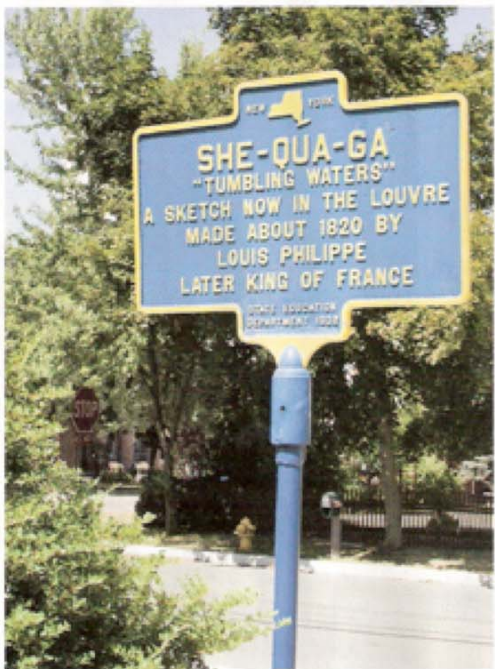


# FINGER LAKES

## Falling for Montour Falls

By Michael J. Fitzgerald  
Photos by Elizabeth Young



Residents of Montour Falls, New York, were mourning the demise of the landmark Henderson's Pharmacy on West Main Street when it closed last year, sure it was a death knell to business as usual in this small Finger Lakes town.

But the drugstore had barely closed when the Village Bakery started renovations with plans to open before the end of this summer. And already another pharmacy has opened just a block away.

"This town is really bouncing back," Chef William Cornelius of the Harvest Cafe says. "Fast."

Montour Falls (pop. 1,750) is rapidly coming out of the shadows of

its more famous neighbor a few miles north on NY Route 14, Watkins Glen. Once a village people often discovered by serendipity, Montour Falls has blossomed in the last few years with new businesses, a theater, upscale loft-style apartments, and even the beginnings of a village nightlife.

Turn down West Main Street and it's like viewing an historic postcard with the flowing Shequagua Falls (pictured above) flowing water into the creek in front of a village park. When visitors come up the street from the highway for the first time, the falls can be startling. In the wetter seasons it is as if they are pouring water right into the downtown.

In the mid-1800s, Montour Falls was the seat of government for Schuyler County, though at that time the town was called Havana, becoming Montour Falls in 1890. It was a hub of activity with canal-based commerce, later handled by the railroad. It's the home of the Schuyler County Historical Society where local experts can bring visitors up to speed on county history in fascinating detail.

And all of that rich history is highlighted for visitors as part of a concerted community-wide effort to put the town back on the map. And it's working. It is apparent the historic town has blossomed again.

Six years ago Valerie and Jeff Snider moved to Montour Falls from California, opening the Harvest Café on Main Street. At that time, the small downtown strip had as many vacant storefronts as businesses really making it. The Snider's vision was to create not just a café, but a community.

Their motto for their enterprise since day one has been: "Where Community Happens."

Bit by bit they transformed a lunch-counter into what is now a restaurant/community hub by day and a nightclub several nights per week featuring musicians, poets, artists, and writers—even some karaoke.

It's not the Algonquin Roundtable, but it's getting there.

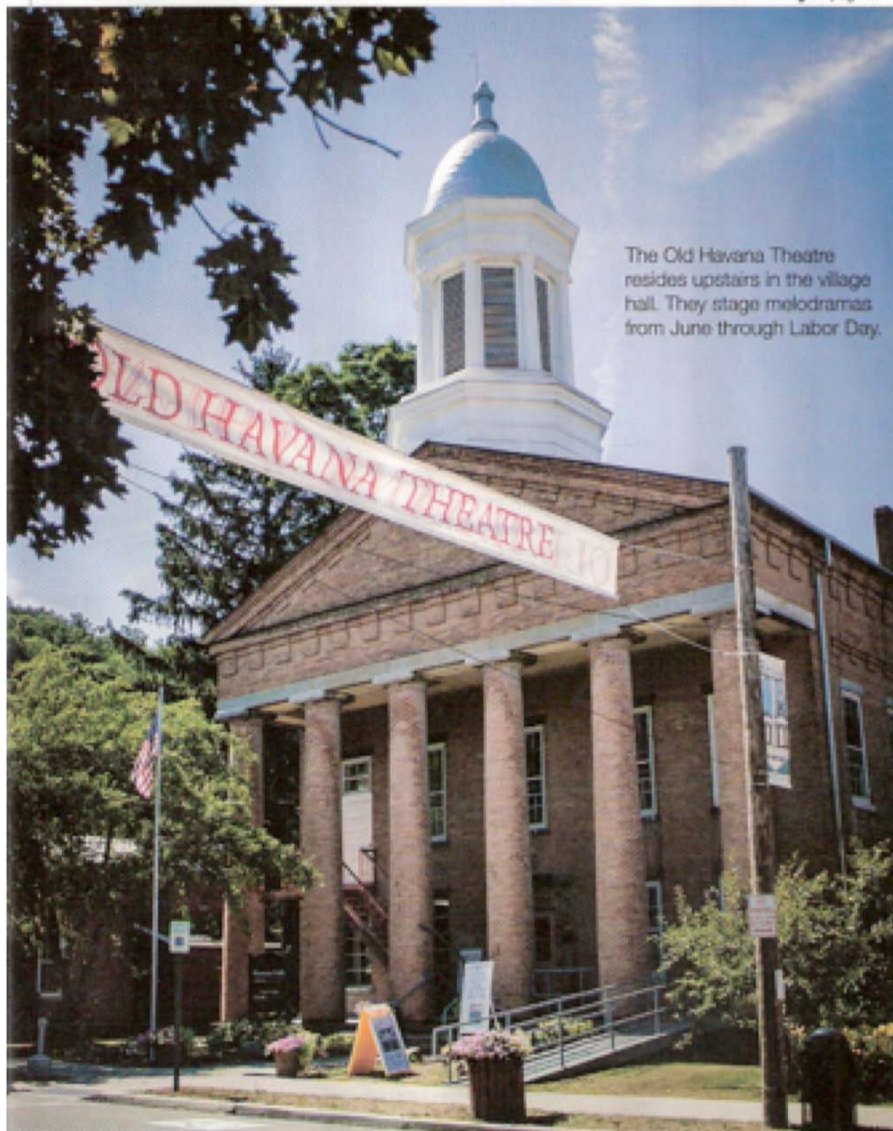
The Sniders had the good fortune

—and perhaps foresight—this year to hire Chef Cornelius to head up their food services. Originally from Lakewood, Ohio (and now a Watkins Glen resident), the former television chef personality was working on product development with Brick Village Gourmet in Mayville, New York, and had just launched his own line of gourmet food products under the label "Chef William Creations."

"Montour Falls is like a big extended family," he said. "The town is so friendly to small businesses and visiting people, it's amazing."

Just up the street from the Harvest Café is an equally friendly and community-minded spot—the renovated Montour House, built in 1840 and once operated as a hotel.

See *Falling* on page 58



The Old Havana Theatre resides upstairs in the village hall. They stage melodramas from June through Labor Day.



(Above left) The Montour Coffee House and Wine Bar on Main Street is a 2010 award-winning New York State Restoration space; (Above right) Memorial Library, originally built in 1864 as a bank, was converted in 1904 to a library; (Left) Residents and campers alike enjoy the cooling waters of Eagle Cliff falls at Havana Glen Campground.

Falling continued from page 55

The three-story brick building houses loft apartments, a variety of professional offices, and the Montour Coffee House and Wine Bar, a salon that also acts as a visitors' center for Montour Falls, featuring work by local artists.

"We get a very interesting group of visitors and tourists through here," Maggie Martin, artist and owner of the coffee house and wine bar says. "I tell visitors, just walk up and down Main Street and around the 'T.' There's plenty to see and do."

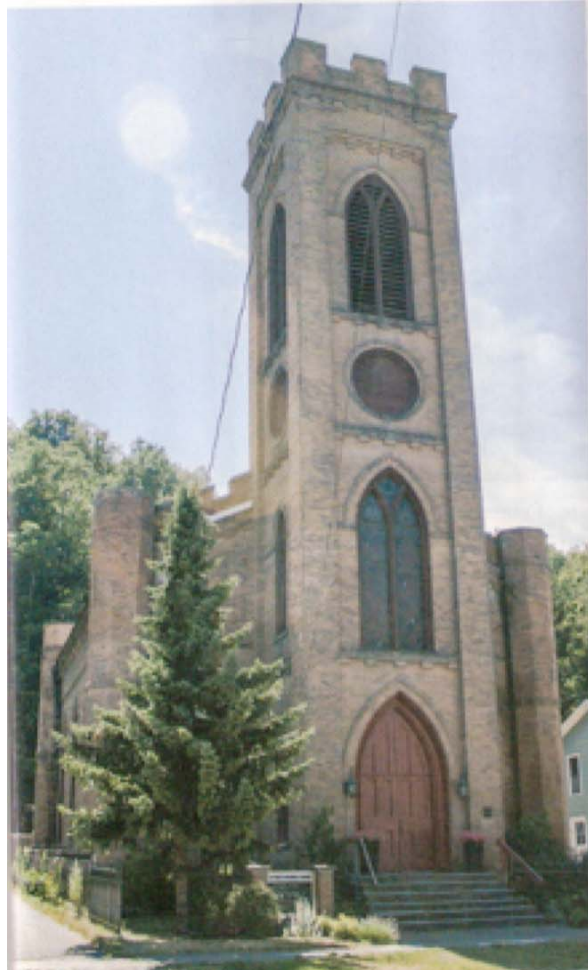
The "T" is the strip of West Main Street and its intersection with Genesee Street at the falls. Early mornings in July and August, Kate Chesebrough offers yoga classes in the shadow of the waterfalls, drawing locals and tourists to the quiet setting.

"People say that in just an hour and half, it's like the waterfalls help recharge them," Chesebrough says.

A half-block from the waterfall is the Old Havana Courthouse Theatre, a playhouse that puts on live shows all summer in the tradition and manner of old-style theater shows.

The year's offerings include *The Mesmerist and The Maiden* and *The Inventor's Daughter...or The Villain Made a Grab for the Lab*. Like the Montour House, the theatre had fallen into disuse but last year was rescued by a community effort.

"It fills up for shows now all the time," Martin says. Another gem that draws people is the stately public library right next door, an historic building itself, where the full story of Montour Falls' transformation from a Seneca Indian village in the 1700s to a modern city is laid out.



St. Paul's Episcopal Church was built in 1853, just a block away from the falls in the middle of the town.

Montour Falls is also home to a 180-boat marina and campground with ninety spaces and a long waiting list. But campers also head to nearby Havana Glen in great numbers during the season, as do hikers on the Catherine Valley Trail, a trail that stretches from Seneca Lake almost to the village of Horseheads along the edge of trout-filled Catherine Creek.

The chances of people whizzing past Montour Falls should drop by the end of summer when a project to create a dazzling entryway and central median entrance to downtown will be completed.

"The median will have large trees and we have a big welcoming sign that will point people into town," Martin says.

"And once Shequagua Falls catches their eye? Well, they will want to stay and visit." 🌲

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