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# Let's Go to the Beach!

BY DAN BERGGREN

*"...in every curving beach, in every grain of sand there is the story of the earth."*—Rachel Carson

**What is it about sandy places** near water that draws people? No matter where they're located, the results of weathering and erosion are very popular around the world. Narrow or wide, these gently sloping strips of land lie along the edges of oceans, lakes, or even rivers. There are world famous ones on the Greek Islands, Virgin Islands, Hawaiian Islands, the Riviera, the Maldives, and the Seychelles. And there are small, little known places that no one mentions for fear of giving away a family vacation secret.

New York State, with over 7,600 freshwater lakes, ponds, and reservoirs—and more than 70,000 miles of rivers and streams—is bountiful in beaches. There are ocean beaches like Cooper's, Jones, and Coney Island; and beaches on the Great Lakes—the eponymous Ontario Beach and Sunset Bay Beach on Lake Erie. Even the Finger Lakes have beaches, like Otsego's Glimmerglass State Park. Twenty-five of the Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) campgrounds in the Catskills and Adirondacks have beaches, and two are even named for the beaches—Golden Beach and Moffitt Beach. There are municipal beaches that are extremely well populated, like Lake George's Million Dollar Beach and out-of-the-way ones like the town beach at Minerva Lake (more on that later). One of most unique and remote locations comes at the end of a DEC-maintained hiking trail to Blue Ledge in the Adirondacks, known for its steep cliff that is always in the shade. A sandy beach right alongside the mighty Hudson River awaits the hiker at the end of the 2.5-mile trail—it's not much bigger than a large living room. It's the perfect spot to rest, enjoy the scenery, listen to the roar of the river, and depending on the season, see a raft or kayak go bouncing along the rapids.

Okay, it's time for a true confession: I was a beach boy. No, not one of The Beach Boys who formed in the early 1960s and still perform almost six decades later, but a boy of 14 who worked at a beach one summer long

ago. Recently, I returned to Donnelly Beach on Minerva Lake and reminisced about that time and place. Essex County's Town of Minerva had a program that ran throughout July and August, giving two weeks of employment to two teenagers at a time. More importantly, it gave us the opportunity to learn about working, having responsibilities, earning a wage, and developing a sense of civic duty. Each morning, I'd arrive at seven to pick up trash, rake the beach, check fireplaces in the campground, and restock supplies in the bathhouse and bathrooms. After helping the lifeguard carry and position the rescue boat, I could turn my attention to one of the longer term projects like painting picnic tables or keeping the lake trail clear. Of course, there was also the opportunity to take a midday dip, then have a sandwich brought from home, or splurge on French fries and a hot dog from "The Stand," while visiting with friends. What more could a teenager ask for? And as a bonus, with the money I earned from that summer's beach boy duties, I bought my first guitar.

The good people of Minerva Township didn't always have a beach. In fact, there wasn't even a lake. It was in 1930 that the Town Board voted to approve construction of a dam on Jones Brook to form a lake on property owned by the local Baptist minister, the Reverend F. M. LaBar. The following year, work was begun on this project. It gave much needed employment to Depression-era families, beginning with cutting trees and excavation that left behind a couple of islands in the midst of this local wonder.

Francis Donnelly, who had come from a family of public servants, was assessor at the time. A few years later in 1934, he became Town Supervisor, an office he held for 46 years—the record for the longest consecutively serving elected official in the nation. He spent much time and energy on the project, including having the beach area changed from the northwest end of the lake, where car access was rather steep, to the southern shore. This required sand to be drawn out on the ice in winter, to fall into place during the next

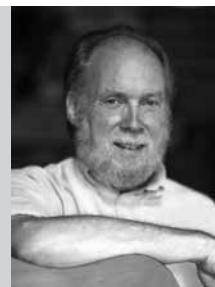
spring's thaw. In 1958, the beach was dedicated to Francis and renamed Donnelly Beach.

A few families have small camps near the beach, and others have been coming for generations to set up their tent or camper, but day use of the beach is the biggest attraction. In addition to things you'd expect like swimming and boating, there are tennis and basketball courts, picnic tables under the pines, pavilions to host gatherings like family or alumni reunions, a bandstand where concerts are held, a playground with swings, and on special occasions, firework displays that originate on one of the islands in the middle. There is "the cove," where boys and girls demonstrate their bravery by swinging from a rope into the cold, deep water. At "the point," you can get away from the crowd to have a quiet conversation and maybe a kiss. A peaceful trail leads down near the dam that made this lake possible. In the winter, there are ice-skating and hockey.

Donnelly Beach is not only an intensely personal memory of my beach boy days, it's a friendly public place I still visit and enjoy, whether it's to see friends and former neighbors, present programs for the historical society, or give concerts in the bandstand. The pride and hard work of all those who care for this place is apparent. Francis Donnelly would be pleased to see its progress and to know how many people continue to enjoy his efforts and those of the hard-working folks of Minerva. ▼

Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was

a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit [www.berggrenfolk.com](http://www.berggrenfolk.com) to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



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