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Note on an Article in Harper's Monthly Magazine June 1931

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In the June Harper’s Magazine, in an article by "Brendan Lee", (a name under which we recognize a former "nature-writer" of some years ago), makes a statement (p.109) for which a due correction should be speedily recorded. He says:

"From it,[a pond], as of old, the brook flows northward through unbroken forest to Sungegarmook-- a picturesque Indian name which by some linguistic lunacy has been translated into 'Lobster Lake'. In the Milicete tongue sunge means 'fish trap'; and the root mook for 'water' has such pleasant variations as garmook for 'broad water' and murmook for 'flowing water' and boomook for 'sounding water' or a waterfall."

It would be a simple task to tear this information into tatters:—for example, mook is not a root, but a locative ending; boomook means nothing by itself, and never waterfall, it being a part of the word Seboomook, or Sebemook, a large lake, long used for Moosehead Lake, as Lake Sebem; and so with the others.

The point to insist upon is that there is no such Indian name for Lobster Lake, or for any other vaine lake that we know, as Sungegarmook; and that Lobster Lake is an original English name and not a translation of any Indian name for the lake. So far from being a "linguistic lunacy" there is a good reason for the name, which should not be changed by theorists or strangers.

Lobster Lake was so called from the tiny fresh-water lobsters which are, or used to be, found there in numbers. I have never seen them described in any book, but I have seen and handled the tiny creatures, which escape general observation. Conditions change so much that one cannot assert that the same living creatures will
continue to inhabit their old haunts after many years; but I have
turned to the journal of an old cruise in the Maine woods, made many
years ago, and am not speaking from memory when I say that one
day while having dinner at the foot of the Horse Race on Caucomgomoc
Stream, my father said he would see whether he could not find a
fresh-water lobster to show me. He looked about in the stream
just below the little double pitch a few feet high, where there
was a wing-dam on the right bank and a sharp ledge sending out
a spur upon the left (all most likely changed now), and there he
found the low heaps of sand and small gravel, heaped up by the little
shell-fish. Scratching about the mouth of an entrance, as one used
to do to draw the big salt-water lobsters out from under rocks, he
enticed the occupant to come out and caught him. "Although he was
not more than two inches long"—I quote the journal—"he could nip
sharply and took the aggressive. In all his motions he was
precisely like the large lobster." I held him some time on my hand
watching him. He had miniature "big claws" like the large lobster
and frothed about the mouth, and was as active and ugly as if he had
weighed two pounds. I returned him to the water again after examining
him. I have never seen one on any other waters in the state, but I
know that Lobst'r Lake got its name from these little fellows.

The Indian name for Lobster Lake is Peske-begat, of Hubbard's
map of the Maine Woods. Thoreau understood Joseph Polis to pronounce
it Beskabekuk— and he probably did so call it; but the words are the
same to an Indian. In his "Woods and Lakes of Maine" Mr. L.L. Hubbard
gives two interpretations of this word and a description of the lake,
(pages 37, 38, 208). Bèrat is a word for "dead-water" in Abnaki and
peske,(or pisca as we get it in Piscataqua and Piscataquis) indicates
a "branching". Mr. Hubbard suggests that the word may mean "Split
Lake, because a point partially divides it; or the word may refer to the entrance of the outlet into the West Branch Penobscot. Conditions here are so unusual that this most likely gives the name, "Branch of a Deadwater." The outlet comes in almost at right angles to the course of the West Branch and the fall is so slight that in times of freshet on the river, the river rises much faster than the stream and turns the current up into the lake, which will rise eight or ten feet above its usual level by the water pouring up into the lake instead of flowing down the river. Many years ago a green hand on the drive was sent down to boom off Lobster Stream, in order to keep the logs from being carried up into the lake. He naturally supposed the strongest current marked the river and so he threw his boom across the wrong stream and turned a large part of the drive up into Lobster Lake, where they had plenty of trouble in getting it back again with the current against them.

I have known the name Mattahumkeag to be applied to Lobster Lake, which must refer to conditions at its outlet: it indicates that there is, or was once, a sandy point at the outlet. But the real peculiarity of the lake is that it is a "pocket-lake" or inlet-outlet lake, with a reversible current in the outlet, like Umbagog, Kezar Pond, Androscoggin Pond, Lovewell's Pond and perhaps other Maine lakes. I question whether the name Peskebegat did not apply exclusively to the stream, and perhaps Mattahumkeag to the lake above it, but it never was Sungegarmook. 

F.H.E.