



# The Beauty of Maine's Wilderness

**Millinocket** is located in one of the most beautiful spots in the state. Gateway to the Maine woods, Millinocket has extensive four season outdoor activities and a prolific art scene. More importantly, Millinocket is a community that works together to overcome challenges and preserve their bond with the area. BY CAROL HIGGINS TAYLOR

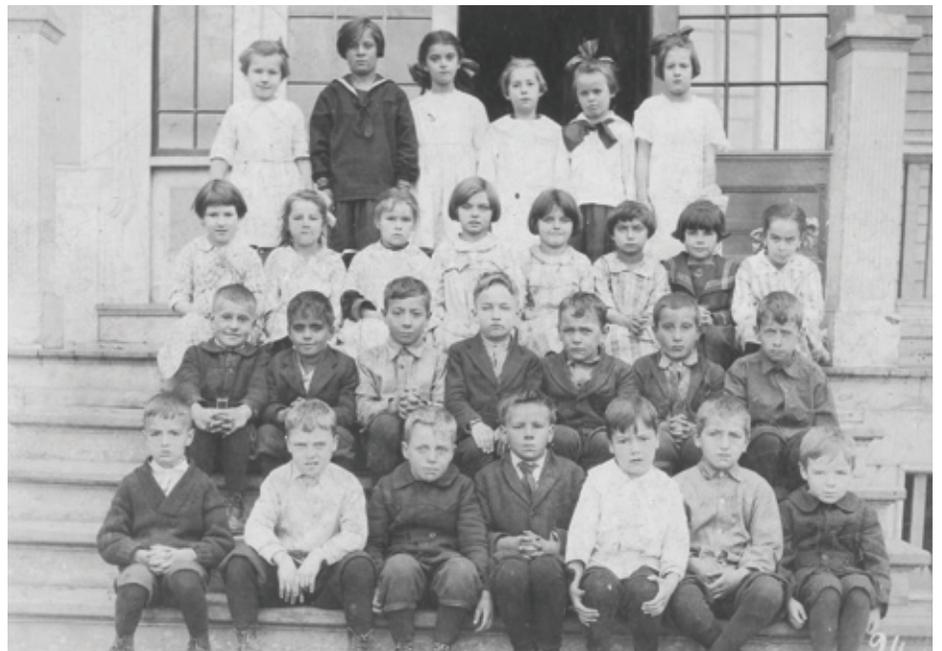
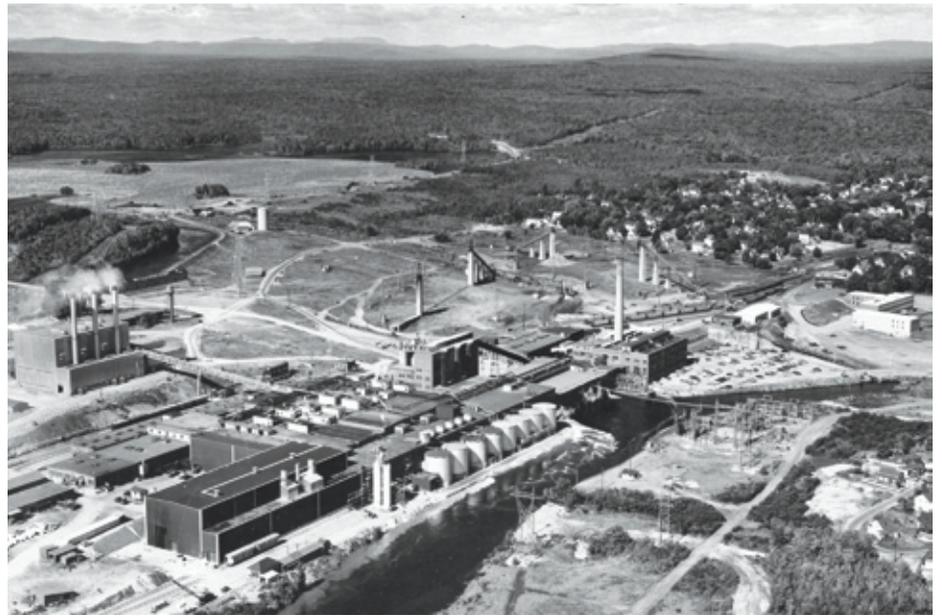
**M**illinocket is a year-round tourist destination for some and home to many others. While the town may be steeped in "doom and gloom" in the media and public's eye, the bigger story is the resilience of a community who loves their town and each other. It's a community that views the proverbial glass as half full and focuses on the positive aspects of what it means to live in Millinocket.

There is a sense of community history unlike in other places, says Jean Bod-

PHOTO: COURTESY OF BAXTER STATE PARK



A scenic view of Russell Pond, one of two backcountry campgrounds in Baxter State Park.



Top: An aerial view of the Millinocket Mill, prior to 1960. Middle: Looking down Penobscot Avenue during the 1930s. Bottom: Children from Oxford Street School in 1924.

dy, office manager at the Kathadin Area Chamber of Commerce. "It's the funniest thing that I hear all the time," she says, explaining the nuance of a community that has essentially grown up together. "Locals in conversation will say, 'down by the old Smith house' for example, as a means of direction when telling a story, and all the locals know where that is. It's the one thing that still amazes me." There is a comforting charm and warmth about this shared community history and comradery, she adds. While Boddy's husband is a native to Millinocket, she grew up in Bar Harbor and moved to the area eight years ago.

"The people are very community minded and Millinocket is a great place to raise a family," Boddy says. "It's safe and friendly. You can stroll the streets in the evening and see neighbors sitting on their front porches. It's beautiful."

a piece of maine: *millinocket*



The Blueberry Ledges Trail is one of the more leisurely trails in Baxter State Park.



Downtown Millinocket boasts multiple art galleries and museums.

One of the best-kept secrets in Millinocket is the art scene. "This area is an artist's dream," she says, and she's right. There are countless breathtaking landscapes just waiting to be memorialized. There are two successful art galleries downtown that substantiate her claim.

A walk down Main Street features businesses that have stood the test of time. The Scootic In Restaurant has been serving customers since the early 1900s and is currently employing the fifth generation of the Simon family. Ferland Jewelers has been in business since 1948. Ruthie's Hotel Terrace and Restaurant is owned by Tom and Ruth Leet, who have been running the business since 2009. Hikers love the Appalachian Trail Café, lodge, and hiking store. The lodge, a former boarding house built in 1901, has been hosting AT hikers since 1988. Fans of the Discovery Channel's *American Loggers* reality show will want to stop into the Pelletier Loggers

Family Restaurant. This logging family help put Millinocket on the map during the show's run from 2009–2012.

### HISTORY

Millinocket was inhabited for about 10,000 years by Native Americans. Thomas Fowler, the first white settler in Millinocket, arrived in 1829. He worked with his family to clear land, build a log cabin, and start a farm on the West Branch of the Penobscot River at the head of Shad Pond.

By 1837, the state of Maine census revealed that several families had followed suit and were also living in what was then known as East Indian Township No. 2. Thomas Fowler and son were hired by author Henry David Thoreau in 1846 to be guides on a trip to Mt. Katahdin. Later Thoreau would describe the area in his book titled, *The Maine Woods*.

The development of the area began to grow in 1894 when the Bangor and Aroos-

took Railroad completed its line to Houlton providing new rail service to the region. The area grew so quickly that the small township was dubbed "The Magic City" because it seemingly appeared overnight.

Five years later, in 1899, the Great Northern Paper Company was established. It was to be the largest of its kind in the country and when construction on the mill began, employment soared. In June, 500 people went to work and by August the number grew to 1,000. The Italian immigrant stonemasons who worked on the mill lived in houses which were built across the stream to accommodate them. To this day, this area of town is still known as Little Italy.

The railroad and the mill were catalysts to the economic development of the town and in 1901 the town of Millinocket was incorporated. In the Abenaki language the name Millinocket means "land with many islands," referring to beautiful Millinocket Lake.



Rafters with the New England Outdoor Center traverse the rapids.

## stats

**Incorporation Date:** March 16, 1901

**Population:** 4,506

**Population Density:** 282

**Mill Rate:** 29.60

**Median Age:** 51

**Median Household Income:**

In 2012, \$36,379

**Median Home Value:** In 2012, \$63,634

**Major Employers:**

- Millinocket Regional Hospital
- Granite Street Elementary
- Millinocket Middle School
- Stearns High School

**Major Natural Resources:**

- Baxter State Park

The success of the paper industry and the increased population brought the need for services, such as a volunteer fire department, schools, and a post office. In 1900, Millinocket's population was approximately 2,000. By 1911, it had reached 5,000, and in 1970, the population had grown to more than 7,600.

Millinocket, though a small town, remained extremely prosperous for decades, mainly because of the paper industry and its proximity to Baxter State Park; Mt. Katahdin, Maine's tallest mountain; and Moosehead Lake, Maine's largest lake.

Trouble began in the early 2000s when GNP announced its bankruptcy filing. The town struggled economically, culturally, emotionally, and mentally. Over the next few years, the fate of the mill was like a roller coaster ride. Finally, in 2008, the mill ceased operation. Any hope of

recovery was dashed when the last paper machine was auctioned off in June 2014, putting an end to the industry that built the town more than a century ago.

Losing the mill was like losing a beloved family member to many Millinocket residents, especially to those who grew up with the company and considered it akin to the "family business" because of all the generations that worked there.

The closing put a strain on the community, but Millinocket is not to be discounted.

"It's not all doom and gloom," Boddy says. "There are a lot of things happening here all year long. We have four beautiful seasons with many outdoor activities in each one. From a chamber standpoint, we just want to get people into Millinocket so they can experience the beauty of it for themselves."

## THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Millinocket is the major point of entry into the Maine woods, which is home to Baxter State Park. About 64,000 visitors enter the park every year to take advantage of its 209,644 acres of pristine wilderness. There is an activity for everyone, from sun worshipers to snow bunnies. The adventures include fishing, hiking, camping, boating, cross country skiing, and snowmobiling, to name a few.

The park is also home to Mt. Katahdin. The mountain, with an elevation of more than 5,200 feet, is situated at the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail.

Baxter State Park began as a vision of former Maine Governor Percival P. Baxter, the 53rd governor of Maine, who served from 1921-1925. Baxter enjoyed fishing and vacationing in the Maine woods during his childhood, and had great affection for the land and wildlife. This passion facilitated the donation of his first piece of land in 1931. Over the years he added various parcels until his final acquisition in 1962, bringing the park's area to 201,018 acres.

"We are lucky to have this park," says Jean Hoekwater, park naturalist at Baxter State Park. "One individual made it all possible. And we work hard to adhere to his vision."

Governor Baxter ensured the protection of the park by leaving two sizeable trust funds in place for the operation and maintenance to prevent the need for state funding. A three-person authority consisting of the attorney general, the director of the Maine Forest Service, and the commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, make up the Baxter State Park Authority, which has full power in the control and management of the park and in the exercise of all trust obligations. The authority has purchased and been gifted additional acreage to increase the park to its current size of 209,644 acres.

Baxter State Park is a source of community cohesiveness and consistency in Millinocket. "The park is one of the only things that has remained the same over the years," says Hoekwater. "We have been a constant in the area. Our job is to prevent disturbance of animals and plants and to preserve that balance. We put preservation first and recreation second."

The New England Outdoor Center (NEOC), founded by Matt Polstein in

1982, helps visitors and residents enjoy Millinocket's surroundings to the fullest. Considered to be one of the pioneers of Maine whitewater rafting, Polstein brings enthusiasm to the outdoor adventures on which he embarks.

Henry David Thoreau's book, *The Maine Woods*, is celebrating its 150-year anniversary in 2014. The NEOC has facilitated guided trips retracing parts of

time to raft the Penobscot River, first time back-country skiing or snowmobiling."

Polstein's mission is evidence of his love of the area. The goal of his business is to help people explore the outdoors while gaining an understanding and respect for the responsible shared use of the Maine woodlands.

"We get a great response from our guests," Polstein says. "And no mat-

**"There are a lot of things happening here all year long. We want to get people into Millinocket so they can experience the beauty of it for themselves." — Jean Boddy**

Thoreau's three separate journeys into the heart of the Maine woods. These tours allow people to take a sneak peak at history and gives them a chance to compare the setting of today with that in Thoreau's book, says Polstein.

"There is so much opportunity in the area," he says. "People experience a lot of 'firsts' with us, with regard to outdoor activities—first time in a canoe or kayak, first time on an overnight camping trip, first

ter what images we put on the website, people are always surprised at just how beautiful the area is when they see it themselves first hand."

## ARTS

Millinocket has more to offer than outdoor activities. There is also an arts scene in this picturesque town.

"We are walking around on sacred ground and trying to keep up with the

Katahdin has inspired and challenged hikers for generations.





This photo: Ferland Jewelers has been in business since 1948. Below: North Light Gallery is adding to Millinocket's art scene.



past," says Marsha Donahue, artist and owner of North Light Gallery. She's referring to Frederick Edwin Church, the landscape artist who painted Millinocket in the 1800s.

"This arts movement keeps going forward here in Millinocket," Donahue says. She has more than 40 artists represented in her gallery, including some locals. The artwork ranges from painting, metalwork, sculpture, carving, drawing, collage, ceramic, photography, and leatherworking. The public response to the gallery has been one of appreciation and surprise.

"Visitors are often surprised that there are galleries in town," she says. "I love having it here because it represents something that isn't closing and that captures the beauty of the area. When things are tough, I feel a responsibility to the people here."

Mooseprints Gallery, owned by Mark Picard and Anita Mueller, displays photographs of Millinocket's spectacular landscape and wildlife. Picard is an internationally published wildlife photographer and in 2012 was named Maine Sportsman Artist of the Year. The U.S. Postal Service uses one of his images on a Maine postal stamp.

The couple offers the North Maine Woods Photography Workshop series. Mueller finds the same element of surprise as Donahue does with her gallery visitors. "People find the gallery a nice unexpected treat when they come to town," she says.

Mueller credits the local community for her positive attitude. "The community is warm and giving and will do anything for you," she says. "They have suffered loses and the town has changed a great deal, but the people help each other and care for each other. They are hard-working and proud."

The fiber arts have a presence in Millinocket as well. The NEOC offers Fiber Retreats for "Fiberistas," says Sarah Hunt, Fiber Arts Retreat coordinator at NEOC. Designed to provide creative rejuvenation and connections with others who embrace the craft, the Fiber Retreats attract people from all over the world.

"We've had people come from Sweden, Texas, and the United Kingdom to the retreats," Hunt says. "There are workshops, they can knit, sip wine or tea, and really create their own experience." □

PHOTOS: (TOP) LAURA MANZO; (BOTTOM) MARSHA DONAHUE



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