



Lake Tear

Trekking to the headwaters of the Hudson

Carl Heilman II

by Sandra Weber

"...way up among the Adirondack peaks is a little pool asleep. Through the long winter it lies—a solid crystal almost—under the accumulating weight of many snows, barren of all life save that which, like itself, waits for the summer's sun to warm it into tardy being and bring with the rank green fringe its swarms of batrachian young."

—Seneca Ray Stoddard, 1885



Lake Tear of the Clouds remains as picturesque today as Seneca Ray Stoddard portrayed it more than 100 years ago. Nestled between mountain peaks and circled by dark forests, the pool offers the perfect spot for a respite after a hard climb. Looking at the small pond, it's hard to believe that this is the headwaters of the mighty Hudson.

Reaching Lake Tear's shore is no small feat, requiring a nine-mile walk through the Adirondack forest. I always wanted to visit it, and so decided to make the trek this fine morning. Setting out from the deserted Upper Works, a principal

After circling Flowed Lands, crossing the bridge at Lake Colden, and wading across the Opalescent River, I pitch my tent. Throughout the night, I listen to a brook's soft babble, my excitement mounting at the prospect of reaching its source the next day: Lake Tear of the Clouds, headwaters of the Hudson River.

Morning clouds and dense fog beg me to wait for a day of summer sun, but I ignore them. I venture up the banks of the Opalescent, past the Flume. It is a tough pull, with a very crooked and snarled trail that requires me to climb over and under log after log.

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trailhead that accesses the Adirondack High Peaks, I cross the 20-foot wide Calamity Brook, and walk along an old logging road to Calamity Pond. A tall stone monument reminds me that entrepreneur David Henderson accidentally shot himself and died on this spot in 1845. I continue onward to a less ominous campsite.

Invisible droplets dampen my cheeks, but not my mettle. I follow the ever-shrinking branch of the Hudson River along its wild course, ascending 1,500 feet in two hours. Here, the wide and mighty Hudson has transformed into a wee little creek—Feldspar Brook in name, but as narrow as a rainspout and as shallow as a birdbath.

What it lacks in size, it makes up for in spirit. At this point, the water gushes into a stone basin that snares it for a moment before spilling it into a lower basin. The wild cascade continues on and on, rushing toward North Creek, Albany, Manhattan, and eventually the Atlantic Ocean. Standing there, it dawns on me that this is the spontaneous birth of the Hudson.

I lift my head and look beyond the bustle into the eerie stillness. It's late morning, yet a gray mist gives the sense of sleepy dawn, as if the glaciers have just retreated. At last I spy the little pool and the rank green fringe—the likely source of the vapors that ooze into my nostrils.



Lake Tear, circa 1885

Seneca Ray Stoddard



With Mt. Marcy standing guard, Lake Tear is as peaceful and picturesque today as it was in September 1901. It was here that then Vice President Theodore Roosevelt (who had just finished climbing Mt. Marcy) first heard the news that President McKinley lay dying in Buffalo. Before Roosevelt could make it out of the Adirondacks, McKinley had passed away.

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Verplanck Colvin

The eastern half of the pond is covered by puffy moss, pond weeds, and ashen tree skeletons. On the western shore, dark green spruce reflect their knurly forms onto the smooth open water. The bald gray heads of two rocks lurk in the middle. I can't help but notice that there are no air bubbles or flashes of fish fins. The pond, I'm told, has never been home to fish; some surmising the stream is too steep to support much in the way of aquatic insect life, and that spring melt waters scour the streambeds.

Only two acres in size and less than three feet deep, the pond is essentially a bog. And like any bog, the open water will slowly be covered with a mat of moss and other plants. Lake Tear of the Clouds may one day become dry land, but that day is far away. For now, the water of Lake Tear rests at my feet, and Mount Marcy, the tallest mountain in the state, hovers 1,000 feet above.

However, there is no view of Marcy today. The mountain is living up to its nickname, Cloudsplitter, with dripping clouds hanging just 20 feet above the calm surface of Lake Tear. In 1872, one of the lake's first known Caucasian visitors, state surveyor Verplanck Colvin, looked out at a similar scene and later wrote: "But how wild and desolate this spot!...First seen as we then saw it, dark and dripping with the moisture of the heavens, it seemed, on its minuteness and its prettiness, a veritable Tear-of-the-Clouds, the summit water as I named it."

The Algonquins, Mohawks, and other people of native America undoubtedly found the pond centuries before Colvin. They likely felt it, drank it, and walked its shores. The Mohawks knowingly called the Hudson River "Co-ha-ta-te-a," interpreted as Great River having Mountains beyond the (Cahoh) Cohoes Falls, or simply, River from Beyond the Peaks.

When European settlers reached the New World, they called the river The Great North River of the New

Netherlands or "Rio de Montagne" (River of the Mountain). Eventually, Hudson River replaced the descriptive names that had paid tribute to the river's source. Yet, explorers still sought the source. It was one of the most coveted discoveries in New York State.

As far as we know, Colvin and his guide William Nye, of North Elba, were the first white men to visit Lake Tear. Guides and tourists had reportedly looked at the little pond from the top of Mount Marcy and presumed that the outlet flowed east to the Ausable River. No one bothered to explore further until Colvin came to the region. He was curious about everything. So, he ventured down the side of Marcy, up to the top of Gray Mountain, and then down to the little pond. Surveying the area, he was able to determine that the pond did not flow to the Ausable, but rather to the Hudson.

Just three years later, legendary guide Orson "Old Mountain" Phelps, with his son, Ed, and L. J. Lamb, had the honor of building the first trail to Lake Tear. But Phelps wanted more accolades, claiming he had earlier named the pond Lake Perkins in honor of artist Frederick S. Perkins. He criticized Colvin's "namby-pamby" name. However, others adored the name Lake Tear of the Clouds, thinking it was the aboriginal name for the pond.

Colvin originally called the pond Summit Water in his report to the state

legislators. But he also described it as "a minute, unpretending tear of the clouds—as it were—a lonely pool, shivering in the breezes of the mountains, and sending its limpid surplus through Feldspar Brook to the Opalescent River, the well-spring of the Hudson." When the statesmen read the report, they liked Colvin's poetic phrase and gave the name Lake Tear of the Clouds to the little lake.

As I look at the lofty pool nestled between mountain peaks, Colvin's words about these wild headwaters come to mind: "From the loftiest lakelet of New York the water descends, gathering volume at every brook, till in full breadth it swells before the wharves and piers of the metropolis, floating the richly burdened ships of all the nations."

Along its 315-mile journey, the Hudson River flows past the places where more than eight million people live, work and play. The river is, and always has been, an important commercial and recreational waterway, reflected in its designation as an American Heritage River in 1998. Organizations cooperate to promote economic development, environmental protection, and historic and cultural preservation along the river's entire course, from the Verrazano Narrows in New York Harbor to Lake Tear in the Adirondack High Peaks.

As I get ready to make the return trek, and before the highborn water of Lake Tear can escape to the harbor, I capture a cupful and pump it through a filter. I swish the cool, clear liquid in my mouth and then swallow. Ahhh, life is good.

Author **Sandra Weber** has written several books celebrating the Adirondack Mountains, including *Two In The Wilderness: Adventures Of A Mother And Daughter In The Adirondack Mountains*, and *Mount Marcy: The High Peak of New York*.