It must be something in the water. How else could a tiny town on the shores of a small lake in upstate New York claim America’s first literary superstar, a Nobel Prize-winning doctor, one of America’s greatest 19th-century painters, a Supreme Court justice and a founding director of New York City’s Museum of Modern Art? Then there are two of America’s greatest inventors and the legendary founder of America’s national pastime: baseball.
With such historic pedigree, chances are a future American president is raising her or his hand right now in Cooperstown Elementary School. About four hours by car from the Big Apple, Cooperstown has always been small and out of the way. Even now the population is only about 2,000, yet its list of notables makes cities hundreds of times bigger boil with envy. James Fenimore Cooper, the literary superstar, would probably agree it was something in the water of his beloved Lake Otsego, or Glimmerglass, as he called it in his Leatherstocking novels.

Cooper’s father, Judge William Cooper, built Cooperstown on the lake’s southern shore, where the Susquehanna, the longest river on America’s East Coast, starts its journey to Chesapeake Bay. “In 1785, I visited the rough and hilly country of Otsego, where there existed not an inhabitant, nor any trace of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road… I explored the country, formed my plans of future settlement, and meditated upon where a place of road…”

Judge Cooper sold off small plots of his new land as fast as possible and wasted no time moving his family to his purchase. When his wife refused to leave their comfortable New Jersey home for the New York wilderness, Cooper picked up her chair with her in it and deposited both in the waiting wagon.

The judge died in 1809, but if he could see Cooperstown today, he’d feel gratified. He’d find a small, prosperous, pleasant town full of 19th-century Georgians, Federal, and Victorian homes plus tall, graceful trees and green lawns: one of those towns New England is quite proud of but which people seldom credit to New York. Lake Otsego remains beautiful, and agriculture is still important.

Food for Thought

At the weekly Farmers Market, just off Main Street and next to Doubleday Field, the judge would feel right at home. Everything on sale must be produced within 50 miles (80 km) of town. It was impossible for me to resist the aromas and tastes of scones, savory pies, and fruit tarts from “English Baker” Perry Owen (“I’m from Wales, actually”). Nearby, Illysa Berg offered free samples of her delicious Painted Goat goat cheese. She and her Honduran-born husband spent their first winter in a six-meter container while they built permanent buildings first for their goats and then for themselves.

I saw several Amish families among these modern pioneers: men with long beards and tall straw hats, women in long dresses and old-fashioned bonnets. They offered everything from Emmenthal cheese (seriously good) to apples to five kinds of squash.

No Picnic

Near the outdoor historic village of the Farmers’ Museum and the New York State Historical Association is the Fenimore Art Museum, where the librarian gave me a quick biography of Cooper, explaining that while his books were wildly popular, he himself was not. Cooper took his entire family to Europe (in part to protect his royalties). Feted abroad as something like American royalty, he returned to Cooperstown expecting to be treated as America’s first environmental novel. The five volumes of Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales follow his hero, the gallant Natty Bumppo, from callow youth to old age.

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Every day, on the way back to my motel on the west side of the lake, I stopped in at Three Mile Point, a small and pleasant tree-shaded park jutting out into the lake. Cooper returned from Europe to find this point, one of his many holdings, had been used as a popular village picnic spot.

“He demanded everyone stay off his land,” said the librarian rolling his eyes. “He took the case to court and won. That didn’t exactly make him popular in town.”

Cooper’s own home became a hotel after his death in 1851, but burned to the ground in 1852. The land it stood on is a park now, with a statue of the great man gazing out across his beloved lake. He may be keeping an eye out for kids playing catch on his lawn, too, because next door sits The National Baseball Hall of Fame, present-day Cooperstown’s 800-pound gorilla.

Birthplace of Baseball and the Sewing Machine

Popular history credits Abner Doubleday with inventing America’s national pastime in a Cooperstown cow pasture, now Doubleday Field, in 1839. One hundred years later the Hall of Fame opened. Each summer, streets are...
crowded with fans old and young, and when new members of the hall are inducted, the town swells to more than 20,000.

The Coopers founded the town, but the Clarks gave it the shape seen today. Edward Clark’s family already held land in Cooperstown when, in 1851, he partnered with inventor Isaac Singer to found the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

Singer himself spent several years in Cooperstown perfecting the machinist trade he used to devise his revolutionary machine. Clark provided the business knowledge to make Singer’s creation so successful you still find one in most American homes. There really must be something in these still waters that runs deep and fertile.

Giant Hoax and Grand Opera

My favorite exhibit at the Farmers’ Museum is the Cardiff Giant. Well diggers found the three-meter “petrified giant” in a field in Cardiff, NY. Tens of thousands paid 50 cents to see it. P.T. Barnum offered at least $50,000 to rent it. Mark Twain wrote “A Ghost Story” about the giant.

It was a hoax, one of the 19th century’s greatest. A fuming atheist, George Hull, had the stone carved and planted in a cousin’s field after an argument with a fundamentalist over a passage in Genesis about giants living on the earth. When I saw it, I had to agree with the man next to me. “That,” he snorted, “wouldn’t fool my three-year-old grandson.”

The museums straddle the beautiful country road circling Lake Otsego. Going up the west side, I passed homes simple and palatial. Rich farm fields lay on the rolling hills, and road signs warn to watch for horses and buggies of the Amish farmers.

I smiled at another yellow road sign reading simply “OPERA.” “Opera” is not a word associated with country road signs in upstate New York. Apples, sweet corn, homemade jam—all, yes; opera, no. Yet, just around a bend appeared the large plain gray hall of Glimmerglass Opera. It’s one of America’s most highly regarded summer opera festivals, renowned for its innovative staging of new and little-known opera works.

Romancing the Stones

Following the road east around the lake and south back towards Cooperstown, I came to Glimmerglass State Park. In the park on a small hill overlooking the lake I found Hyde Hall. Fabulously wealthy George Clarke (no relation to the Clarks) built here so his bride, a Cooper, could be close to her family. His stately cut-stone home is one of America’s finest examples of romantic classicist architecture.
My tour guide on a slow day—just me—in early autumn was Ed, a retired teacher. We watched a solitary carpenter restoring one of the rooms. Ed whispered to me, "Ask about the ghost."

"Heard that," the carpenter said. "Matter of fact, it's just about time for her to come round. She doesn't like the summer crowds. I see her a couple of times every winter, but she never bothers me."

**Something Good Brewing**

Back in town, in the middle of Cooperstown's three blocks of downtown, I stopped at Danny's Market.

There's an old-fashioned delicatessen counter as soon as you step onto its checkerboard linoleum floor.

"Are you Danny?" I asked the guy behind the counter. He laughed, "Naa, Danny's long gone. Sold the place years ago." While he made my sandwich I asked him about the summer crowds. "Summertime, couldn't even hear your question. Line goes out the back door, round the building, and on Main Street. Crazy!" He drizzled olive oil on my sandwich's tomatoes and mozzarella, "This time of year is great." He handed my sandwich over the counter and smiled. "And in winter we close by four P.M."

I walked off the sandwich by strolling lakeside and admiring the houses lining the nearby streets. James Two of Edward Clark's grandsons left an especially deep impression on Cooperstown. Stephen C. Clark Sr. (1882–1960) turned a gym he built for the town's use into the National Baseball Hall of Fame (he built another gym to replace it). He and brother Edward Severin Clark (1870–1933) built The Otesaga hotel, now a Historic Hotel in the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Edward S., called "the Squire" because of his love of the family farm, built Fenimore House.


Just across the street is Edward's magnificent stone barn. "My brother's cow palace," Stephen muses, as he used it to anchor the Farmer's Museum. Dedicated to 19th-century agricultural life, its grounds are full of 19th-century buildings moved here and restored from around the region.

Finally, Stephen founded Cooperstown's Mary Imogene Bassett Hospital (named for a beloved town doctor). Famous for its work in rural medicine, it also fostered Dr. E. Dorrall Thomas, 1990 Nobel Laureate in Medicine for work in cell and organ transplants. "The long cold winters, absence of commuting problems, and opportunity for long discussions were conducive to our work," Dr. Thomas wrote, and they "had a deep and abiding influence on subsequent works since most of the basic concepts were laid out during that time."

Fenimore Cooper's good friend Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph and Morse Code and a leading Hudson River School painter, loved to summer near here somewhere. So did 19th-century Supreme Court Justice Samuel Nelson. I envied them.

Main Street's tourist information booth gave me a tip for my last morning. South of town, past green fields and thick forests, I came to Cooperstown's newest celebrity: the Ommegang Brewery. Putting Cooperstown's magical water to the best use possible, it produces Belgian-style ales and wins awards doing it. They offer free tours ending with a generous tasting "seminar" (for a minimal fee). I bought a few bottles of my favorites and drove leisurely back.

Before heading home I ordered another Danny's deli sandwich, as takeout, and ate it on a Main Street bench. The autumn sun felt warm. Every store around had a baseball theme. A man strolled across Main Street with his golden retriever. A breeze off the lake stirred the leaves in the trees behind me. I decided I had time for a latte from the Doubleday Café, across the street. Make that a double. Life is good in Cooperstown.

**Walls of Fame**

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