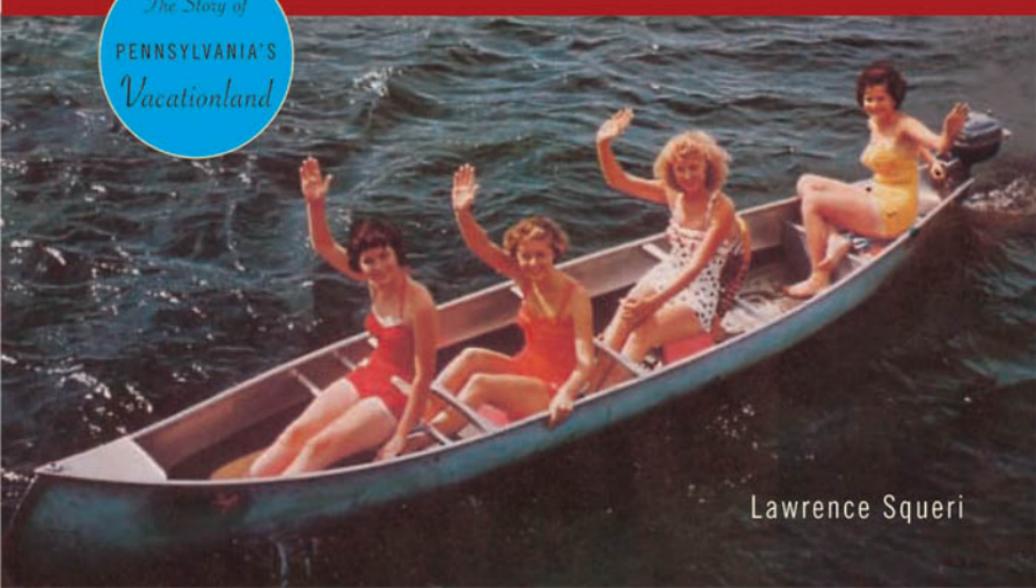




# BETTER *in the* Poconos

*The Story of*  
PENNSYLVANIA'S  
*Vacationland*



Lawrence Squeri

BETTER *in the* Poconos



**NEW YORK**

**VERMONT**

**Catskills**

**PENNSYLVANIA**

**CONNECTICUT**

Scranton •

• Port Jervis

Hudson  
River

Milford •

Wilkes-Barre •

**Poconos**

• Mt. Pocono

Stroudsburg •  
Delaware Water Gap •

Delaware  
River

Easton •

Newark •

Bethlehem •  
Allentown •

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New York City

• Trenton

**ATLANTIC  
OCEAN**

Philadelphia •

BETTER *in the*  
Poconos

The Story of Pennsylvania's *Vacationland*

Lawrence Squeri

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A Keystone Book is so designated to distinguish it from the typical scholarly monograph that a university press publishes. It is a book intended to serve the citizens of Pennsylvania by educating them and others, in an entertaining way, about aspects of the history, culture, society, and environment of the state as part of the Middle Atlantic region.

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To *Rosemarie* and *Nick*



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# PREFACE

This book could begin with a memoir of my very first visits to the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania. I could lyrically describe pleasant memories of idyllic vacations with my parents. This might be charming indeed—but my family never went to the Poconos. People in my New York City neighborhood, Astoria, went to the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York; my parents were no different. During the summer, they would take us to the Catskills, where we'd spend a week in a small boardinghouse that catered to New Yorkers from northern Italy.

I first learned of the Poconos when I went to Philadelphia to attend the University of Pennsylvania. Hearing about the Poconos on KYW radio, I became interested in this alternative to the Catskills, located in northeastern Pennsylvania. Even then, though, I did not visit the area. I was busy with academic pursuits, and I did not have the money for a vacation. Still, my curiosity had been piqued. It was reinforced every time I listened to the Philadelphia news. More than once I wondered about the Poconos, these fabulous mountains of honeymoon havens, ski lodges, children's camps, summer homes, and resorts.

When I finally saw the Poconos, I have to admit that I was somewhat surprised by their popularity. I have seen higher mountains. I could understand why Philadelphians found them exciting: they are the closest mountains to the city of brotherly love. Why New Yorkers went there when they had the Catskills was still a mystery. But gradually, the truth dawned on me. The Poconos are an acquired taste. They have to be sampled, experienced over again, like a good wine. The winding roads, the gentle hills, the idyllic waterfalls, the placid Delaware River that separates the Poconos from New Jersey—all have a charm that grows on a person.

The story of Pocono vacationing really begins in the nineteenth century. The factories that created the big cities also created a middle class with disposable income and a taste for annual trips. All over America, mountains, seashores, and lakes that were near urban centers and railroads became likely spots for resorts.

The Poconos had a great location. Stroudsburg, which is the largest town in the region, is located roughly one hundred miles west of New York City and one hundred miles north of Philadelphia. The

New Jersey suburbs of New York City and the northern suburbs of Philadelphia are closer. Even nearer are the small cities of Wilkes-Barre, Scranton, Trenton, Easton, Bethlehem, and Allentown. (Only thirty miles separate Easton from Stroudsburg.)

Despite their location, though, the Poconos were not necessarily destined to give rise to resorts. If the region had been blessed with good soil, the local residents might have become happy farmers in the years after the Civil War. Instead, the poverty of the mountain soil forced them to supplement their incomes by housing summer boarders. Successful boardinghouse keepers gave up farming altogether, while ambitious city people moved to the Poconos and opened their own resorts. Eventually, the large number of boardinghouses and hotels redefined the Pocono economy—and farming and lumbering evolved into a service economy of leisure. All this happened long before deindustrialization made service economies fashionable.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, resort keepers banded together to create a trade association to promote the Poconos. The resort keepers believed that they needed such promotion. Although the area had its natural attractions, it also had serious competition from Niagara Falls and the New Jersey shore. Visitors from New York could not be taken for granted, because they could easily travel to the Catskills or the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts. The trade association wanted to stimulate an already existing flow of tourists, and Pocono innkeepers were not shy in letting the public know of the area's many assets, such as the Delaware Water Gap and the scenic waterfalls.

In the long run, though, the natural beauties of the Poconos were less important to the success of the vacation industry than that industry's ability to renew itself. The Poconos originally appealed to sportsmen (fishermen and hunters) and to tourists who, in the years before the Civil War, preferred the scenic to the fashionable. After the Civil War, the Poconos developed a mass market. Along with their picturesque attractions, they offered the refinements of the Victorian vacation, including carriage rides, lectures, and card parties.

In the twentieth century, the public became more demanding. Resort keepers responded with golf courses and swimming pools, and by the 1920s, they were providing social directors to keep guests busy. In the 1940s, clever entrepreneurs realized that newlyweds had money for honeymoons. They transformed the Poconos into the "land of love" by opening honeymoon hotels, which evolved into couples resorts—the institutions whose garish heart-shaped bathtubs have become Pocono icons. In the 1950s, alert resort keepers saw that young singles had money and the freedom to enjoy it. This was the golden age of the singles resorts, where twentysomethings could meet and connect. In today's market, people look for nightclub entertainment and family fun, and again, the large resorts oblige.

The greatest act of reinvention after World War II, however, was the introduction of skiing. Although snowfall in the region tends to be uncertain, the Pocono ski runs can offer artificial snow. Neither Colorado nor Vermont feel threatened, but Pocono skiing does fill a niche for nearby skiers on tight budgets. It is no accident that the Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau called the area "the near country."

Aside from their capacity for reinvention, the Poconos stand out for their close relationship with Philadelphia. Although the Poconos drew tourists from New York City and Philadelphia—perhaps even more from New York, which is larger and had a direct rail connection to the Poconos—the region has been a peculiarly Pennsylvanian resort. It is almost an extension of Philadelphia. To begin, there is the proprietary attitude Philadelphians have toward “their” Poconos. For Philadelphians, the Poconos are the only accessible mountains within a reasonable travel time. It is telling that the New York City media never mention the Pocono weather, leaving the curious to settle for the forecast in “western New Jersey.” By contrast, Philadelphia radio and television always mention Pocono weather, as if the Poconos were as close as the backyard.

The Poconos have also shown their Philadelphia connection by sharing the same ethnic culture. Philadelphia was unique among the old East Coast cities in that its “ethnic” citizens accepted Protestant dominance. As late as the 1940s, Philadelphia elected Protestant Republican mayors. Likewise, ethnic diversity was never a dominant feature of the Poconos. Although the Poconos had Jewish resorts and Italian resorts, the great majority of resort owners had northern European names, giving Pocono vacationing a WASP image. The Poconos, then, were quite unlike the Catskills, which were defined in the twentieth century by a heavy Jewish presence from New York City.

Another trait of Philadelphia is its relaxed, understated tone. Philadelphia was founded by Quakers, modest people who frowned upon ostentation and braggadocio. Long after the Quakers lost political control of Philadelphia, their ethos continued to influence the city’s culture. Philadelphia has not cared to compete with other cities, never becoming a metropolis boasting skyscrapers and spectacles. Its famous Mummers Parade aside, Philadelphia is not a city of popular display. Its New Year’s Eve celebration cannot compare to New York’s. Philadelphia has no Rockefeller Center or Times Square. The Philadelphia tourist bureau tacitly admits that visitors may not be fully satisfied: aside from recommending the city’s colonial buildings and museums, the tourist bureau urges side trips outside of Philadelphia to Atlantic City, Valley Forge, and Longwood Gardens in the distant suburbs.

The Poconos, too, have been quiet and unobtrusive. The region has never been known for monumental hotels, neon, glitter, or world-class hanky-panky. When the very famous visited the Poconos, they did not call attention to themselves. Even the couples resorts have plain exteriors. An uninformed traveler would never guess that the walls hide “love nests” that, according to one’s point of view, are either tacky or colorful.

The Poconos have survived, though, in the very competitive vacation business. The region attracted vacationers prior to the Civil War, thrived in the late Victorian era, remained a major resort center during the twentieth century, and enjoyed great business at the end of the 1990s. The future looks bright in the new millennium. This book is the history of this successful vacation region, of its renewal and reinvention, and of its status as a particularly Pennsylvanian resort. The book pays attention to children’s camps, bungalow colonies, hunting clubs, and day-tripper attractions, but it concentrates on the resorts. Without them, the Poconos would lack vacation glamour.

Finally, the task remains of defining and locating the Pocono region. The eastern boundary of the region is the upper Delaware River, which separates the states of New York and New Jersey from Pennsylvania. The much smaller Lehigh River is sometimes considered a southwestern boundary. The Blue (Kittatinny) Mountains separate the Pocono region from the Lehigh Valley to the south. The opening through these mountains is the famous Delaware Water Gap, through which flows the Delaware River. Even today, because of Interstate 80, Delaware Water Gap remains a gateway into the Pocono region from New Jersey.

The Pocono region contains two distinct mountain chains: the Blue (Kittatinny) Mountains and the Pocono Mountains proper. The Pocono Mountains are located inland from the Delaware River. They are, in fact, a hilly plateau, an eroded remnant of mountains formed in the Cambrian Period, before the dinosaurs. This plateau has definite boundaries. It covers the north and west of Monroe County and adjacent chunks of Pike, Wayne, Carbon, Luzerne, and Lackawanna Counties.

In the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century, residents used precise language when referring to local geography. The term “Pocono” referred only to the plateau. The thirty-five miles along the Delaware River from Milford to Delaware Water Gap was called the Upper Delaware Valley or the Minisink, its Indian name. The mountains around Stroudsburg and Delaware Water Gap were called by their correct names of the Blue or Kittatinny Mountains. But in ads that appeared in the New York City press, the entire region was occasionally called “Pennsylvania Mountains.”

These assorted names can pose problems. Outsiders might confuse a name that contains “Delaware” with the state of Delaware. Milford, too, is common. Stroudsburg might be confused with Strasburg, a village in Lancaster County’s Amish Country. And much of Pennsylvania is mountainous, as travelers know. As a result, around World War I or so, the area adjacent to the plateau—even the Blue Mountains—began to be known as “the Poconos.” Local purists resisted the change, but the term “Pocono,” with its Indian origin, is unique. Referring to the region as “the Poconos” has been a stroke of genius.

This larger region, occupying the plateau and beyond, is the vacationland of northeastern Pennsylvania. It is what the modern public calls the Pocono Mountains. And in this work, I use the term “Pocono” to refer to this larger area.

The Pocono region, though, still has uncertain boundaries. It may be easiest to define the vacation hub by ignoring geographic features and concentrating instead on political divisions. During the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, the Pocono vacationland consisted of Monroe and Pike Counties. (This book focuses on these two counties.) When the modern-day Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau was founded in 1948, however, it added Carbon County (which lies southwest of Monroe County) and Wayne County (which lies north of Monroe County and west of Pike County) to the original two. The Poconos thus officially became a four-county region.

Since the word “Poconos” conjures vacation glamour, the Pocono region will continue to expand. Ambitious real estate developers are already stretching the boundaries at the fringes. Lately, the

Scranton and Wilkes-Barre area to the northeast has been occasionally included in the Poconos. In the new millennium, the Pocono region may eventually include *all* of northeastern Pennsylvania. The only certainty is that the Delaware River will continue to define the eastern boundary of the region. There are no indications whatsoever that the Pocono region, like George Washington, will cross the Delaware and conquer the New Jersey side.