



# SENSE OF PLACE

*Electric Lake: Oneonta's Forgotten Gem*

By Jim Loudon

(Square Circle Press, soft cover, 56 pages, \$16.95)

reviewed by John Rowen

In *Electric Lake*, Jim Loudon uses recollections and illustrations to chronicle the creation, heyday and decline of a clever bit of engineering in Oneonta, New York.

Loudon, author of two books on local railroads, is well suited to telling the story of a 50 acre pond that grew to be named "Electric Lake." He is an Otsego County resident, a SUNY Oneonta graduate and dedicated historian of the technology and people of Otsego County and Oneonta.

In 1897, Oneonta was experiencing what Loudon calls an "ever-growing demand for electricity." Demand was driven by the rapid growth of the Delaware and Hudson (D&H) Railroad and its railroad shops, electrification of the Oneonta trolley and many other new uses for electricity such as street lights.

Although much of the D&H freight was coal, Frank Miller, Marquis Keys, George W. Lewis and A.O. Miller came up with a clever power source, a source that foreshadowed modern efforts to develop green power. They acquired 50 acres of farmland on the eastern end of Oneonta, built a dam, powerhouse, other supporting structures and created a large pond.

Local residents soon nicknamed the pond "Electric Lake." Along with providing hydroelectric power, the Lake had picnic groves and boat launches, provided winter employment through ice harvesting by the Oneonta Ice Company and offered some ice skating in winter.

The powerhouse and lake were bought by Associated Electric and Gas, which would later become New York State Electric and Gas. In 1954, the utility discontinued generating power at the lake. It appears from Loudon's text that the utility drained the Lake in the same year. In the 1970's, the last vestiges of the dam and powerhouse were razed during construction of Interstate 88. The

remainder of the undisturbed lake bed is now covered with grasses, brush and trees.

Loudon offers information on how to find remnants of the Lake and dam. The remnants include some retaining walls and the dam sluice gates. Near book's end, he presents four pairs of photographs. In each, the top photograph is a historic view; the bottom is a present day photograph taken by Loudon from a point as close as possible to the point in the historic view.

*Electric Lake* includes nearly 60 black and white maps, satellite photographs, old postcards and modern photographs to show how the place looked then and now. A few maps and satellite photographs were confusing at first glance but became clearer after reading the text and looking closely at the details. Square Circle Press publisher Richard Vang worked with Loudon to design an appealing cover with colored illustrations.

Most of the book describes the design and construction of the Lake and the powerhouse and what remains of the place. Loudon also describes the only death at the Lake, when 12 year-old George Brown drowned, in 1907, in the race downstream of the dam.

My favorite part of Loudon's text is the one page chapter, "Electric Lake Memories." In this chapter, he describes how the place. He includes his own "fond memories of Electric Lake, where as a boy of five I recall fishing with my dad . . . in a big flat-bottomed boat" and the recollections of others.

At the end of this chapter, Loudon includes an anecdote from Wayne Wright about how a large snapping turtle wandered into the Wright family's yard of, seeking a new home, after the Lake was drained. The family captured the turtle, loaded it into a truck and gently released it in another local lake.

In *Electric Lake*, Loudon does for the Lake something similar to what the Wrights did for the turtle. He carefully preserves a sense of the place so it, too, will live on, in history. 🐢