

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

May 2012, Issue 217

Sunny Hill

A steady rain greeted the crowd of 35 who came out for our “Sunny Hill as Archetype for Greenville’s Boarding Houses / Resorts” program, hosted by Sunny Hill owners—Gary, Wayne, & Gail—at Sunny Hill. Attendance results later.

A productive starting point that was the photo board as one entered the Rec Hall, where nearly fifty 8x10 photographs marked the progress of Sunny Hill from its early days until mid-late century. Those of us of a certain age (most of us attending) recognized many of the stages, and then realized how an accumulation of small changes can almost escape unnoticed until one sees proof leading to the current state.

Key moments included the building of the kitchen, the pool, the pond, and, of course, the various buildings.

I introduced the evening with the general overview of how boarding houses started, gradually took more people, had to adapt to customers’ wants, competed with similar area ventures, built a pool so the stream was not needed, built a rec hall or some other similar structure, added staff to service the increasing number of guests, added on to the main house or built new structures, renovated for private bathrooms, installed the newfangled TVs, set up air conditioning for those sultry days that we used to have to live with, and so on.

The Nicholsons had reproduced and preserved older photographs and home movies on CD/DVD over ten years ago. This evening, they decided to show the movie disk, which contained a couple dozen of some old home movies. We saw Arnold with his parents, snow scenes, views that later would be filled in with resort development, Mae with children, guests acting like guests (a lot of dress-up scenes, especially men dressing as women), and a lot of good times. Although the films were silent, Gary narrated as we went along, filling in facts and background, sidestepping to a short story, and more, as Gary can do.

After the movie show, Wayne took over, filled in more information, and fielded questions about history and day-to-day operations. For me, one of the most telling parts was the list of entertainment that Sunny Hill provides, from the old fashioned bingo and horse-racing nights to the sought after golf and fishing to the rather recent Lake Loree centered events and the fire-works. Wayne also listed the trips the buses take guests to, stretching from Saratoga to Poughkeepsie, Cooperstown to Lee, MA

At meeting’s end, I thanked the Nicholsons for hosting our local history meeting and wished them continued success in their efforts. Their hospitality symbolizes the community spirit Sunny Hill has shown throughout the years.

And a big thank you goes to Stephanie and Christine for providing refreshments for the evening. Your help was much appreciated.

I tried to take attendance but was too busy to keep an accurate list, especially as numbers swelled by the 7:30 suggested opening. So, at the risk of leaving someone out (you will have to let me know so I can correct it for next newsletter), I will attempt such a list. I believe I saw: Stephanie Ingalls, Bob & Marie Shaw, Phyllis Beechert, Kathie Williams (it's been a while, Kathie, and nice to see you), Orrin & Shirley Stevens, Dot Blenis (and daughter), Walter & Donna Ingalls, Bette Welter, Christine Mickelsen, and County Historian Dave Dorpfeld.

Some of the visitors included (my memory is even hazier with this!): Ken Mabey, Jackie Park (Greenville's newest Town Clerk), Kurt Spohler and daughter Sam, Charlie Gombar (longtime acquaintance from my Spohler days), Margaret Donahue, the Mrs. Preisner & Bear & Jennings (I don't know them well enough to call by first name!), Sally Staunch, Mary Lou Nahas and several more that I missed or didn't know.

The next meeting, June 11, will feature Professor Dr. Titus, Senior Full Professor of the Geology Department at Hartwick College (also, a Freehold resident, a neighbor and friend of mine). Titus will remind us of the destructive power that Hurricane Irene unleashed on our area, and then explain why the damage was as bad as it was.

In addition to his college work, Dr. Titus writes a weekly geology column for the Daily Mail (Thursdays, usually) and a quarterly column for Kaatskill Life magazine. He has presented at least two other programs for the GLHG, and I look forward to his engaging lectures.

Also, we will use this event to encourage anyone who wants to contribute to the flood relief efforts to do so. In particular, I have agreed, with Robert's urging, that we take a free-will donation for the Pratt Museum in Prattsville which suffered major damage (both the museum and the town!). We thought it appropriate that one history-minded organization help another one for this event. Of course, if you wish to help out any flood relief effort in any other way, you should do so. And, I know that some of you have done your share already.

I will collect whatever (checks or cash) is given at our June meeting and forward it to Carolyn Bennett, director at the Pratt Museum. Thank you all, for any help, you are able to give.

Reminders:

The Greene County Historical Society's Home Tour takes place on June 2nd (I hope you are getting this newsletter in time). I enjoy seeing structures that otherwise would be out of my purview. The Town of Durham is the epicenter this year, and the tour starts at the Yellow Deli and runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Contact GCHS for more information, or feel free to contact me.

Reproduced in this newsletter is the list of resorts that I handed out at this past meeting. These are the ones for which I have found proof – advertisement, pamphlet, post card, etc. Remind me if you can think of others (I know I have to add King Hill Cottage, Kathie!)

I will attempt to put online the contents of newsletters that I create. This is the first one, and I will work my way back for several issues, or so. Then, I may include a few that stand out for historical purposes. The one major omission will be the pages that I have copied from some place else (brochures, photos, etc.), and this is a big

*last
minute
change -
next
newsletter*

omission but I don't have the technology to fix this yet.

The historian's files are available on line, if you are willing to download a Word file. Go to <http://www.dteator.com/files.htm>. (if this makes no sense to you non-computer-users, skip this paragraph!).

Looking ahead: June will be as described above; the July program will focus on what I have done on the resorts and web site; August will be shared with the Library, and will be a history-of-Greenville slide show (mostly); September is in limbo, as I might be out of the country.

We will try to schedule a share session but... to be honest, the last few share sessions, at least on an every-other-month basis, seemed to be lagging in attendance and fullness of spirit (although those of you present certainly made it worthwhile!). I think one or two or three in a season will be satisfactory but unless otherwise directed I will try to limit their number.

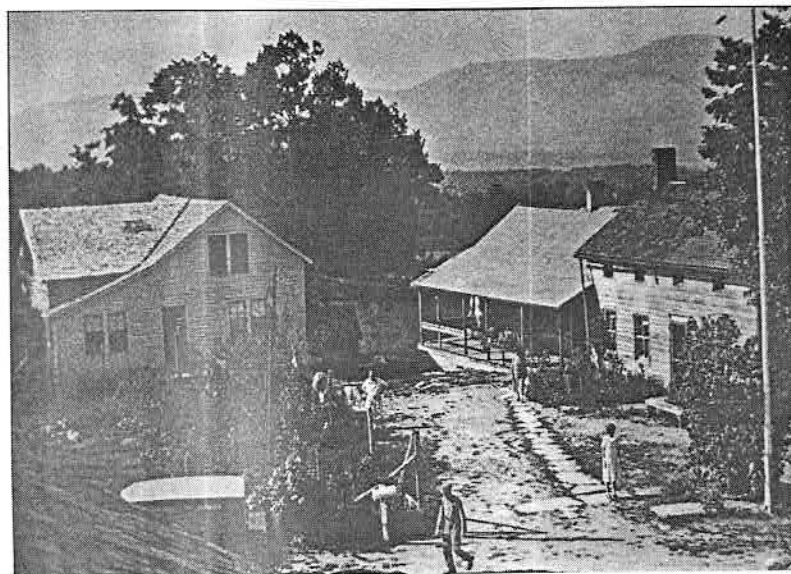
Having said that, there have to be programs to fill the gaps, and this year has

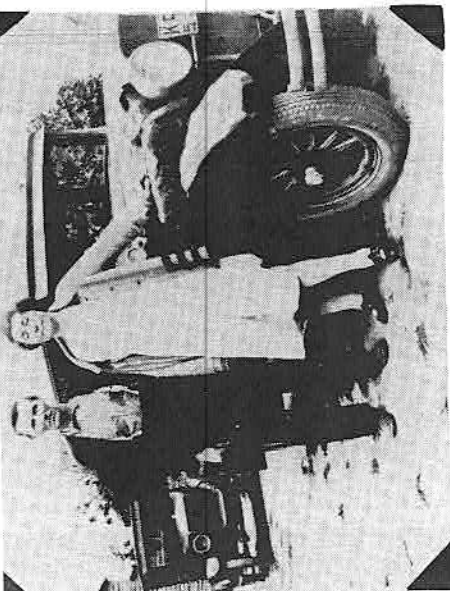
started well enough. As always, if you have an idea for programs, feel free to refer them to me (and a couple of you have done that, and thank you).

Included in this newsletter, in addition to the list of boarding houses / resorts, is a copy of a Sunny Hill history brochure. Also, below, is one of the early Sunny Hill photos.

Also, in addition to online posting of the newsletter, I can email it to those of you who wish to receive it that way. Contact me at my email address (dteator@gmail.com) if you would rather do that any time in the future.

Take care,





THE FIRST SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AT SUNNY HILL

In Mid-April of 1920 Mr. and Mrs. Peter Nichol森 (Peter and Gurine) accompanied by their son Arnold, age six, moved from an apartment in the Bayridge section of Brooklyn and headed for their new home in Greenville, Green County, New York.

Peter and Gurine Nichol森 came from **Arendal** and **Grimstad**, Norway, Aronold was born in **Edmonton**, Alberta, Canada.

They took the WestShore Railroad from Weehawken, N.J. to West Cocksackie and a Model T Ford from there to the farm. As they neared their destination the taxi became stuck in a series of snowbanks along what is now known as Fox Hill Road. While Peter helped the taxi driver to get backed out of the snow banks, Gurine began to walk along the dark woods road with Arnold at her side in an attempt to find her new home. As they walked the dark and lonely road with no light of any kind, Gurine began to sob from fear of exhaustion - in an unfamiliar wilderness, but Arnold clung tightly to his mother's hand and said, "Be brave, Ma! Be brave!"

EARLY HISTORY AT THE FARM

The Farm which Peter and Gurine purchased had been known in the previous century as the Edgett Farm and as nearly as can be learned was owned by the Edgett back into Colonial Times. A lady member of the Edgett family was 13 years of age when Washington was inaugurated President of the U.S.A. and at age 67 was buried in the private cemetery at Sunny Hill (a cemetery used by the Edgett family for many years). In the late 1800's the farm was purchased by Spencer Plank who sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Aslaug Olsen around 1910. In April 1920 it was named Sunny Hill Farm by Gurine. The name has been most appropriate, because year after year there are very many times when rain falls all around the area or state and does not fall at Sunny Hill. The good weather has made Sunny Hill an ideal spot for the vacationist.

EARLY DESCRIPTION OF SUNNY HILL

In 1920 Sunny Hill consisted of approximately 110 acres of land, less than half being cleared, stonewalls running in all directions, a living house, a barn, a combination pigpen and out-house (three-holer no partitions and the ever handy Sears Roebuck catalog), and an old wagonshed which fell during 1922 under the weight of the snow. On the front lawn in front of the present Main House was a vegetable garden where the routine vegetables were grown plus rhubarb and an annual crop of potatoes. Approximately six cows furnished milk and butter for the table and two horses were the means of power for plowing and other farm work. Chickens and pigs furnished the poultry and food for the table.

Peter, a carpenter by trade had to work in the city during most of the year and would try to do limited farming on week-ends and short stays on the farm. Gurine worked from early until late to care for the livestock and care for her household as well. She soon discovered that another source of income was needed in order for her family to make ends meet. She rented out rooms to three families who did their own cooking and took a few boarders besides - the weekly rate for board and room being \$5. per week for adults. All families cooked on the woodburning stove.

With Gurine and Arnold alone during the winters at Sunny Hill, conditions were very difficult. Invariably the well and pump would freeze causing severe hardships in watering livestock and obtaining water for cooking. Old fashioned snowstorms with inadequate snow removal equipment caused additional hardship in obtaining store supplies and mail would be several weeks in coming through hard winters.

PROGRESS BEGINS AT SUNNY HILL

In approximately 1925 Peter set up an old sawmill from parts which he salvaged here and there. Powered by an old Fordson tractor he began to cut logs and make them into lumber. He began work in 1925 on what was to become the Main House - where the old wagonshed had fallen down. The first flush toilet was put in about 1926 and a carbide gas lighting system about the same time. Electricity finally came to the farm about 1928. A bathroom was added upstairs for use by guests in upstairs rooms. There was on bathroom and toilet for approximately each ten or twelve guest rooms.

The main recreation was a hot dog party about once a week and an occasional trip by horse and buggy to Freehold or Greenville over a wagon trail type of road where the grass grew as high in the center of the road as along the sides.

OLD FARMHOUSE CONVERTED

The old farmhouse consisted of about five downstairs rooms, a living room, kitchen and summer kitchen where most of the cooking was done. Upstairs were about six more rooms with very low ceilings making it necessary for any one occupying such rooms to roll into bed sideways in order not to hit their heads on the ceilings.

The attic in this building was full of old spinning wheels, clocks newspapers, lamps, seashells and other items which in this day and age would have great value, but which in the 1920's were considered primarily junk. Periodically the horse and wagon would be used to unload part of the junk from the attic to be taken to the dump.

Eventually, in the late 1920's the old farmhouse was torn down and replaced by the present Annex building (which has since been rebuilt). A Store and Recreation Hall was provided down stairs in the Annex.

SUNNY HILL CONTINUES TO GROW

As Sunny Hill acquired more guest rooms more and more guests began to come. The present Recreation Hall was built in part in 1931 and added to four times since. The present swimming pool was built in 1933 (the second oldest in the area) and activities were planned for guests entertainment most nights of the week. Daily ball games became a large part of the recreational program from 1935 on.

The dining room which was built under the Main House served as the main eating place for almost thirty years although it was added to three times.

Bungalows A, B, C, D and E were built in order to meet the need for more summer guests.

In 1955 Bungalow D was rebuilt to provide the first building with private shower, toilet and sink facilities. The first motel built was the 4-unit Arendal Motel with private bath, and a radio in each room. Guests staying at the Arendal were considered the elite among Sunny Hill guests at the time.

Next came the building of the Grimstad Motel about 1960 with rooms ranking with the finest in existence at average resort areas. At the same time the Main House and Annex were both converted to all rooms with private baths. By 1961 Sunny Hill may have become the first resort in the area to have all rooms with private bath facilities.

THE 1940'S EVENTFUL YEARS AT SUNNY HILL

In July 1941 Mae Zulch came to spend a vacation at Sunny Hill from her home in the Parkchester section of the Bronx. After a couple of routine vacation days things happened fast with the result that Mae and Arnold were married seven weeks later - c Labor Day 1941. (And, as Arnold often said, "They have been laboring ever since.")

Gurine's health was very poor for the period of 1930 thru 1944, being severely crippled with arthritis, overburdened with hard work and truthfully speaking having no recreation year in and year out. She died at 57 years of age in 1944. Her passing was a great shock to members of the family and to all who knew her, as Gurine liked everyone and always saw the "good in people" rather than their faults. Peter continued to work hard - mostly at carpenter work and building and died in 1949 at the age of 67. But Gurine and Peter's hard work and long hours had laid the foundations upon which Sunny Hill was built.

In 1949 a large barn burned down in the center of Sunny Hill's grounds from unknown causes. It was replaced by an Annex building which contained a fellows dormitory. This building was later enlarged and became known as the present Edmonton Motel - a 24 unit building with private bath and radio in each room plus two TV lounge rooms.

The year 1949 was the last year for any farming and cows at Sunny Hill. It was the turning point which determined that Sunny Hill would be in the vacation business only from then on.

Large scale tree and stonewall removal took place in the 1940's and 1950's with the result that more than 3 miles of stone walls were removed from the grounds at Sunny Hill or more than 80,000 tons of stonewalls. Most of this removal was accomplished by hand labor. Knolls were knocked off and low areas filled in to produce the 75 acres of landscaped grounds which Sunny Hill has today.

PERSONAL NOTES ABOUT THE NICHOLSENS

At the age of 17, Arnold assumed the ever increasing responsibility in the management of Sunny Hill due to Gurine's ill health. He spent many hours of careful planning and thoughts in laying out the various buildings and sports facilities from a point of beauty, practicability, and enjoyment to the vacationist. In addition to making the plans and layouts for the various Buildings and sports plus the golf course he has also planned the landscaping and layout of shrubbery and tree planting.

During the period of 1933-38 he attended the University of Alabama and Columbia University, obtaining B.S. and M.S. degrees in Health and Physical Education and History and minored in social science and psychology. He taught in the field for seven years which included work at high school, Y.M.C.A., Delehanty Institute and three years at Bethany College, West Virginia where he taught Physical Education courses and headed the physical training for Navy V-5 and V-12 men as well as Army Glider-Pilots in training. With the end of World War II Arnold resigned from the teaching field to devote more time to Sunny Hill and the resort business.

He became very active in community affairs, serving as president of the Chamber of Commerce for 7 years, as President of the Fire Company, an officer and worker in many local organizations and activities. From 1954-1964 he ran for office, was elected and served for ten years as Town and County Supervisor and was Chairman of the County Board of Supervisors for two years. During his ten years in office Arnold headed or was a member of almost all of the regular and special committees on the Board. During Arnold's time in office as Supervisor of Greenville this town which is one of the smaller of the 932 towns in New York State at the time received "State Wide Recognition" on at least five occasions for making exceptional progress in modernizing town highways, in equalizing assessments and utilizing business practices which led to saving of many thousands of dollars of taxpayers monies.

As a resort owner his many activities in an average work day of 18 - 19 hours included typing many thousands of letters each year; booking and planning large recreation programs for 6-7 days a week during the five month resort season; square dance calling and piano playing for group singing; hiring and coordinating of staff personnel; guided tours of the local and surrounding areas and other duties too numerous to mention.

Mae has been an invaluable part of the Nichol森 team. Adjusting very rapidly from city life to life in the country, she has stepped into the large responsibility of buying food, planning meals and seeing that meals are served on time to hundreds of guests and employees. In addition, she plans room decorations and takes charge of linen purchase and maintenance, makes many bookings; treats first aid cases and does countless other chores in her 17-18 hour day also - plus bringing up three youngsters and maintaining a home.

Gary, was born in 1945; Wayne seven years later and Gail a year after that.

Gary has demonstrated a keen interest in the resort business and likes especially the challenge of responsibility for maintenance of machinery in care of Sunny Hill's grounds and care of the golf course. He is an excellent mechanic and experienced bulldozer and backhoe operator - able to run almost all types of mechanical equipment. Attendance at Albany Business College helped to give Gary valuable education necessary in the business world today.

Wayne and Gail show a very keen interest in Sunny Hill and have assumed the many duties connected with its operation.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIFTIES & LAKE LOREE

A miracle happened at Sunny Hill in 1954 when a local bulldozer operator, Bud Young, suggested building a lake on Sunny Hill's grounds where there are no streams or sizable springs of any kind. In fact, for many years Sunny Hill was plagued by lack of good water supplies and the Nicholsons were forced to have wells drilled deeper and deeper.

At Bud Young's suggestion, more than 15 acres of woods were cleared and he proceeded to dig out the stumps and build a dam. He uncovered a considerable number of surface springs which yielded a small amount of water. However, when the melting snows and Spring thaws came, the Nicholsons were amazed to see the lake fill up with water and hold it's level to a surprising degree because of the clay content of the soil. The lake was named Lake Loree in honor of Gail Loree Nicholson and has been a real "godsend" to Sunny Hill in enabling storage of millions of gallons of water used for resort consumption, boating and fishing, and the maintenance of the golf course.

Stocked with large mouth bass which have been caught and weighed up to 8 pounds, blue gills, sunfish, perch and other species, it affords a most enjoyable sport to the fisherman and many hours of pleasure for the youngsters.

In 1955 Bungalow D was rebuilt to provide the first building with private shower, toilet and sink facilities. The first motel built was the 4 - unit Arendal Motel with private bath and a radio in each room. Guests staying there were considered the elite among Sunny Hill patrons at that time.

THE 60'S BRING MODERN CHANGES TO SUNNY HILL

Next came the building of the Grimstad Motel during 1960 with rooms ranking with the finest in existence at average resort areas. The Grimstad was named after Gurine Nicholson's hometown in Norway.

At the same time the Main House and the Annex were both converted to all private baths. By 1961, Sunny Hill may have become the first resort in the area to provide these private facility features.

GARWAYNE HALL EMERGES

A long cherished dream became a reality in 1961 when Garwayne Hall was built to provide a very modern and spacious dining hall, second to none anywhere - where guests could enjoy their meals three times a day. This dining room has one of the most spectacular views in all of the Catskills. The building was named after Gary and Wayne Nicholson. Seating 300 guests, this building also features a very modern kitchen with the finest in cooking equipment such as electric and steam pressure cookers, automatic egg boilers and homemade ice cream making machine which enables the kitchen staff to work under the most ideal conditions.

By 1963 the old barn was remodeled by adding a new wing and was renamed the Edmonton after Arnold's birthplace, Edmonton Alberta, Canada.

PARKCHESTER MOTEL

Between 1964 and 1965 the 20 room Parkchester Motel was built furnishing the finest accommodations to be found anywhere on the East Coast of the nation. Equipped with private bath, an additional vanity and dressing area, TV, radio, wall to wall carpeting, porch and magnificent view, the units have been well received by everyone. This is Sunny Hill's largest motel and is named after Mae Nicholson's birthplace, Parkchester, Bronx NY.

SUNNY HILL GOLF COURSE

In 1968, the original 9 - hole golf course was opened which provided a very popular attraction to Sunny Hill guests and to the local public. It was a challenging Par 30 course designed and laid out by Arnold and is 1700 yards in length. Of the more than 4000 persons who played it during 1968 only two equalled or broke par. Comments on the new course and clubhouse which provides extremely modern locker and shower facilities, a lounge room, refreshment area, etc., have been most enthusiastic.

This same year the remodeling of the Main House and Annex took place. These were part of the original property. Furnishings were updated and the exterior of both buildings were resurfaced. They were renamed the Viking Main and Viking Annex in honor of the family's Norwegian heritage.

For the 1969 season, Bungalow B and the old Arendal Motel were taken down and were replaced by a new 8 unit Arendal which was named after Peter Nicholson's hometown in Norway.

THE 70'S

Major remodeling of the present Recreation Hall occurred between 1971-72. This was originally built in part in 1931. It now holds 300 people comfortably and provides a modern snack bar, game room facilities and a huge dance floor.

In 1972-73 Bungalow E was demolished and replaced with the Country Squire motel. This was the last accommodation constructed giving Sunny Hill exactly 100 rooms. It was named after the surrounding area.

The next five years proved to be difficult with the State of New York mandating waste treatment plants, costing Sunny Hill valuable land and a great deal of money which halted the implementing of new projects.

THE 80'S - A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

This new decade brought with it the passing of Arnold Nicholson. He never saw his last dream come true, the new 9 holes to the golf course to complete it, affectionately called "Arnie's Back Nine".

In the mid 80's, New York State mandated new standards for water filtration. For 5 years now, Sunny Hill has had to conform with new regulations and expensive new equipment to meet those standards each year. All this work has been at a cost of over \$150,000.00 and is still ongoing.

Further along came the picnic Pavilion at Lake Loree, the Sunny Hill Trolley, the Fire Engine, the Merry Go Round, the Doodle Bug and new buses to transport our guests to and from various day trips. For our fitness minded guests, there is a hiking trail around Lake Loree, about a half mile long.

The Entertainment Center, under the GarWayne Hall, is complete with miniature golf, bocci ball courts, video games and a pool table.

THE 90'S

With many of Sunny Hill's nightly entertainment comes the Lake side parties with bonfires, hotdogs, etc. And to provide light along the way to Lake Loree, Sunny Hill installed quaint turn-of-the-century lamp posts. These new lights, also dotted throughout the resort, give Sunny Hill a certain ambiance in the evening hours. During the summer of '93 a new deck was constructed alongside the Clubhouse overlooking Lake Loree. Behind the Grimstad motel a new playground with 2 towers and extra large deck was created.

We cannot continue without mentioning the steadfastness of Mae Nicholson, wife of Arnold and mother of Gary, Wayne & Gail. At 78 years of age, she still manages to be at work in the kitchen by 6 AM seven days a week on season. Surprisingly enough, her work day does not end much before 7 PM!

The Viking Annex was removed, but replaced by the new Austland Motel. It was so named for the farm that Gurnie Nicholson came from so many years ago. This pride of Sunny Hill boasts 2 queen size beds, 25" color TVs and each unit has it's own refrigerator. The motel also holds a work-out room and laundry facilities for the convenience of our guests.

1994 ushers in the 75th Anniversary of Sunny Hill Resort. We are very proud of the long standing traditions, the many guests, old and new. We will endeavor to keep up the standards to which our guests have become accustomed and feel that the summer vacation business is not really a business, but the care and entertainment of a large family.

