2.1 History of the Rondout Stream

A Historical Tour of the Rondout – From Headwaters to the Reservoir

"My eyes had never before beheld such beauty in a mountain stream." John Burroughs wrote this in his sketch "A Bed of Boughs" on his first visit to Peekamoose and the headwaters of the Rondout Creek. He went on to say "If I were a trout, I should ascend every stream, until I found the Rondout." (1)

If we explore the Rondout's headwaters and follow the stream out towards civilization, it is an interesting journey through the history of the region's communities. This land that started in the stewardship of the Indians, and passed ownership to a relative few, was slow to be developed. It seems that it was 1849 when the bark peelers began leveling the massive hemlocks so they could peel the bark for the tanneries outside the area. Esther George (2) tells us "there were no tanneries in the area." The only tannery located on the Rondout Creek was far down the stream at Lackawack. Saw mills abounded and early maps often show the initials *SM* designating where a sawmill was operating.

Figure 1 Buttermilk Falls awes visitors of the Rondout valley

But back to the stream itself and its source in the wilderness of Peekamoose, there fed by mountain brooks with plain names – Bear Hole, Stoney Cabin, High Falls Brook, Buttermilk Falls (Fig. 1). These names do little to describe the exotic nature of the water as it came pounding down the steep mountainsides of Peekamoose Mountain. Even today, those exploring these streams come away with a sense of awe as to their majesty. The act of quenching a sudden thirst by kneeling by the stream and cupping one's hands for a drink of fresh mountain water is unique to the human experience. One can only imagine the first explorers of the area as they satisfied their thirst.

Climbing the mountainside to follow any of these streams is a tough hike into the past. The prize for those who explore the Bear Hole is reaching the section of the stream where a wide deep basin of water has been formed. There trout can be seen moving lazily in its deepest parts out of the way of all but the most determined angler. Who would know that the High Falls Brook once had a road that ran beside it all the way from Red Hill or that, in the middle of its descent, there lived a man by the name of Romaine Moe who farmed it in this very hardscrabble existence. Thus the mid-point on the High Falls Brook has been

referred to as the "Main Moe" place. There were other families, too, who lived in the Peekamoose area eking out an existence before they settled elsewhere.

Follow the Rondout through the area known as Bull Run and on to Sundown (once called Denning Falls). It is there that the East Branch of the Rondout meets the Rondout coming from Peekamoose. This mountain brook wends its way downward from the Greenville area. Natives refer to the East Branch as the Sundown Creek. It is here that a Methodist Church, a one-room school, a store/post office and a handful of residences are evident on an 1875 map of Town of Denning, Ulster County.

The first post office was established in Bull Run in 1889 with Jacob Coddington as postmaster. The second postmaster was Paul Sheley. The story is told that Sheley's widow became postmistress, didn't like the name Bull Run and hence the name Peekamoose came about. Sundown's first post office began in 1888 with Allen Dean as postmaster. Allen Dean was one of the fortunate ones who fought in the Civil War and returned home to tell about it.

Old-timers hunted and fished to feed their families. Once the area was opened up by advent of the railroad, there were a few to-do individuals who purchased large of land in the Peekamoose area. Certainly, establishment of the Catskill Forest Preserve changed the area forever. Hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking for recreational purposes have been pursued at least 1900 (Fig. 2). Today, this recreational aspect continues: it is even possible to see a group of visitor drumming the Buttermilk Falls in the background. the well-tracts the since with

Figure 2 Group camping in early 1900s

Moving onward for a few miles and almost to Rondout Reservoir, there is a stream called the Sugar Loaf, which joins with the Rondout. The Sugar Loaf, too, has its source on Red Hill. This stream passes the sites of three one-room schools; one of which had the distinction of being the first approved school in the Town of Denning. It was down this same Sugar Loaf that an early story tells us of a long-gone Methodist Church that came tumbling down in an early flood. (3) The nearby community of Lowes Corners now exists only in memories.

Eureka, Montela and Lackawack are the remaining communities that one could have seen along the stream where now the Rondout Reservoir waters rest. It was in Eureka where the Chestnut and the Rondout met that the Hornbecks, earliest documented settlers of the valley, made their home. Descendants of those first Hornbecks still make their home within walking distance of the foundation of that first log cabin. Eureka was more developed than many of the smaller communities previously mentioned here.

Montela, the middle village, straddled the Town of Neversink and Town of Wawarsing line. Its post office was established in 1886 in the Ulster County section with Frank Dixon as postmaster.

One of the interesting stories to come out of the valley was the establishment of the County Line Hotel, which was located part in Neversink and part in Wawarsing. When the Town of Neversink became a "dry" township, a gentleman by the name of Frank Patruno moved his establishment to the County Line where he ran a bar on the "wet" side and cut hair on the "dry" side.

At the other end of the Reservoir, the village of Lackawack stood. Its first post office was established in 1835 with Alonzo Vail as postmaster. Lackawack was the most developed of the three communities. Its pride and joy was the Lackawack House run by John Shiels, proprietor and owner. It was commonplace for Tammany Hall politicians to travel from New York City by train to Ellenville. There, horse-drawn carriages conveyed travelers to this popular resort at Lackawack. The hotel was destroyed by fire in 1917. (4)

In 1976 the Town of Neversink and the Town of Wawarsing dedicated a plaque that memorialized the Upper Rondout Valley. It reads "People settled this valley over 200 years ago. They founded Eureka, Montela, and Lackawack. Most were farmers. A few were storekeepers. A tannery, lumber mill, excelsior mills, gristmill, carding and fulling mill, churches, cemeteries, post office and tourist accommodations were here. During the 1930s and 1940s, New York City constructed Rondout Reservoir. Its waters now rest on the sites of Eureka, Montela and Lackawack."

Contributed by Carol Smythe, Historian Town of Neversink

References

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2 – *A Short History of Sundown* – Esther George – self-published

3 – *Papers of the Reverend J. Milton Harris* –

4 – *To the Mountains by Rail* – Manville B. Wakefield – 1970 – Wakefair Press

5 – *Time and the Valleys Museum* – archives

6 – *Town of Neversink* - archives