which held its annual chili cook-off and cowboy dance June 11 — complete with complimentary hats and boot-shaped glasses. (Ken Knutson photos)

Hello Hinsdale, Mass.

Population: 2,032
Year incorporated: 1804

Named for: Rev. Theodore Hinsdale, local community and religious leader

Form of government: Open town meeting (all registered voters may vote on matters rather than having elected representatives vote on behalf of the town's population)

Notable landmarks: Housatonic River, Lake Ashmere, Hinsdale Public Library (built in 1867)

Claims to fame: Lake Ashmere was named by William Cullen Bryant, poet and long-time editor of the New York Evening Post, for the ash trees lining its shores.

bed, I said, which was next on our agenda. The night was cool, but clear skies had returned. May we sleep tight, and don't let the black bears bite.