

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

September 2002, Issue 135

Calendar

A September evening that felt more like July awaited the GLHGers: Mimi Weeks, Dot & Larry Hesel, Connie Teator, Harriett Rasmussen, Ron Golden, Len & Bel Gardiner, Dot Blenis, Rosemary Lambert, Walter Ingalls, Stephanie Ingalls, Phyllis Beechert, David and Judy Rundell, and Don Teator.

One of the main attractions was to be a quarter century old slide show developed by the Greenville Area Chamber of Commerce, but other elements made us postpone this.

First was Rosemary Lambert's account of helping a letter writer who was trying to find the location of Baker's Farm, based on memories when the letter writer was a kid in the 1930s. Rosemary called me, I made a couple of partially successful phone calls, Rosemary talked to Grant Micklesen, and, voila, we had most of our story. It turns out that Baker's Farm was the residence of Jesse and Addie Baker, today the residence of David Walker on West Rd in Greenville Center. Impressed upon us is how fragile is the connection of memory keepers, and with the passing of these people, the less likely we will to make connections.

Don announced taking possession of Doris Hempstead's collection of genealogy cards, amounting to thousands and thousands of 3x5 cards, each with some genealogical nugget waiting for some searcher to find it. Don will need to organize the cards and then consider the best site for researchers. More later.

Phyllis Beechert had brought diplomas awarded to Goldie Wright, later Goldie White. She appears to have graduated from high school in mid-year, and then attended Delhi to get her teaching certificate in June.

The NY Times article, copied for this newsletter, was discussed and debated, with no real verdict reached. Also enclosed is the Hudson Valley feature on Greenville. Which one do you like better?

The star of the evening was the 2003 calendar, and we leafed month by month, with brief or not-so-brief comments about each month. The person responsible for the calendar ran out of time to adequately research the recognitions, and will complete them for the 2004 calendar. Instead, a brief history and other items replaced the recognitions for 2003.

The calendars are available at

Bryant's, Rite-Aid, and the Library. Perhaps, let the people in charge know we are appreciative of their help. If you want to get calendars from me, give me a call. (634-2397)

The meeting tried to end about 9 P.M. but we spent 20 minutes discussing the Comprehensive Plan the town is revising, as well as our concerns about how they could affect Greenville's future. I personally hope many of you care enough to follow this or to become involved in giving your input during the coming half year.

WARNING: I will be in Washington, D.C. during Columbus Day weekend and will not be back in time for our meeting. Forgive me for being presumptuous but, based on the agenda we had, I think the **October meeting should be cancelled**. However, if someone wishes to be responsible for the meeting, please give me a call. We could make a phone tree to let everyone know.

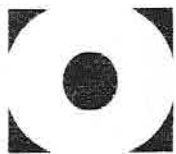
Otherwise, our next meeting, the November meeting, will start with the slide show, and calendars will be available. Mail orders will be filled by mailing a check to Don Teator (3979 Rt 67, Freehold, NY 12431), with prices of \$7 for first calendar, and \$6 for each additional calendar.

One correction from the last newsletter. The Civil War documents was from an Elijah Nelson.

One more local note: The Durham Center Museum has an exhibit on Greenville stuff - postcards, resort brochures, Scott Ellis, photos, etc. The exhibit is open until closing day of the museum which is Columbus Day weekend, and the museum is usually open on weekend afternoons. I think you will enjoy it.

And, yes, Rosemary, I have your pen!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Don".



In a sultry summer day, the first thing you notice about Greenville is the smell. The constant breeze blowing through this rural town in the foothills of the northern Catskills carries a pleasing aroma of sweet clover and dried grass, a sure sign that you're in the country.

In fact, those hurtling through the Greene County town on Route 32, on their way to Albany or Kingston, might think they're in the middle of nowhere. In a way, they are. And that's the charm of the place.

Greenville caters to tourists, but on its own terms. Want gift shops and art galleries? Go to Hunter or Windham. There are a few good restaurants — just enough to make a weekend's stay pleasurable — and some fine resorts and B&Bs. And that's about it, except for rolling country roads, lots of grazing horses, lovingly tended farmhouses, and a wealth of peace and quiet.

At the risk of offending its inhabitants, many of whom make the 35-mile commute to Albany for work, what makes Greenville special is its plainness: it hearkens back to a simpler time. "It has a look that's different," admits Eliot Dalton, who runs the Greenville Arms 1899 Inn with his wife, Letitia.

Sure, there have been changes through the years. The Cumberland Farms, across from the New England-style green in the hamlet of Greenville, is where the movie theater once stood, explains Tom Briggs, who's lived there since boyhood and now runs Tommy's, a lunch wagon whose *pièce de résistance* is the "Matt dog," loaded with sauerkraut, mustard, peppers, and onions. "And we have sidewalks now," he adds with a laugh.

More change may be on the way. The town's zoning laws, among the strictest in the county, are currently under review. "People want to see some small commercial development," says Briggs. Dalton is among them, but he's also glad that several groups are ready to fight any plans that could damage the town's historic character and natural beauty — the very things that attract people in the first place.

"I don't know where it's gonna go," he says of the tough decisions that lie ahead. "It's going to be interesting."

One positive change that has already taken place was the creation of the George V. Vanderbilt Park. The way it integrates space for group pursuits — a soccer field and baseball diamond — with areas for more solitary activities, such as hiking, bird-watching, and fishing, could serve as a primer for other towns hoping to shape public land. Even more impressive, while Greenville received state funds to develop the park, most of the work was undertaken by volunteers. As Dalton says with pride, "It's one of the town's largest assets."

The Daltons' inn, a rambling Victorian, would be a pleasant place to while away a weekend, making forays on a bicycle down back roads if the urge to exercise arose. But Dalton, who got into the innkeeping business 13 years ago after a career as a Merchant Marine tugboat captain, says such urges are rare for most guests. "They'll come up and hang out," he says. "They just plant themselves by the pool." They do get up long enough to enjoy Letitia's breakfasts and afternoon teas. For dinner, they venture to the stately looking Freehold Country Inn or the funkier Ruby's Hotel, both in the nearby hamlet of Freehold.

Don't be surprised if there's no room at the Greenville Arms when you call. The Daltons run a series of popular, weeklong Hudson River Valley Art Workshops throughout the year. Nationally recognized artists — their paintings adorn the inn's walls — share their talents with students who come from all over the United States, as well as the Orient and Europe. In the fall, many of the classes venture away from the inn's large art studio to take advantage of the brilliant fall colors.

The great outdoors is what it's all about at the Sunny Hill Resort, which has been run by the Nichol森 family since it began welcoming guests in the 1920s. But the only thing old-

fashioned about the place is the fun, which everyone was having on a recent visit. Some were swimming in the pool; others were golfing or playing shuffleboard or tennis. Children were enjoying amusement park-style rides or clambering on wooden playgrounds. Down at the lake, paddleboaters were skimming the water. Come dinner-time, everyone congregated in the dining room — the largest in the Catskills — to munch on everything from bratwurst to paella. Guests who want to venture farther afield can take advantage of organized day-trips to places like Olana, downtown Albany, or the Baseball Hall of Fame. And once a week, everyone meets down by the lake for a hot dog roast, a tradition at Sunny Hill — so named because summer thunderstorms seem to bypass it — for 70 years.

The town's other big resort, Balsam Shade, has similar amenities and hosts a series of seasonal events. Coming up on September 21 is the Great Northern Catskills Fall Biathlon Challenge; entrants will run two miles, bike another 12, and hoof another two miles. On October 19 and 20, the resort plays host to the Great Northern Catskills Snowmobile Grass Drags, where professional and amateur snowmobilers will try to break speed records on the green stuff. There will also be a petting zoo and carnival.

The continued success of Greenville's resorts at the same time that many Catskills retreats have sunk into bankruptcy and oblivion epitomizes the town's good fortunes. There may not be a lot to do there, at least compared to urban centers, but what is available — whether reading a book in the spotlessly renovated library; attending a concert in the next-door community center, located in a former church; angling for trout in Basic Creek; or catching a flick at the Greenville Family Drive-In (yup, they've still got one) — is sure to be enjoyable and done among friends.

"I love living here," says Briggs, summing up Greenville's attraction. "It's just a nice place. Everybody's family." ■

By Reed Sparling

HUDSON VALLEY SEPTEMBER 2002

The sweet smell of Greenville



Photographs by Chris Ramirez for The New York Times

They were cool refuges from the sweltering city: the Grand View, the Mohican House, Rose Haven, and, at top, Sugar Maples. But with air-conditioning and cheap flights to Florida, who needs a lawn chair in the Catskills now?

Where Summer Just Isn't What It Used to Be

By DAN BARRY

GREENVILLE, N.Y., July 24 — People around here can recite the names as though they were family. There was the Dellwood, down in Roundtop. The Mohican House, over in Acra. The Pleasant View, not to be confused with the Pleasant Acres, and the Pine Crest, not to be confused with the Pine Springs. There was the Breezy Knoll and the Alberta Lodge and, of course, the Jolly House.

With brochures featuring swimming pools that looked larger than Lake George, these resorts lured the sweat-glistened of downstate to the

UPSTATE

Yesterday's Retreats

cool mountains of Greene County: the less-familiar Catskills. While Jewish vacationers flocked to the borscht belt to the southwest, the Italians and Germans and Irish created their own enclaves here, where the staples were ziti and sauerbraten, not borscht. They offered cheap escape — hayrides and bocce, shuffleboard and step dances — and, as

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HARRY POTTER! Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, the hottest book ever — now in paperback. — ADVT.

the people here say, they did *some* business in their day.

But dusk has fallen on their day. Now, a meandering drive through the Greene County hills in midsummer, once the height of the resort season, becomes a kind of archaeological expedition into the recreational habits of a distant civilization. In deserted, weed-strewn lots, rusted neon signs promise nightly entertainment, as wildflowers sprout from the cracks of bone-dry pools. Some resorts have been converted into cheap apartments; others have become retreat centers for religious

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organizations.

Then there are the ones that have simply vanished, leaving former guests to wonder whether the good times they remember were real or imagined.

Some family-run ethnic resorts continue to operate. German-Americans gather in Roundtop, Irish-Americans frequent East Durham, and here and there are resorts catering to Italian-Americans. The most successful have learned to provide nonstop activities to a generation of guests not content with a book, an Adirondack chair and the croaking lullaby of tree frogs.

But for every resort still ringing a dinner bell, there is a Pleasant Acres. In 1927, the Sausto family opened a modest boarding house in Leeds that by the early 1970's had become a 160-room resort, with a loyal clientele of working-class families from Long Island, New Jersey and the five boroughs. Many Italian-American families passed on the Pleasant Acres experience — a week in July, two in August — like some cherished heirloom.

Last summer, though, was the last for Pleasant Acres. Joseph Sausto, the founders' grandson, said that factors known in the resort industry as the three A's — air-conditioning, airlines, and assimilation — mortally wounded his business. Air-conditioners replicated the cool of the mountains, airline deregulation made trips to Disney World more affordable, and time blurred ethnic distinctions.

There is also the setting, he said. Greene County, two hours north of New York City (with no traffic), offers verdant mountains, bracing creeks and the Rip Van Winkle legend; the thunderclaps actually do sound like celestial bowling. But beyond the tired look of its villages, it

has no ocean, no major tourist attraction — other than a 69-year-old game farm — and no viable plans for a casino. The Pataki administration and the State Legislature hopped-scotched the county last year when they announced plans for casinos in western New York and the Catskill counties of Sullivan and Ulster.

So, Mr. Sausto said, he sold the 90-acre property — everything from its Boccie Tavern to the map of Italy hanging on its main building's wall — to the operator of a Jewish boys' camp. And for the first time in his 41 years, his summer nights do not ring with the sounds of others on vacation.

"We talk about it all the time," he said. "But tastes change."

The stories behind many of Greene County's blue-collar resorts follow the Sausto paradigm: immigrant grandparents moved to the country, built a cabin or two, invited acquaintances to escape the sweltering city — and a family business was born. The Italians gravitated toward Cairo, the Scandinavians gathered in Greenville and the Jews who didn't go to the borscht belt headed to Tannersville.

The resorts advertised in the ethnic newspapers of New York City and churned out postcards by the thousands. Raymond Beecher, the 86-year-old county historian, flipped through old postcards kept in the county archives the other day, pausing occasionally to ponder some long-gone resort's attempt at distinction. The Mountain Spring Farm boasted that it was "The nearest thing to Ireland," while Mannell Acres bragged that "Our German-American table is well supplied."

Although there were certain constants, like swimming pools, the resorts had distinct personalities. The Pine Springs in Freehold had a kind of finger-snapping swagger, with nightclub acts and house bands. The Shepard Farm in Greenville, though, frowned on alcohol consumption. ("Those depending on stimulants for their fun should select a hotel where beer and liquors are sold," advised one of its brochures. "We do not have a bar and cater only to guests who do not require it.")

These personalities were not always pleasant. Up until the 1930's, a few resorts circulated brochures expressing a preference for gentiles.

Who knows when the decline be-

gan? Maybe it was when the Rose Haven in Acra burned down three decades ago, never to be rebuilt; all that remains is a weed-tangled sign, "Orchestra — Cocktail Lounge," and the ghost of a pool. Or maybe it was when the Sugar Maples in Maplecrest closed its doors, leaving a complex of shuttered buildings that still dominates the hamlet.

The expectations of customers changed. ("They wanted drastic things," said Donald Teator, the Greenville historian and a former resort bartender. "Like their own showers.") Longtime customers began coming for just the weekend, and then not at all. The magic evaporated somehow from the come-hither neon signs along Routes 23 and 32.

"Greene County sort of slipped back," said Gunther C. Ohm, a county legislator. "It is what it is. You see the people passing through, slipping up toward Saratoga or Lake George."

Nonprofit religious organizations from New York City and New Jersey have bought a few resorts, stirring some local resentment, because a few places seem to continue to operate as resorts even after they are bought by tax-exempt groups. "That's a problem," acknowledged Peter Markou, the county's director of economic development. "But if somebody's not making it, they have

every right to sell."

The trend is jarring for those with long memories. The finger-snapping place called Pine Springs is now the Miracle Mountain Christian Resort, owned by the Salvation and Deliverance Church of Harlem. Its brochure says that the resort is open to Christians of all denominations and offers the standard getaway accommodations — from a fitness center to V.I.P. suites with Jacuzzis.

But focusing on a niche market does not guarantee success, said Cam Mills, the on-site manager. "Nobody does mom-and-pop stuff anymore," he said, standing at the edge of the quiet, deserted resort. "No one does picnics anymore. We've got a pool, but Disney has a pool."

There are still resorts that are generations old sprinkled throughout the mountains, including here in Greenville. The Sunny Hill resort has a golf course now, and arranges trips to tourist attractions well outside Greene County. Baumann's Brookside offers Sunday morning table tennis, Wednesday evening marshmallow roasts and Friday night costume parties.

And the Balsam Shade is in mid-blur of yet another summer. There, in a sun room, Jyl and Len DeGiovine paused to consider the odd nature of their business, which is to create excitement daily in a slumbering

Catskills county.

"I'll run the climbing wall for the guests, and she'll run the bocce tournament," said Mr. DeGiovine. "I'll take them white-water rafting, and she'll take them to Saratoga."

This is the life that Mrs. DeGiovine, 48, has always known; her grandfather, Burdette Griffin, opened the Balsam Shade in 1935. But maintaining the business has become harder in recent years. She and her husband have expanded their season to nearly six months from four, she said, and are always hunting for new ideas. A few years ago, for example, they started an August balloon festival.

"We're making it," she said. "But we worry."

Outside, thunder rolled through the foothills and rain slashed against the windows. Inside, children dashed about the lobby, waitresses set out silverware for a spaghetti dinner, and the DeGiovines reminisced about how the nightclub at Pine Springs used to rock. How the guests at the Shepard used to hide their beer in the toilet tanks. How the Colonial Manor became The Love of Jesus Family Center. How one very popular resort never recovered from a fire.

"That poor place," Mrs. DeGiovine said.