

Centenary of Swami Vivekananda at Thousand Island Park, NY July 21-23, 1995

A Tribute from the Thousand Island Park Landmark Society to
Commemorate the Centenary of Swami Vivekananda at
Thousand Island Park by Susan T. Turri

"Desire, ignorance, and inequality – this is the trinity of bondage... Freedom is the goal of the universe." - Swami Vivekananda

A Mystery of Time, Place & Culture

If you listen carefully on a summer day, you can hear "magical sounds" drifting down from behind the Tabernacle. At dusk, sounds of bells and hymns of praise in ancient Sanskrit rise from a peaceful sanctuary among the rocks and pines. These meditations are reminiscent of a time, a century ago, when Thousand Island Park was a summer community devoted to the fostering of religious, social and family values.

Vivekananda was and is an integral part of that tradition:

Who was Swami Vivekananda and why does a cottage bear his name? Why do millions of people belonging to different faiths follow his teachings and those of his great teacher, Sri Ramakrishna? How did a Victorian cottage on the St. Lawrence River achieve such a spiritual significance?

100 Years Ago

Swami Vivekananda's arrival at the Main Dock of Thousand Island Park a century ago, on June 18, 1895, was the result of a convergence of events that would have a lasting effect on millions of people, both here and abroad. He came to the Park at the invitation of Miss Mary Elizabeth Dutcher, an artist and cottage owner who had attended his spiritual classes in New York City and was struck by his strength of purpose.

In preparation for Swami Vivekananda's arrival, Miss Dutcher added a wing to her cottage for his comfort and privacy. The three-story addition housed a guest room on the lowest floor, a classroom on the first floor, and the Swami's room on the top floor which opened onto a porch with a magnificent view of the river. "WELCOME VIVEKANANDA" read the banner that greeted

him as he entered the cottage for the beginning of a remarkable seven weeks. Today, one hundred years later, the cottage stands much as it was then, revered as a holy place by followers of his teachings.

"Sisters and Brothers of America"

This young and remarkable philosopher-monk, Swami Vivekananda, was only 32 years old at the time of his visit to the Park, but he was already a celebrity in America. A follower of Sri Ramakrishna (a Hindu sage who preached the harmony of all religions and the universality of truth), Vivekananda had arrived in the United States only two years earlier, in July 1893. He had journeyed from India to Chicago at the urging of his fellow monks and admirers to represent Hinduism at the World Parliament of Religions. An unknown monk he had not been invited to attend this convergence of all the world's faiths nor, certainly, to speak. However, Professor J. H. Wright of Harvard University, through a chance meeting with Vivekananda, was so impressed by this young man's depth of knowledge and charisma that he arranged an invitation for the Swami to address the entire Congress.

His humble – yet electrifying – address came at the end of an opening day of sectarian speeches and completely changed the tenor of the conference, a conference which is generally regarded as marking the birth of the inter-faith movement. With the simple words, "Sisters and Brothers of America," he introduced his all-inclusive message of universal tolerance and acceptance. He prayed: "As different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea; so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." Ending with an inspired plea for the end of sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism, he was given a standing ovation. As the New York Herald noted: "He is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the parliament."

A Welcome Retreat

Exhausted by nearly two strenuous years of lecturing throughout the U.S., Vivekananda was grateful to find refuge at Thousand Island Park. Here was a place that, from its inception, had encouraged the exchange of ideas in a setting conducive to contemplation and relaxation. The Park was only 20 years old in 1895, yet it had already attracted enough people to form a community of 600 cottages. Its several thousand summer residents supported a program of recreation for both mind and body, attracting celebrated preachers and speakers as prominent as Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglas.

Vivekananda, rejuvenated by the Park, gathered his spiritual power to train the twelve students, who followed him here. His thoughts and teachings were transcribed into the collection, "Inspired Talks," a compilation of ideas that married the East and the West; and which joined the spirituality of Ramakrishna with his own deep concern for the political freedom and material

well-being of humanity. Unlike the religious mystics of India who were often blind to the suffering of mankind, he taught the virtue of "seeing God with one's eyes open."

Vivekananda was quick to observe the contrast between America's material wealth, scientific knowledge, youthful vigor and spiritual skepticism, on the one hand, and India's ancient philosophies of self-control and contemplation amid physical poverty on the other. He felt that the American promise of dignity and hope for all could become the social embodiment of his spiritual beliefs. What the Americans lacked in spiritual wisdom, they compensated for in "social" advances: hospitals, schools and a society devoid of the "caste" system he so detested. "We will teach them our spirituality, and assimilate what is best in their society," he wrote to his friends in India. He became increasingly aware of the need for social change in his homeland: "What India needs is not religion, but bread."

The Call of India

Swami said that he was "at his best" at Thousand Island Park. The ideas he refined and expressed there grew, during the years that followed, into institutions both in India and elsewhere. Yet, this work would take its toll. Upon Vivekananda's return to India in January 1897, he was denounced by some for his new social and humanitarian teachings, but welcomed by those who believed in him as the herald of a new age for his country.

Now back at home (though in failing health), he founded the Ramakrishna Order of India, dedicated to the realization of Truth through service to humanity. He devoted his time and energy to improve the condition of India's masses. He died less than six years later, at the age of 39, exalted by the credo of his mission: "In work is the Worship of God." In but a short life, he had spiritually reached so many. Indeed, his humanistic views would profoundly influence generations of individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi who openly acknowledge his own debt to Vivekananda's ideals.

The Flame Burns Yet

Today the Ramakrishna Order of India founded by Vivekananda for the "service of God in Man" has more than 1,000 monks throughout the world, and millions of followers in India and abroad. In India the Order is best known for its humanitarian and educational efforts, operating schools and hospitals, providing social welfare and relief work while also conducting religious and temple activities. Here in the West, its role has been that of spiritual teaching and guidance, with 13 Vedanta (Hindu) Centers in North America, 1 in Argentina and 5 in Europe.

The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York has resumed use of the original Dutch cottage as a summer retreat, and each summer hundreds of students come to study the ways of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Thousands more have made pilgrimage to this site, sacred to many of Vivekananda's followers. Yet, for over fifty years after Swami left here, the cottage had returned to obscurity. It was not until 1947 that Swami Nikhilananda, the leader of the

Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, came to the Park searching for the site of Vivekananda's stay. He found the cottage in state of total disrepair. Setting an early example for the Park, and in recognition of the heritage of place, he arranged to purchase the cottage and had it completely restored to its condition at the time of Vivekananda's visit.

The Torch is Passed

It is now Swami Adiswarananda who has become the spiritual leader of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center and who conducts the summer retreats. He is the present representative of Vivekananda in the Park. Born in Calcutta in 1925, he joined the monastic Order of Sri Ramakrishna in 1954. He served as a Professor at one the Order's colleges, and later as Joint-Editor of Prabuddha Bharata: Awakened India, a monthly journal on religion and philosophy. He came to the United States in 1968 to assist Swami Nikhilananda (who died in the Park in 1973). A frequent lecturer, Swami Adiswarananda has become a valued and admired member of the Park.

The Circle of Life

Tomorrow when we hear the sounds of ancient Sanskrit hymns drifting down from behind the Tabernacle we will again reminded that Thousand Island Park is more than a summer resort; it is a spiritual place with a wonderful heritage of unity that was truly enhanced by the visit of a great teacher who came here and stayed on in spirit, teaching us that we are all one.

"Various religions are but flowers of different colors which we should tie with the cord of love into a beautiful bouquet and offer at the altar of Truth." - Swami Nikhilananda