

Hinsdale, Mass., offers a glimpse back

Tucked away in the Berkshires, former mill town endures as trove of America's dawn

By Ken Knutson

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Welcome rays of sun pierced the tree canopy as Wyatt and I emerged from our tent.

We trudged through the chilly Sunday morning up to the camp latrine, enjoying the serenity as our neighbors kept cozy in their RVs.

Needing a hearty breakfast, we hopped in the car to the only local sit-down spot cooking: Ozzie's Steak & Eggs.

White clapboard homes emblematic of New England guide us into town, past the 164-year-old St. Patrick's Catholic Church, divinely positioned on Church Street.

Ozzie's occupies the ground floor of an old, towering (for Hinsdale, Mass.) three-story brick building overlooking the Housatonic River.

"Can I get French toast?" Wyatt half-whispers to me.

I feign confidence that it'll be on the menu as we're led back to our table. To my relief, it is.

"We're from Hinsdale ... (dramatic pause) Illinois!" I proclaim as our waitress arrives.

I was already growing weary of hearing myself deliver that introduction, but Jessica Yarmey seemed intrigued.

"I've lived here all my life," shared Yarmey, 31, an Ozzie's employee since 2004. She's graduate of Wahconah High School, class size 135.

"I love it here. We know our customers really well. People are really friendly," she remarked.

Ozzie's, open morning to night, was bustling, mostly with middle-aged and older folks but a couple young families, too.

After devouring our meals, we're introduced to owner Al Lussier. Traffic in the off-season can be slow, he suggested, but this time of year makes up for it.

"It's a small town, but the summer explodes with all the campers and vacationers," said Lussier, who has operated the establishment with wife Tracey for 13 years. "We do like three

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

times the business this season."

He generously presented Wyatt with an Ozzie's T-shirt, then hustled back to work before I could find out the reason an alligator serves as the restaurant's mascot.

We strolled along Maple Street, which meets Main Street to form the town's nexus.

In its halcyon days, Hinsdale was serviced by both a train and trolley, as evidenced by adjacent Depot Street. The actual depot closed in 1937.

We stand above Housatonic River, listening to the rushing water that once powered the woolen mills.

"Can we go back to camp, Dad? I want to play baseball," Wyatt said.

Perhaps Hinsdale's most prominent summer encampment is the Dan Duquette Sports Academy, started by the former general manager of the Boston Red Sox (and current Baltimore Orioles GM).

We had spied a ball field across from our campground that I speculated belonged to the academy. Deserted, it seemed an open invitation for batting practice, which we accepted.

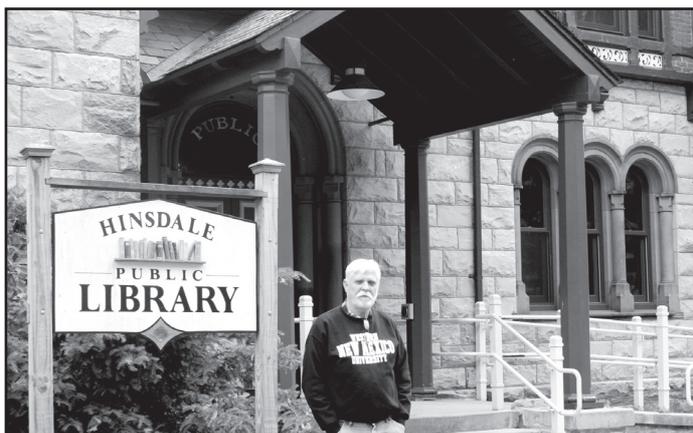
Lunchtime soon was approaching and so were stormy skies. I had almost forgotten that the Appalachian Trail meandered right through this part of the Berkshires, so we headed out to find it.

Marked by small wooden signs where it intersects Robinson Road, the rugged trail feels like sacred ground as we trudge along a few steps.

"The Appalachian Trail is very famous," I told Wyatt. "It goes a long way."

"Does it go to Florida?" he asked, citing his last out-of-state experience.

"I don't think that far," I answered. "I think it ends in



Georgia."

The Hinsdale Trading Co. was next on our itinerary. The outpost is another of the general store-type shops that dot the New England landscapes: a miniature grocery on one side, short order food service on the other.

Manning the lunch counter is proprietor Mike Ciaburri, a former employee who accepted the invitation to purchase it eight years ago.

He testified to town's past glory as we wait for our pizza.

"This used to be a big mill town. We made blankets for the troops during World War I. The population was like 20,000 — mostly sheep," he quipped.

I longed to tread the Old Mill trail nearby to see the factory ruins, but deteriorating weather made that a dicey proposition. We pass yet another general store on the way back to camp. We'd be deep in our sleeping bags tonight.

The next morning, before hitting the road, we stop by the Hinsdale Public Library. There we meet library director and Hinsdale, Mass. native Tom Butler.

"We lost our town historian last year. He was 98,"

Butler said, before demonstrating his own solid grasp of local lore.

The railroad's construction along the river in the 1840s compelled the center of town to shift from its previous site on higher ground.

"They moved the church down here on rollers. It was such a feat that they said, 'We're leaving the parsonage up there,'" Butler related with a smile.

The rails moved a lot of wool, but also served as the de facto dividing line between Irish immigrant laborer dwellings and the stately homes of the British-American management.

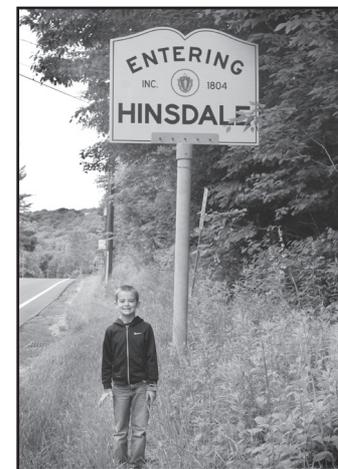
I learned that the decaying specimen Wyatt and I saw yesterday were the remains of the once majestic Shady Villa, built 1819 by Major Ichabod Emmons.

The housing market's been on the rise of late, Butler remarked.

"This is affordable, and a lot of New Yorkers have moved up here for second homes. That shot the real estate prices up high," he said. "We've had a little boom in the last two or three years."

Butler said he has no plans to leave.

"I've done my share of



Mike Ciaburri, owner of Hinsdale Trading Co., and Tom Butler, director the Hinsdale Public Library, both have deep roots in Hinsdale, Mass. and talked about the town's heritage as a mill town. With a population around 2,000, Hinsdale is one of the smaller "hill towns" surrounding the regional hub of Pittsfield. (Ken Knutson photos)

traveling," he said. "I trekked all around the country and had a ball. And then came back."

So much more to explore here, but our itinerary beckons. Hinsdale, N.H., here we come.

Hello Hinsdale, Mass

Population: 2,032
Year incorporated: 1804

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

Places of interest: section of Appalachian Trail; homestead of Israel Bissel, who rode with Paul Revere to warn citizens of approaching British troops

Special events: Sept. 24 craft fair, Dec. 19 Festival of Trees, biweekly car and motorcycle shows throughout the summer

Local talent: former major leaguers Jeff Reardon and Turk Wendell (Wahconah High School grads)