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Barn in Management Unit 2. Photo taken by Barbara Barone, SCSWCD.

IV. Chestnut Creek Watershed Description

A. Community History and Current Conditions

1. Background

In 1743, the first settlement in the Township of Neversink was created. The area, named Eureka, was situated where the Rondout and Chestnut streams flowed together. As more families arrived, the settlement grew. During the American Revolution (1775-1783), settlers were forced out of the area. The Town of Neversink remained unoccupied by white settlers until about 1788.¹

Grahamsville, formerly called Chestnut Valley due to the vast number of Chestnut trees, was the site of a memorable battle in 1778, which led to the renaming of the town after Lieutenant John Graham (Photo 1). A more detailed account of the naming and development of the Town of Neversink can be found in Township of Neversink 1798-1998, by Loretta Ackerly. Also see Figure 2, Town of Neversink Timeline.

Before 1809, the area we now know as Sullivan County was included under Ulster County. The towns of Denning, Rockland, Fallsburg, Callicoon, Fremont and Liberty comprised an area designated “The Neversink Country”. There are various interpretations of the origin of the name of the area, however the exact meaning of Neversink remains a mystery.¹ The word ‘Neversink’ may be derived from the Native American word, ‘Mahackamack’, the network of streams that flow through

this region of the Catskills. One idea of what this word implies is, “a continual running stream which never sinks into the ground so as to become dry.” Another interpretation would be that the water flows so quickly it never allows an object to reach its bottom, hence the object will ‘never sink’.

On March 16, 1798, the “Town of Neversink” was formed under an act passed by the Ulster County Legislature. On March 27, 1809, Sullivan County was separated from Ulster County. Only a few years before the separation there were only four towns in the County; Neversink, Lumberland, Mamakating and Thompson. However, during and after this time other townships were formed and separated from Neversink, leaving what defines the “Town of Neversink” today.¹

The combination of economic conditions and the coming of the reservoirs for provision of water to downstate New York have left Grahamsville, Neversink, Claryville, and Willowemoc as the communities in existence today. The towns committed to history are Neversink Flats,



Photo 1. Chestnut Valley-Grahamsville
(<http://www.catskillonline.com/history/neversink/>,
February 2003).

Bittersweet, Curry's Corners, Unionville, Eureka (Neversink's first settlement) and Montela.¹

Lifestyles of the Past

During the late 1800's, the primary livelihood in the Town of Neversink was dairy farming, followed by lumbering and leather tanning. Chestnut Creek sustained two gristmill operations, a number of sawmills, a knife shop and several tanneries.¹

It appears that the Chestnut Valley bottoms were at one time covered in hemlock forest, which is significant to stream and landscape evolution in the area. The leather tanning process required large quantities of tannin rich hemlock bark and dozens of vats for soaking. Forests cleared for agriculture provided a plentiful supply of bark.³ Tanneries were often located on the creek because of their high demand for water. Tanneries in the vicinity of Grahamsville that utilized Chestnut Creek include Stoddard Hammond's (Reynolds) Tannery, Curry's Tannery, and Michael Walter's Tannery. The most successful years for Neversink tanneries were 1840-1870. Following the Civil War (1861-1865), demand for tanned leather declined and combined with steady depletion of hemlock forests, resulting in the decline of the tannery industry.

During the 1800's, each farm functioned as its own community, being almost entirely self-sufficient.⁵ However, farmers often brought grain to local gristmills for flour. There were two gristmills located on Chestnut Creek. They utilized flowing water as a power source to operate large stone wheels to grind grain.¹ In MU 1, on



Photo 2. View of remnants of old grist mill below Crystal Falls. (Photo courtesy of Dean family).

Archie Dean's property, remnants of one of these mills resides at the bottom of Crystal Falls and serves as a reminder of the past (Photo 2). There was once a dam located above this mill which created a small pond. Chestnut Creek was once transported through a flume from the pond to the grist mill to turn the stone wheels.

A knife factory was also situated on Chestnut Creek next to the Methodist Church, which still stands in Grahamsville. There was a large turning wheel on the stream side of the building which used the flowing water to generate power for the factory. The knife factory burned to the ground in 1909.¹

All of the above endeavors relied on the Chestnut Creek and employed numerous residents throughout the Town of Neversink. Thus, livelihoods of many have banked on the healthy function of Chestnut Creek throughout history.

The Turn of the Century

The Sullivan County Gazetteer and Business Directory (circa 1872-73) reports Neversink as a flourishing business

district. Neversink was the center of trade for people throughout the County. However, with the coming of the railroad to Sullivan County in 1873, commercial opportunities diminished and a new lifestyle was to be adopted. Hotels and summer resorts attracting . Neversink was quick to pick up on the demand for this expanding industry and other areas of Sullivan County soon followed. The area became known for the clean air, water and country atmosphere that the summer resorts offered.¹

By the end of the 19th century, farming remained the primary method of making a living, but boarding houses and business were beginning to spread.

The Reservoirs

The turn of the century not only brought changes to upstate New York, but had its impact on New York City as well. The population of downstate New York continued to expand due to the high rate of immigration. Clean drinking water became scarce as the main sources of New York water were depleted or polluted. The Board of Water Supply for the City of New York was formed in 1905 and enlisted to locate and plan a new water supply system. The Catskill Mountains were a prime source area due to the constant flow of clean water and sparsely populated forested landscape. Six reservoirs in New York City's West of Hudson River water supply, including Rondout Reservoir were constructed during the early and mid 1900's. These reservoirs were designed to deliver water through a series of aqueducts (Photo 3). The reservoirs were divided into two systems, the Catskill System which includes Schoharie and Ashokan Reservoirs, and the Delaware system



Photo 3. Catskill Aqueduct. October 3, 1923 (NYC DEP, 2003).

which includes Cannonsville, Pepacton, Neversink, and Rondout reservoirs. Both systems deliver water through the East of Hudson River reservoir system to collection points prior to final delivery to New York City.

By 1939, the construction of the reservoirs was underway. Rondout Reservoir, into which Chestnut Creek empties, was completed in June of 1951 (Photo 4). Neversink Reservoir was in full operation by 1955.¹

This was a time of hardship for the Town of Neversink. There are a variety of stories concerning the loss of homes and lives to construction of the dams and pipes, and the abrupt change forced upon the lifestyle and history of families



Photo 4. Rondout Reservoir, 2004.

throughout the area. More information concerning the social impacts the reservoirs had on the area can be found in Township of Neversink 1798-1998, by Loretta Ackerly. Many of the old timers who remain in the area still remember the time period when part of Chestnut Valley was flooded. In an interview with Archie Dean, he recalled relocating 2 barns, a silo, and 3 small bungalows outside of the reservoir area. One of the barns they removed still sits across from Mr. Dean's home in Grahamsville.

Floods

Neversink's history is marked with destructive natural disasters. Settling villages and hamlets along ever-flowing streams and rivers, such as Chestnut Creek, has contributed to massive flooding and flood damages over the past couple of centuries. Some people today can still recall the wrath that the Great Flood of 1928 released on Grahamsville and Eureka. As a result of the 1928 flood, three men drowned and several were injured, nearly 100 homes were washed away, numerous bridges were lost, 500 people were left homeless, the water supply to the area was polluted or destroyed, and acres of farmland and several hundred farm buildings were

destroyed²

Floods have been documented in Chestnut Creek as far back as 1786. During a flood in Eureka in 1938, roads were damaged and landslides made escape to the hills difficult. The main road into town was flooded with three feet of water and damaged. One resident stated, "the waters rose with such great suddenness and the cars could scarcely be rushed to the hill before the flood was upon them."² Since the building of the reservoirs, there have been periods of high water, such as the flood of 1975 (Photo 5), but nothing has come close to the floods of the past. Some speculate that the reservoirs have 'tamed' the river by giving it a controlled outlet, while others feel that the next time we receive a 100-year storm there will be serious flooding.¹ For additional information about Chestnut Creek flood history and flooding behavior, see Section IV.B.2 Hydrology and Flood History.

2000 Census

Historically, farming was the most popular economic activity followed by tourism. Today, the labor force differs significantly according to the 2000 Census. The 2000 Census documented the Town of Neversink Population at 3,553 and a Total Employed Labor Force of 1,483. Agriculture is now at the bottom of a diverse list of employment⁶ (Figure 1). About 27% of jobs are related to resources that may come from or end up in the Chestnut Creek watershed (quarries, road building, farming, fishing, etc.) influencing the natural landscape. Stream and resource related jobs may have increased in the management/professional category when considering such agencies as the

Chestnut Creek Stream Management Plan



Washout

State Dept. of Transportation workers begin repairs on Rt. 55 at Curry, where Chestnut Creek spilled over its

banks Sunday and washed out the road's eastbound lane. Problems caused by the weekend's heavy

—Record photo by Phillip Blanchard

7/22/75

Middletown Record

rainstorms were most severe in the towns of Neversink and Liberty. Story, other photo, Page 3.

Photo 5. 1975 Flood (Middletown Record, 1975).

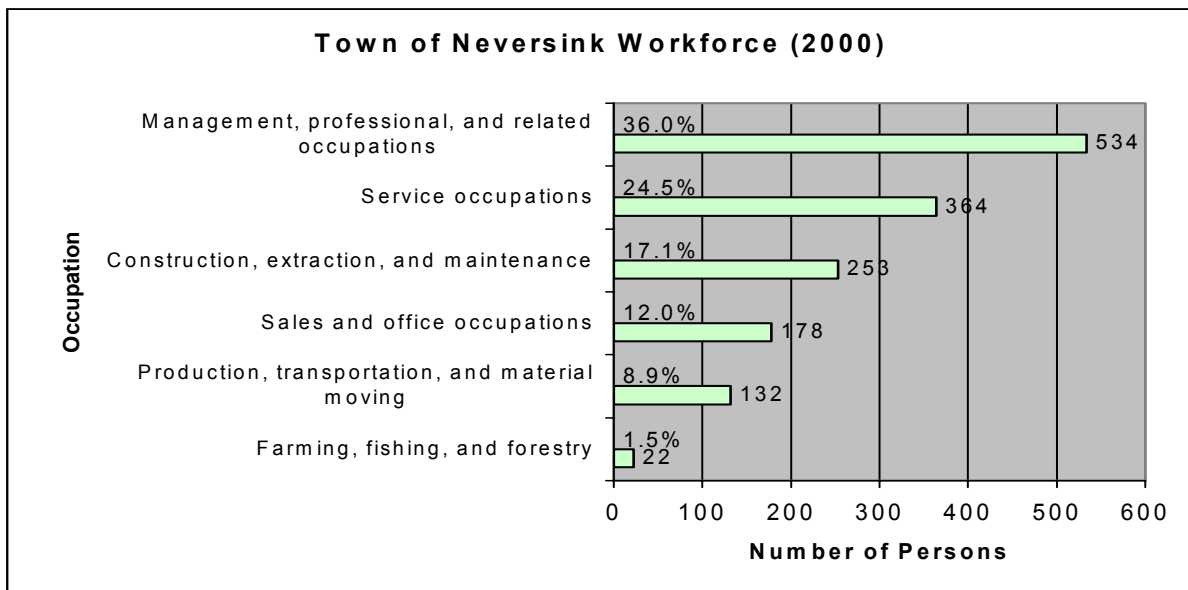


Figure 1. Breakdown of Occupations, Town of Neversink Census 2000.

Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Sullivan County Soil and Water Conservation District (SCSWCD). These agencies as well as other resource jobs increase in opportunities as stream and resource partnerships grow.

2. Recreational Opportunities in Chestnut Creek

Chestnut Creek is also viewed differently for its benefits today than historically. Instead of utilizing the creek primarily for manufacturing leather, flour or other such products as in years gone by, it is valued more for the recreational opportunities it offers. The governing body of the Town of Neversink is continually brainstorming ways to beautify the town and demonstrate good stewardship. Chestnut Creek is a central part of the natural resource wealth of Neversink.

Fishing is a popular pastime associated with Chestnut Creek providing enjoyment for local residents and tourists. The Town of Neversink, the Grahamsville Rod and Gun Club and the Sullivan County Sportsman Association work together to fund a stream-stocking program, depositing trout at selected locations in Chestnut Creek every spring. For more information on stocking, see Volume I, Section IV.B.4. Water Quality and Ecological Health. The Grahamsville Rod and Gun Club has donated fishing poles to the Daniel Pierce Library for public use (Volume I, Section IV.A.4. Grahamsville Rod and Gun Club), while volunteers throughout the community are available to give guidance to those who need it. Georgiana Lepke, Town Supervisor, wishes for residents to take advantage of public access to Chestnut Creek behind the

Town Hall for this purpose. Some of the fondest memories held by long time residents of the creek include learning to fish in the flowing waters as children.

Angler enthusiasts may prefer the reservoir for most fishing, depending on personal preference. Fishing in the reservoir can be relaxing, often involves a boat and calm waters, and larger fish. You are required to have a New York City DEP permit to fish in the reservoirs.

A Grahamsville Museum Committee has recently formed and is currently working on development of The Museum of Time and the Valleys. The mission of the museum is “To honor and preserve our history and share the heritage of our area including actively adding to the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the history and value of the Rondout and Neversink Watersheds.” The museum is intended to be housed in the new addition of the Daniel Pierce Library and will eventually form partnerships with schools and other institutions to provide environmental education.

The Chestnut Creek Landowner Perspective Survey results in 2001 showed that Chestnut Creek is most valued for aesthetic purposes (Volume I, Section VI. Appendices). A walking trail is available, beginning at the Fairgrounds in Grahamsville, for year round use. Town Supervisor, Georgianna Lepke, hopes to incorporate Chestnut Creek’s ambience into weekend functions behind the Town Hall. A stage is situated adjacent to the Creek here, which local musicians can use to display their talent while residents relax along the stream bank.

Chestnut Creek Stream Management Plan

Neversink Timeline 1740-Present

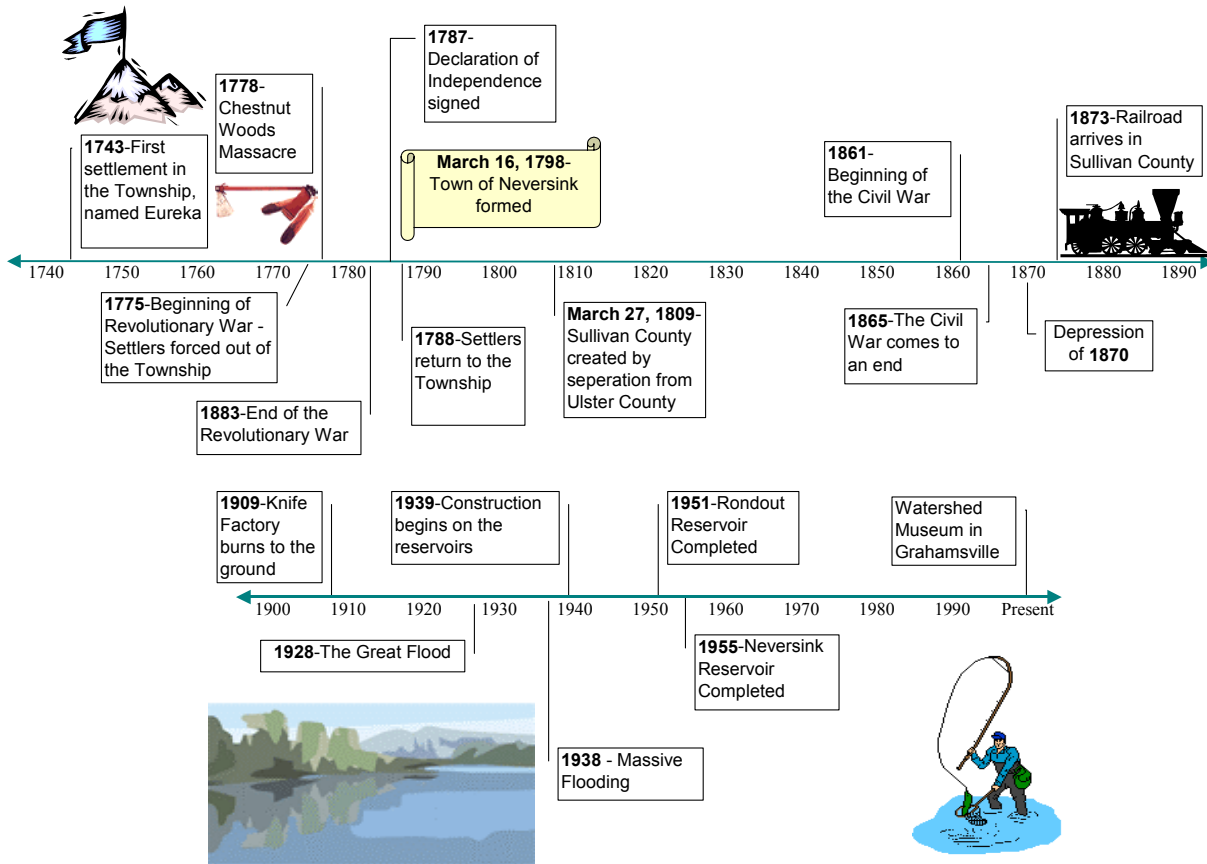


Figure 2. Town of Neversink Timeline. (Created with information derived from the sources below).

Sources

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2. Ellenville, Ulster County, N.Y. Thursday August 11, 1938. *The Ellenville Journal*.
3. Richards, Matt, *Bark Tanning*, June 2000, <http://www.braintan.com/barktan/1basics.htm>, 2/10/2003
4. Schuetz, Annemarie. October 1999. *Watershed Museum may come to Neversink*. Times Harold Record.
5. Smythe, Carol. 2003. Personal Interview.

6. U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.
7. Dean, Archie. 2003. Personal Interview.

3. A History of the Beaver Dam Club

By

Marilyn Shurter Cotesworth

September 7, 2003

According to a map, dated 1860, there was a man named Barney "Hots" Barefoot who owned a farm and sawmill near what is today the Beaver Dam Club lake. He sold the farm and sawmill in 1867 to Gerald Dubois. From that date until 1890 Mr. Dubois ran the sawmill located on Red Brook.

Local lore was "that each evening, after sawing and peeling operations had stopped, a family of beavers would swim down Red Brook and dam the stream, only to have the workmen tear down the dam the next day. This became a continuing nuisance until the mill owner finally surrendered to the beavers and decided to sell his land and sawmill."* Some men from Ellenville had been looking for land and a lake to buy with the intention of forming a club for fishing and hunting and they saw the potential in what the beavers had started and decided to buy the property. Thus, ten business and professional men from Ellenville purchased the Dubois acreage and farm. They also bought the adjoining land belonging to George B. and Nancy Childs on September 29, 1890 for \$1,800. The deed to the Child's property states "the land being in the Town of Neversink Great Lot #4 Hardenbergh Patent," and mentions sections in the "Drowned Lands", part of a "Patent granted to Captain Johannis Ver Nooy in 1718 and said to extend to a place beyond Red Brook near Beaverdam."* The total land they eventually purchased is

that which the Club owns today, consisting of approximately 277 acres with a lake of about 70 acres. These same ten men filed Certificate of Incorporation papers on August 2, 1890, naming the club for the industrious beavers that had originally dammed the stream. Thus the Beaver Dam Club, Inc. was officially formed. The road running between today's Route 42 and the Ulster Heights Road and through the Club property became the Beaver Dam Road. The Certificate of Incorporation from the State of New York specified, "the particular business and object of the Club is hunting & fishing and the propagation of game & fish, and acquiring of land, ponds & streams for said purpose". The deed names the ten as the Board of Trustees to manage the Club and the office of the Club was located in Ellenville, New York. The By-Laws of the Club adopted in 1890 showed they would have only 30 members, nine of them serving as the Board of Trustees who would then elect a President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. It has always been a private club with its membership currently limited to 35.

Shortly after the Club was established a stone and earthen dam with a 50-foot long spillway was built to replace the beaver dam and to form the lake that exists today (Photo 1). A wooden bridge was built over the spillway for access to the far side of the lake.

Some time in the 1890's the members had a log clubhouse built and this still stands today exactly as it was built over 100 years ago, the only changes being porches that were soon added which encircled the building, and an upstairs loft which was built over one side porch. The Clubhouse

Chestnut Creek Stream Management Plan

consists of 6 bedrooms upstairs, and a large kitchen and meeting room on the first floor. A stone fireplace in the meeting room and the stone chimney had to be torn down in the late 1930's as it was threatening to pull the entire building over. The fireplace was replaced with a wood-burning stove. Behind the Clubhouse stood one shed for firewood and another one for ice, which was cut in the winter from the lake in large blocks, packed in sawdust and stacked in the shed. This supply was used for the farmhouse and Clubhouse iceboxes as well as those in some of the members' summer cottages. This practice continued until electricity reached the area. Over the years, twelve cottages were built on the Club property. Several of them are now over 70 or 80 years old and two of the oldest are still owned by the same families that originally

built them. A few, after falling into disrepair or succumbing to fire, have been expanded or replaced. These 12 cottages are all that are now allowed, with the remainder of the property still being preserved in as pristine a manner as when it was originally purchased. Maintaining the quiet, peaceful atmosphere of the lake and its environs is what has kept the Club a special place all these years. The wonderful fishing lake that was envisioned by the founders became a reality and made the Club tremendously popular for its pickerel, perch and bullheads.

After the Clubhouse was built the members had a large, 8-slip boathouse constructed on the northwest side of the lake. It was one of the best loved features of the club, but unfortunately it only lasted until the 1960's when it was torn down by



Photo 1. Beaver Dam Pond

two members who claimed it was in disrepair, with neither the knowledge nor the approval of the other members. The boathouse, sadly, was never replaced.

The Clubhouse became a very important social center for the Club for over half a century. All six bedrooms were usually full on summer weekends until the 1940's. Many members would elect to stay at the Clubhouse for a week or so at a time. Before the automobile was in common use the trip to the club from Ellenville via the Ulster Heights Road in a two horse surrey or carriage took at least half a day. Members traveling such distances would spend the night in the Clubhouse in order to have time to hunt or fish.

Staying at the Club was made especially easy for the members due to the efforts of the Club caretakers. The land the Club had originally purchased came with a farmhouse and barn, (supposedly those of Barney "Hots" Barefoot), which was an ideal arrangement as the members had couples live in the farmhouse as full time caretakers. The Clubhouse had been built just to the west of the farmhouse so that it would be conveniently located near the caretaker's home. There were caretakers at the club until the 1990's. Most of them had dairy herds and farmed the land to earn a living, or were retired, but the man was responsible for maintaining the property, the buildings and the dam. He also supplied milk, eggs and vegetables to the members and tended the boats, cut the ice in the winter from the lake, and kept the hay cut in the fields in the summer. The caretaker's wife had to keep the Clubhouse clean and supply linens and other necessities for members staying there, at a cost of twenty five cents a night,

raised to fifty cents a night in the 1940's. She was also responsible for providing mid-day dinners on Sundays for members and guests, and these were so popular it often took several sittings to serve everyone. There was a fish cleaning station on the back porch of the Clubhouse, where the caretaker cleaned "bullheads" early in the morning after late night fishing parties by members and their guests. The subsequent fried fish breakfasts were so good that nightly bullheading excursions became increasingly popular. The first known caretaker was Mr. Rampe. The last caretaker's wife to serve meals, in the mid 1940's was Mrs. Harold Deirfelter, who was famous for her chicken dinners and her hand churned vanilla custard ice cream.

After the late 1940's the members' use of the Clubhouse changed. What had always been a popular weekend or vacation destination became less desirable following the war. The bedrooms at the Clubhouse were rarely used after the 1950's when members could easily drive to the Club and get back home quickly. So the Clubhouse became a place for the business meetings and the annual social functions of the Club or as a spot to sit awhile on a day trip. The lure of "catching the big one", however, still draws the fishing enthusiasts to the lake all summer long, and in the winter ice fishing is popular. In the fall hunters roam the property looking for pheasant, deer and wild turkeys.

Most of the members now live in Sullivan or Ulster Counties or other locations in New York, and a few are from New Jersey, Delaware, Florida, and Ohio. The current

Officers of the Club are Herbert DeWitt, Jr., President; Craig Wilhelm, Vice President; Jim Cotesworth, Secretary and Harold Buley, Treasurer. Many of the memberships have been handed down from one generation to the next, so the Club has become an important part of family tradition for those members and their families. In 1990, and in 2000, special 100th and 110th year anniversary parties were held to commemorate the founding.

The Club's unifying theme over the last 113 years has been just what the founding members stated in the Certificate of Incorporation in 1890 – “the business of the Club is hunting & fishing” and that is what it's members have loved about the Beaver Dam Club ever since.

Sources

*"A Brief History of the Ulster Heights Area";

**"History of Sullivan County" by J.E. Quinlan;

Beaver Dam Club documents;

Remembrances by Mae Potter Shurter, now 98 years old who spent 90 summers at the Club and whose father, Frank J. Potter became a member in the 1890's and was Club president for the better part of 50 years.

4. Grahamsville Rod & Gun Club

The following is the contribution of local residents:

This club is believed to be one of the oldest such organizations in the State of New York.

Grahamsville Rod & Gun Club was organized for the protection, propagation and conservation of fish and game and to foster and promote good sportsmanship. To further these ends some of the activities in which the club participates include: stocking the Chestnut and its tributaries with trout; releasing white rabbits and pheasants in the Tri Valley area; providing fishing poles that area youth can use for fishing local streams with the cooperation of the Daniel Pierce Library; holding a local “big buck” contest; sponsoring youngsters at the DeBruce Conservation Camp; working with the Sullivan County Federation of Sportsman and the Fish and Wildlife Coalition for Youth of the Hudson Valley each fall to put on a Youth Outdoor Expo; and participating in the Neversink Agricultural Society's Fair at Grahamsville and the Sportsman's show at the Sullivan County Museum in Hurleyville. The club's main fund raising activity is the sale of knives.

Meetings are held the first Thursday after the first Wednesday of the month at the Grahamsville First Aid Squad building. The club owns four boats for members' use.

The club is a member of the Sullivan County Federation of Sportsman and New York State Conservation Counsel, Inc.

Some early members of the club, that

Jack and Ray Denman could recall, included: Bill Weizman, Bruce Denman, Jack Denman, Ken Roosa, Jack Donaldson, Roger Banta, Tony Rojt, Cal Crary, Harrison Krom, Art TerBush, Harry Cole, Miles Gillett, Harry Moore, John Jones, John Knight, Chan Dayton, Sam Anderson and Clarence Krum.

Chestnut Valley Rod and Gun Club (Previous Name of the Grahamsville Rod and Gun Club)

Some of My Early Memories
By Jack Denman

1943-44-45

Meetings were held over Mark Slater's shop, which was later converted to Roger Banta's store and workshop. Now owned and operated as an antique store - (I believe, at any rate it's still there.) On the East side of the second story was a two position 50ft 22 rifle range and competition took place on a regular basis among members and some local clubs.

The club distributed trout to many of the local streams and stocked a lot of feeder streams to the Chestnut that the State didn't get to. In those years these streams ran full year round, today many dry up. As the fish grew they would seek bigger water, that was the theory.

The club worked with the State on various stocking programs and was allowed voice in the County and State on sportsman's issues.

I recall fundraisers in the form of trap shoots, turkey shoots etc. being held several years at Art Akerley's farm behind

Chestnut Creek Stream Management Plan

where Bob Botsford lives now - all fields then. Also was held on the hill behind Bruce Denman's on the level below Bonnell's farm. A 22 shot shell mini - trap shoot was held at the Grahamsville Fair for several years.

About 1946 the club purchased the Odd Fellows hall, I believe from Mark Slater. Fred Akerley held the mortgage and made the sale possible - Art Akerley's father. Now serious money had to be raised.

Alton Carney, my great uncle, was running the Roscoe Theater at the time and he agreed to bring over and show his first run movies every Saturday night. So Grahamsville now had a movie house with good shows followed by food and dancing (locals provided music) once a week year round.

It was great. Downtown Grahamsville was jammed on Saturday nights and I recall good times by all. Some more than others as they made regular trips outside to their cars for a nip or two. Kids take this all in. Neversink was dry - on the inside at least.

The junior members, such as me, did the grunt work. Setting up chairs, dishes, cleaning, etc.

The rifle team was now expanded to five or six positions and we joined a league that included, Port Jervis, Matamorus, Old Falls, Newburgh, Middletown and West Point. We regularly shot at all these places and they came here. The upstairs range was a bit shaky for prone shooting and proved a challenge if somebody was walking around. We were used to it and could cope but visitors complained it was unfair advantage - maybe we did have

some prearranged walking, timed correctly. All in good fun.

The first year that the DeBruce Conservation Camp opened, I was sponsored and attended. I was there for a few days and I kept observing a racoon in a cage that wasn't given much care - it was a stinky matted hair animal. I turned it loose. I was snitched on and was given K. P. duty for the remainder of my stay. Bummer! I packed my bag and left for home. They caught up to me down the road and explained that this wouldn't look good for camp. K.P. would be forgiven - so I went back and completed the two weeks. It was a great experience and I enjoyed it, many of the things taught have stayed with me always.

Getting back to the club. I went away to college in 1950 so I lost contact with happenings. I did shoot for the team on several occasions later on. I had won the individual champion trophy for a couple years and could improve the score sheet. Then I went in the Army so I don't know what happened after that. I do recall hearing that Fred Akerley took the building back for the mortgage. No ill will on anybody's part - T.V. had come on the scene and the people just weren't coming out.