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“Prisons, Nature, and the Olympics: Housing Athletes and Convicts at Lake Placid, New York, 1972-1990”

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In the spring of 1990, after a year of debate, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, responding to pressure from residents and local Congressman David O’Brien Martin, withdrew a plan to expand the overcrowded Federal Correctional Institution at Ray Brook, New York, seven miles from Lake Placid, in the heart of the Adirondack Park. The medium-security prison, which had opened in September 1980, was operating at double capacity in 1990. By that time, Ray Brook’s federal prison had witnessed a number of escapes, and like prisons around the country, was confronting the AIDS epidemic. Local residents banded together in opposition to expanding a facility that only ten years earlier many had hailed as the solution to their region’s economic woes. While the prison played an important role in the regional economy, by 1990, many residents considered expanding the facility too high a price to pay for an economic boost.

Fifteen years earlier, though, when Lake Placid was preparing to host the 1980 Winter Olympic Games, construction of the athletes’ housing in Ray Brook, which was later converted to the federal prison, sparked a storm of controversy. Among the problems and questions that construction of the “Olympic Prison” provoked, one centered on the relationship between the prison and the Adirondack environment. The prison plan, hatched largely in secret, sparked a heated public conversation about the proper balance between economic development and environmental preservation in the Adirondack Park. Determining the prison’s place in the

complex fabric of the Adirondack Park forced residents and non-residents alike to grapple with their often contradictory and conflicting ideas about nature, the environment, the Park, and economic development.

Two years after the IOC awarded Lake Placid the right to host the 1980 Winter Olympics, organizers still had no concrete plan for housing the Olympic athletes. After much difficulty, in May 1976 local Republican Congressman Robert McEwen arranged a meeting between officials from the Lake Placid Olympic Organizing Committee and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (explain a bit about the problem of after-use). By November, Olympic organizers and federal prison officials had selected a 175-acre tract of land inside the constitutionally protected State Forest Preserve in the hamlet of Ray Brook. Under the deal reached between the two sides, the new facility's "primary use" would be as athletes' housing, and its "secondary" (and permanent) use would be as a federal medium-security prison. To build a federal prison on State Forest Preserve land, though, would require either an amendment to the state constitution, or condemnation and purchase of the land by the federal government. To avoid the thorny issue of amending the constitution, the state agreed to sell the land to the federal government, which it did, for one dollar, in June 1977.

The public conversation over the "Olympic Prison" began shortly after men operating bulldozers, chainsaws, and woodchippers began to reshape Ray Brook residents' collective backyard in the summer of 1977. The beginning of the construction (on land that had been a popular recreation spot for decades) caught many local residents by surprise, prompting officials to convene a town hall meeting. Many residents' concerns about the prison revolved around three issues: local autonomy, property values, and quality of life. Many complained that no public hearings had been held prior to construction; Dr. Edward Hixson complained that neither

Olympic nor federal officials had made any “effort to even talk to or explain things to local people. They railroaded through a prison into the area which is an environmental disaster.” Hixson stated that he was “not afraid of getting murdered in my bed by escaped prisoners,” but rather was “more upset by the impact of the prison itself on the surroundings.” Even though officials promised that the prison would not cause any major changes in residents’ lives, Hixson and others claimed that property values in the area had declined by 50%, and noted that with the prison rising in their backyard, many were having trouble selling their properties.

Middle class ideas about quality of life also colored the concerns of local residents. Many complained about the unnatural sounds of heavy machinery coming from the construction site. Residents also worried that the prison would have a long-term adverse effect on their daily lives. Bela Ward noted that the construction had blocked access to several homes and camps and to a number of popular hiking, fishing, and camping spots. Many also worried about higher property taxes, which officials promised would not result. Mrs. Irving Hunt complained that her family could see the lights from the construction site. Officials promised that once complete, the prison would be virtually invisible, screened from view by trees and by what they called “a special type of lighting.” They also promised that “high-class criminals” would occupy the prison and that living near it would be like living next to a “country club.”

The promise of over 200 new jobs, however, caused many residents to temper their initial worries and concerns. Hunt, expressing resignation that the prison would be a reality, stated that she and her family would “have to take the federal government at its word,” but that they were “just a little nervous.” Ray Brook resident Warner Dietz summed up the feelings of many when he stated, “if this has to be the manner in which Olympic housing is built, then we’ll just be quiet about it.” Phil Capone noted that he was not “overjoyed at having a federal prison next door,”

but that ultimately “it will be a boon to the local economy.” This ambivalence, though, would turn to anger as the prison became a destructive force in the local environment.

At the town hall meeting, officials had reassured residents that construction crews were following all state and federal environmental regulations. A June 23 editorial in the *Lake Placid News*, however, pleaded with officials to reconsider the prison plan in the interest of saving the Adirondack environment: “You may wonder...why some things are worth protecting, and others aren’t? If the prison director wanted his penitentiary near the city, why wasn’t Jones Beach condemned?” However, the pleas of the paper, local residents and state environmental officials concerned about the health of the community and environment fell on deaf ears. In August 1977 federal officials unveiled plans for sewage treatment and removal at the new prison, which called for the construction of “lagoons” to be placed less than 200 feet from Ray Brook stream and within 1000 feet of private homes. Local residents erupted with anger. Phil Capone noted that the lagoons would be only 300 feet from his home and from those of his neighbors. Dozens of local residents signed a petition calling for the lagoon plan to be scrapped, citing the need for a healthy environment and concerns about foul odors, visual degradation, pollution, and over-development leading to reductions in property values. The *Lake Placid News* went on the attack, accusing federal officials of having a “lack of concern for Ray Brook’s health and welfare” and criticizing officials who were tolerating “the legal rape of Ray Brook.” The editorial concluded by telling prison officials to go “jump in their own lagoon” and praised local residents and officials for their “firm stand opposing the siting of the fecal facility.” (mention that the issue was eventually resolved by tying the prison’s sewage to the sewage treatment plant at Saranac Lake)

If the sewage issue hadn't been bad enough, dysfunctional planning and construction delays compelled contractors and construction workers at the prison site to cut corners, which resulted in massive environmental destruction in the Ray Brook area in the summer and fall of 1977. By late summer, residents began to notice that the waters of Ray Brook, Oseetah Lake, the Saranac Lakes, and other local ponds, streams, and wetlands were muddier and browner than usual. Runoff and siltation from the construction site, compounded by severe summer storms, sent 400 tons of sediment into the area's watercourses and clean water supplies. Environmentalists and residents feared long-term damage to the area, and environmental officials predicted that the runoff and resulting siltation would cause significant problems for years.

The Adirondack Park Agency (APA) released a study in September 1977 entitled "Ray Brook Federal Prison Site and Environmental Impact." Scientists Jim Hill and Ray Curran noted that so much sediment had washed into the region's waterways that in spots it was visible with the naked eye from half a mile away. However, the damage was not only aesthetic, as sedimentation also contributed to the deaths of scores of fish and other aquatic life, and to the destruction of breeding grounds for those same organisms. High amounts of sediment also covered rocks and plants, threatening birds and other wildlife. APA officials also noted that in addition to damage done to non-human nature, the runoff also jeopardized the health of local residents, as the state received "reports of orange-colored water coming through the faucets in the areas served by Ray Brook." The scientists blamed the destruction on dysfunctional organizers and construction officials in a hurry to meet Olympic deadlines. After the federal government began withholding construction money in October, officials at the site reported that men were working to repair and prevent any further damage (steps taken included installing large sediment basins & stabilization of loose dirt by mulching, seeding, and the placement of mesh

around the site). Nevertheless, the damage had been done, causing APA official Dick Persico to call the destruction at Ray Brook “one of the environmental tragedies of the Olympics.” This tragedy also revealed the fault lines in ideas about nature in the Adirondacks. Many residents, it seemed, had trouble reconciling the need for jobs with the potential for environmental degradation. While many residents were deeply troubled by the destruction, few to none called for the project to be abandoned.

The controversy surrounding the prison plan eventually spread outside the Lake Placid region and expanded beyond issues of environmental protection, property values, and quality of life. Clergy from across New York, along with numerous social justice and religious organizations, including environmentalists, joined forces and formed STOP (Stop the Olympic Prison) in New York City in April 1978. STOP supporters voiced numerous complaints about the prison, including its remote location; violation of the Olympic spirit by housing athletes in a prison; the use of a prison as a tool of economic development; the racial disparity between corrections officers and convicts; and the secret manner in which the prison was planned, among others. Prison opponents argued that “to ship these mostly poor, non-white, inner-city, unemployed youthful males 350 miles north to the high peaks area of the Adirondack Mountains effectively removed from family ties to be guarded by rural white mountain folks in search of ‘recession proof’ federal civil service jobs is absurd, repressive, and racist.” Included among the issues discussed in the public conversation over the prison was its relationship with the Adirondack environment and its place in the Adirondack Park.

Supporters of the prison generally argued that the Adirondack environment provided a natural setting for an institution such as a prison. Many asserted that the Adirondack environment itself would serve as an agent of rehabilitation and reform. A June 1978 editorial in

the *Watertown Daily Times* critical of the prison opposition noted that since the Adirondacks had once been home to “tuberculosis hospitals, drug centers, and retarded children’s hospitals,” that the region “would be just as therapeutic for them (convicts & their loved ones) as it is for thousands who flock here year-round seeking comfort in our beautiful surroundings.” The editorial continued: “Why, it might be asked, is a place so desirable as a vacationland, not good enough for the unfortunate souls who are society’s transgressors.” Addressing the prison’s detractors, the *Times* concluded, “What ironic twist of logic makes these organized churchgoers think that keeping prisoners in urban areas which spawned these crimes is more socially desirable than moving the criminals to better physical surroundings.”

In October 1978, the executive director (and later president) of the Lake Placid Olympic Organizing Committee, the Rev. J. Bernard Fell, commented that “this beautiful area is conducive to rehabilitation.” The following month, another of the prison’s local defenders, the Rev. William Hayes of St. Eustace Episcopal Church in Lake Placid, published a letter in the *North Country Catholic* wherein he argued that the Adirondack environment was naturally suited to the task of rehabilitation and reform: “From the severe sociological and psychological implications of T.B. treatment, drug rehabilitation...and the healing provided the traveler and vacationer, our area is one that is rich in human resources and personal concern. One could argue, that the purity of air and meditative quality of the surrounding mountains provide a unique setting of renewal that can only be an asset for any prison term.” Lake Placid Olympic Organizing Committee President Ronald MacKenzie carried this logic to its extreme, stating “If I were a prisoner, I couldn’t think of a better place to serve out my time than in the Adirondacks.”

This logic, which provided much of the intellectual foundation for prison supporters’ arguments as they made their case in favor of the Adirondack environment’s rehabilitative

qualities, also revealed the contradiction inherent in their ideas about nature and economic development. Adirondack residents' hostility toward what they termed "outside interference" and government regulation of nature has been a mainstay of local life for over a century. However, exceptions could be made if the "outsiders" (in this case, convicts) and the government action (in this case, the construction of the prison), provided direct and tangible economic benefits for residents. On one hand, many residents, resentful of environmental regulations, wished they could do as they pleased with their natural surroundings in order to survive (up to and including full-scale destruction). On the other hand, though, if welcoming outsiders would provide the economic relief they sought, Park residents had no trouble extolling the natural beauty of their home region, along with its supposed restorative qualities. Park residents' ideas about nature, then, could and did shift based on individual and collective convenience. For many, opening a prison in the Park was only "natural."

Prison opponents, on the other hand, argued that in addition to possessing no inherent rehabilitative or reformatory powers, the Adirondack Park was no place to build a prison. In December 1978, the Rev. Graham Hodges of Watertown (an outspoken leader of the opposition), in a speech before a group of prison opponents in Rochester, attacked this idea, which dated to the early 19th century: "Pure cold air and pine trees may cure tuberculosis, but not crime, else there would be no crime in the North Country." Hodges repeated this line in many of his attacks on the prison. In a letter to Governor Hugh Carey in June 1979, he noted, sarcastically, that soon, federal prisoners would "start coming up from New York City, aged 18-25, in handcuffs to enjoy the pure air of the North Country, which we all know has prevented any crimes whatever up here... So character-building are the pine trees and pure air of the Adirondacks that there are

no criminals at all in the beneficent hills of Clinton, Essex and Franklin Counties. So, we can expect instant rehabilitation of the young men from New York.”

Alvin Bronstein, Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union’s National Prison Project, expanded upon Hodges’s reasoning in his testimony at congressional hearings on the prison in March 1979. Bronstein asked: “What kinds of programs and activities can be provided in this remote environment that will impact positively on young blacks and Latinos from Harlem? The prisoners will certainly not be skiing in the beautiful mountains or canoeing on the rivers and lakes of the area. And if they could, would that help them achieve a crime-free life in Harlem?” Bronstein then appealed to the committee to remember the convicts’ families, many of whom would not be able to afford to visit their incarcerated loved ones: “How many black families will be able to travel all weekend from Harlem to Lake Placid, or from Boston, to spend an hour or two with their sons and brothers? What will be the positive impact on them when they are paying their costly motel bill in an Olympic-designed motel filled with white middle-class vacationers who have just returned from the ski slopes?” The Adirondack Mountains themselves, then, while providing no special path to rehabilitation, also stood as a literal and figurative barrier to convict reformation.

Many also asserted that a prison was fundamentally incompatible with a space designated as a park. The Adirondack Park Agency itself seemed to imply as much in a February 1977 report prepared for the federal government as it planned the prison construction. In the report, APA officials urged federal officials to reduce the prison’s “visual impact” by not removing existing vegetation and by constructing the facility in a way that would allow it to blend in (as much as possible) with the existing landscape. Indeed, APA officials expressed deep concern that the prison would be visible from surrounding mountaintops and roads, potentially alienating

tourists. The National Moratorium on Prison Construction, an organization within the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and one of the founding organizations of STOP, argued in early 1978 that “the Adirondack Park was established to preserve wild and other state land for recreational and conservationist uses of New Yorkers and other people...Construction and operation of a prison is totally incompatible with this concept.” Prison opponents drove this point home during the March 1979 congressional hearings. The Rev. William Sloane Coffin, an anti-prison activist and pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, argued in favor of converting the athletes’ housing to another use “which would be consistent with the recreational heritage of the Adirondacks, such as a youth hostel, or a year-round recreational center.” Coffin entered into the congressional record a letter he received from Saranac Lake resident Elizabeth Minehan, a professed opponent of the prison. In her letter, Minehan noted that “the Olympic Games are an appropriate use for our tourist based economy” and “urged the federal government to find other uses for this facility more compatible with the real needs of everyone concerned.” Another local resident, A.R. Hall, wrote to McEwen, deploring the “plan to turn this beautiful place into a prison for New York City residents” and asserting that the prison would destroy “the essence of the Adirondacks as a vacation playground.” At the same hearing, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, testifying against the prison, called it “totally alien to the natural environment” of the Adirondacks and told Congress that “there are long and cold winters up there, and there will be a lot of, perhaps, embittered and more dangerous young people coming out of there, and we’ll bear some responsibility.” Clark called the Adirondacks “an environment of James Fenimore Cooper,” and employing another literary reference, described the federal prison as “a modern *1984* facility.” Though the Adirondack Park already had two

state prisons by the late 1970s, many felt that continuing this trend both would tarnish the region's reputation as a tourist playground and hinder the task of rehabilitation.

Finally, not long before the opening of the Olympics, in December 1979, the Mohawk nation in New York announced its opposition to the prison and intention to hold demonstrations during the Games to publicize both land claims and its position on what it deemed the incompatibility between native conceptions of sport and particular uses of nature. Mohawk criticisms of the prison plan first surfaced at the 11th World Youth Festival in Havana in the summer of 1978. There, Mohawk members of the American delegation addressed the World Assembly of the Development of Sport Among Youth, and criticized the prison plan as inconsistent with Olympic ideals and Native American ideas about sport. Mohawk leaders argued that their ideas about sport emphasized a spiritual relationship to the land and the natural environment that played host to athletic competitions. Building a prison on such ground would thus violate those ideas about the sanctity of sport. To prevent the prison conversion, Mohawk leaders announced that they would be filing a land claim to the Ray Brook prison site based on two 18th century treaties (Treaty of Fort Stanwix of 1784 and the Canandaigua Treaty of 1794), which together deeded 9 million acres of land to the Iroquois in New York. Mohawk leaders asked that the facility be converted for athletic training, acid rain research, or as a convention center. For Native New Yorkers, then, the prison's incompatibility with the park involved spiritual ideas about land and sport. Their ideas about land use, though, were not that different from those of other prison opponents, who stressed the original intent of the Park in the state constitution, and the region's recreational heritage and tourist-based service economy.

On a rainy day in September 1980 federal, state, and local officials gathered to open Ray Brook's federal prison; by early 1981, the new prison had received its first complement of

permanent residents. With the prison's opening, the earlier debates and controversy regarding the prison's place inside the Adirondack Park seemed to die down. As time went on, the prison slowly became integrated into the local community and environment. Residents took jobs there; convicts enrolled in courses at local community colleges, and performed conservation work in the surrounding region; fish and wildlife returned to the once-polluted waterways; new trees grew up around the prison; and aside from the occasional escape, the federal prison in Ray Brook attracted little attention. However, a decade after its opening, the prison, designed originally to hold only 500 inmates, held 1000, and in the context of the War on Drugs and the deepening AIDS crisis, federal officials opted to expand Ray Brook. However, the ambivalence and hesitation felt by many local residents in the late 1970s had disappeared by the late 1980s. By then, residents had lived with the prison for 10 years, and many were concerned about the collateral consequences of expanding an already severely overcrowded prison in a community that contained more convicts than free residents. Fears about AIDS, fears about escapes, and fears about the unknown compelled a majority of local residents, town boards, and politicians to stand up and say no to expanding the prison, and in 1990, the federal government backed down. The prison certainly doesn't "blend in" with the Adirondack environment, but in many ways, it has become integrated into the region's "nature."

The larger significance of this story, though, is that any form of economic development inside the Adirondack Park (or any space designated as a park, for that matter) will always attract attention, questions, and controversy. The fact that this specific case involved a prison added new wrinkles to the history that logging, mining, and tourism never presented. For some, building a federal prison in the Adirondacks was a noble and natural endeavor, an extension of a long history of welcoming and treating the disadvantaged. For others, though, the prison

represented a break from a past whose foundation rested on the development and promotion of tourism and recreation. Opponents argued that tourists would stop visiting the area if it became a “penal colony,” a charge made in the early 1980s by the APA commissioner. Through the 1980s and 1990s, though, the Adirondacks became home to many more prisons, each of which generated their own questions and controversies. As the state of New York begins closing many of its prisons in the early 21st century, and the age of Adirondack prisons draws to a close, we are left to ponder what new forms of economic development will emerge to challenge our understandings of nature and the environment.