

# Area tourism takes off

Democrat and Chronicle  
July 1, 1998



JAMIE GERMANO staff photographer

**Taste test** Michelle Sidles, left, of Canandaigua and Jesse Hueber, center, of South Beach, Fla., sample wines after touring Widmer Wine Cellars. Area wineries have become tourist destinations in recent years.

## New attractions lure more visitors

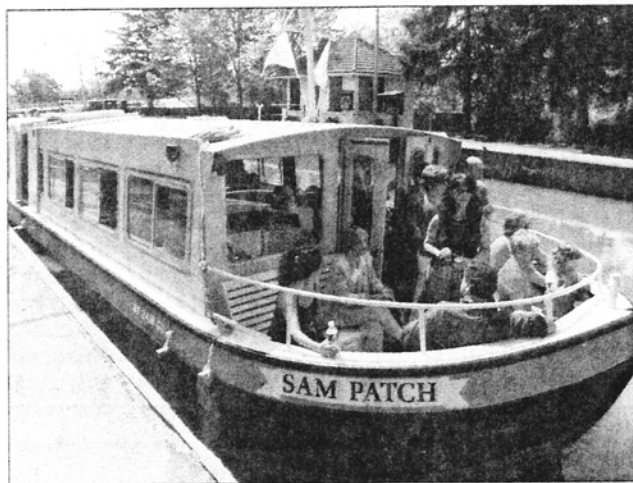
BY STAFF WRITER  
SHERRIE NEGREA

Vicky Miller and her two daughters visited Rochester on business two weeks ago, returned home to Albany and promptly canceled their summer vacation to Cape Cod.

They want to come back to Rochester instead.

"I love the Cape, but I'd rather have different opportunities for my kids," says Miller, conference coordinator for the Independent Bankers Association of New York State. "Just taking my kids to Wegmans would be a trip. We don't have a Wegmans down here."

Wegmans Food Markets Inc. may not be on the must-see itinerary for most tourists, but today there are more attractions than ever to draw visitors to the Rochester area.



ANDREA MELENDEZ staff photographer

**A three-hour tour** Members of the Choo Choo Boogaloo group visiting Rochester wait on the Sam Patch before it leaves for a cruise down the canal.

After years of promoting its wineries, museums and waterways, the Finger Lakes region now lures 8 million tourists annually. Last year,

those visitors spent \$1.9 billion in the 14-county area.

The importance of tourism to the economy has prompted local officials to

push several key projects aimed at attracting visitors, ranging from a proposed ferry service between Rochester and Toronto to a women's heritage trail.

This month, the region will be filled with tourists, as the 150th anniversary of the first women's rights convention, the Hill Cumorah pageant and the Empire State Games get under way. The combination of these events could make 1998 a record year for tourism.

Celebrate '98, the group planning the women's rights celebration in Seneca Falls, is hoping to attract between 50,000 and 100,000 people.

"There's no question in my mind that this is just the beginning of what will happen in the future," says Mary Anne Krupsak, the organization's president.

At least 650 media packets about the event have been mailed to newspapers and magazines across the country, in an effort to boost attendance.

"Once people see what we have to offer here, they will come back again," says Spike Herzig, president of the Finger Lakes Association Inc., a tourism agency in Penn Yan, Yates County. "If they don't come back in the fall, they'll come back next year."

### Tourism bandwagon

Downsizing has hurt major industries across the country, and more cities are turning to tourism to jumpstart their economies.

In the Finger Lakes region, for example, tourism has created 78,000 jobs that generate an \$895 million payroll.

"More and more places are starting to realize that tourism can be a very strong economic engine," says Irving Rein, one of the authors of *Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry and Tourism to Cities, States and Nations*.

But to become world-class tourist destinations, cities need world-class attractions, says Rein, a communications professor at Northwestern University.

"You've got to find that killer attraction that draws," Rein says. In Rochester, he suspects that could be developed in the photographic arena, possibly a "world-class museum."

Tourism officials in the Rochester area believe that the area already has the right mix of attractions, ranging from scenic lakes and canals to the new downtown baseball stadium.

Instead of trying to copy what other communities offer, they say, the Rochester area simply needs to promote its assets more aggressively.

"The more variety that you can put on a menu, the better chance you have to attract visitors," says Ed Hall, who became the president of the Greater Rochester Visitors Association in May.

"In this area, we have such a variety in terms of history, in terms of cultural arts, museums and traditional attrac-

tions that we can put out a very, very handsome menu."

Miller, who came here on a promotional tour sponsored by the visitors association, says she noticed a dramatic turnaround in the city compared with the last time she was here in 1987.

Among developments added since then are Frontier Field, the new Centers at High Falls, the new downtown library and the EZ Rider shuttle.

"The downtown area is starting to come around," Miller says. "I know in 1987, it was a little oppressed. They're starting to build that up. The Eastman House is great. It was a surprise when I came to Rochester, with all the changes that had been made."

Apparently, more people are making the same discovery.

While overall tourist traffic to the region edged up 3 percent last year, the increase in Monroe County alone has been higher. In 1997, 1.5 million people visited the county, double the 1989 number.

The growth is due partly to increased advertising by the visitors association and improvements to existing attractions, such as the renovation of the Strong Museum.

"We've always had good, solid reasons for people to come here, but lately I get the feeling that there's a sense of excitement," says Peter McCrossen, general manager of the Lodge at Woodcliff in Perinton. "A lot of that seems to center around what's going on downtown — High Falls, the ballpark, things that took years to get in place."

Two weeks ago, the visitors association launched a \$41,000 television and media campaign, aimed at communities within driving distance of Rochester. The promotion, offering vacation packages for families, is the association's first television advertising in 10 years.

The tourism packages were organized by the Warren Co., a local consulting firm, one year after a successful pilot project drew 150 visitors here last summer.

"We had people here from Toronto who didn't even

know where Rochester was," says Joe Krzys, Warren project manager. "They said, 'Can we visit the Statue of Liberty while we're there?' They had no clue."

But once they came to Rochester, Krzys says, "They said they were surprised at what a beautiful city this was. They all wanted to come back."

The visitors association targets its marketing to a 250-mile radius that is within convenient driving distance of Rochester. Its strategy fits with the latest trend in the travel industry: shorter trips.

"People are getting away from the traditional two-week family vacation," says James Ashurst, spokesman for the American Society of Travel Agents, a trade group in Washington. "People are working longer hours than they ever had before and are feeling that they need to feel refreshed more periodically rather than in one fell swoop."

Within New York, the state's "I Love NY" campaign highlighted the Finger Lakes this year by promoting the region in two of three of its television commercials in the spring. The \$4 million advertising campaign ran for five weeks in downstate New York and Canada.

With 25 million visitors annually, New York City is still by far the state's most popular tourist destination, says Rob Ryan, a spokesman for the Empire State Development Corp.

Niagara Falls attracts 12 million to 14 million visitors every year. But the Finger Lakes region is also a key tourism area of the state, he says.

Outside the Northeast, however, the region's name recognition is spotty at best.

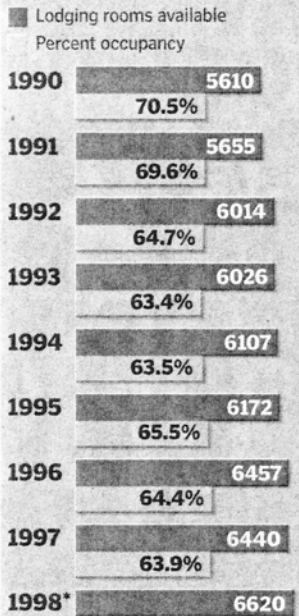
"I know it's in the north and I know that it's normally cold there," says Lorri Lee Ragan, spokeswoman for the International Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus in Washington, D.C.

One factor that may limit the number of tourists who fly to Rochester is the cost of air travel here. Rochester has the fourth-highest air fares in the country.

"When you're looking at just the air portion being an exorbitant amount of money,

## Room at the inn

The number of hotel rooms in Monroe County has increased sharply in the past seven years.



\*Estimated

SOURCE: Greater Rochester Visitors Association Inc.

SEASON TAYLOR staff artist

it's going to lead travelers away," Ashurst says.

Last week, Eastwind Airlines announced that it would start offering low-cost flights from Rochester to four Eastern cities, including Washington, Boston, Trenton, N.J., and Greensboro, N.C.

Mary Peters, president of a travel agency in Alexandria, Va., said the Rochester area needs to market itself more to attract tourists. Her agency has never received any pamphlets or brochures about Rochester or the Finger Lakes.

"With no promotion, it's kind of hard to convince families to go there," she says.

## Spinoff benefits

Though they have focused on a narrower audience, tourism officials in the Rochester area say their efforts have shown results: a moderate increase in the number of visitors.

"In the final analysis, what we're interested in is bringing new dollars into the market," says Hall, the visitors association president who is former director of tourism for the state of Alabama.

One place tourists are spending those dollars at is area hotels.

Developers have built 1,000 new lodging rooms in Monroe County since 1980, increasing the supply to 6,620. So, even though occupancy rates are down slightly — from 71 percent to 64 percent — more rooms are being filled than before.

The market is now considered overbuilt, but hoteliers are hoping the increased focus on tourism will help to fill their rooms.

Outside Rochester, the growth in tourism has spawned a dramatic surge in the boutique wineries scattered throughout the Finger Lakes. The number of wineries in the region has doubled to 60 in the last decade.

An estimated 750,000 people visit the wineries each year, a number that continues to rise as New York vintners gain a first-class reputation.

"It used to be that the wineries were sort of an afterthought," says Jim Tresize, president of the New York Wine and Grape Foundation, a nonprofit promotional agency in Penn Yan. "People would come here for the lakes and other attractions and discover that, 'Hey, there's a few wineries here.'"

"Now the wineries and the wine trails have become destinations. That's a big change."

Jessy Huebner, a 49-year-old Miami cardiologist, came to visit a friend in Canandaigua last weekend and spent most of Monday touring the wineries. It was his first visit to the Finger Lakes.

"I love this area," he said, during a wine-tasting at Widmer Wine Cellars in Naples. "I was living in the heat in Miami and here I walk onto a dock and see this beautiful lake. It was just like a movie."

## Room for growth

While most of the visitors to the region come from the Northeast, tourism officials believe they could attract international travelers, especially from Canada.

Tour buses from the province of Ontario already drive through the Finger Lakes on their routes.

"I think they go to that area and to Rochester because it's a four-day tour that includes the museums and the Erie Canal," said Brian Crow, president of the Ontario Motor Coach Association, a promotional group in Toronto. "They'll go to the Finger Lakes and do some other things and maybe come down to the outlet malls near Niagara."

The proposed ferry between Toronto and Rochester could provide another link to the region. Six daily ferry crossings from each city are planned and the high-speed catamarans can each carry 900 people, 176 cars and several buses.

If the project takes off and a ferry terminal is built in the Charlotte neighborhood, Rochester could potentially join a list of cities that are starting to host Great Lakes cruises.

Before World War II, about 174 cruise ships were touring the Great Lakes. But when the war broke out, the majestic ships disappeared, says Bill McCulloch, manager of economic development for Toronto.

After more than a 50-year hiatus, however, cruise liners returned to the Great Lakes last summer, when a German company began offering a nautical excursion from New York City to Chicago.

The popularity of the cruises has led the company to offer eight trips this year, including five to German tourists and three to Americans.

"They've been selling like hotcakes," says McCulloch, who has worked on drawing cruise ships to Toronto for the past six years.

It is possible Rochester could join the consortium of cities on the tour if the port it builds meets the criteria set by the cruise liner, McCulloch says.

Hall agrees that the ferry service could become the catalyst to attracting cruises to the Charlotte port, which would provide an enormous economic boost.

"That's very big," Hall says, "especially when one of these boats drops off a few thousand passengers in your community for a couple of hours and all they do is spend money. That's a very good thing." □