

Greene County Gleanings

by Raymond Beecher

In the earlier years of the Catskill Mountains' private parks, the inhabitants and their activities were an important source of news items for the local newspaper correspondents. One learned of arrivals and departures, construction activities, land transactions, and employment hirings. Today, these residential communities cherish their privacy; they seldom make newspaper or magazine copy.

Just this past week, while scanning a bundle of *Godey's* magazines for the 1890s, I chanced upon Carolyn Halsted's article entitled "Onteora: An Ideal Summer Club." That August 1897 issue sold for 10 cents the copy or \$1 the year, hardly an exclusive magazine even in those times.

The Halsted article provides the reader with a history of the private park since its inception in the spring of 1888. Mrs. Candace Wheeler and Mr. F.B. Thurber being the prime movers. They had built their cottages at this "Hills in the Sky" some five years earlier.

With 8 persons forming the stock company and approximately 1,000 acres purchased, the Bear and Fox Inn built, the summer community was underway. In 9 years, Onteora Park grew from three cottages and an inn to more than 60 buildings. The clement season population increased from a mere handful to more than 400.

The author comments about the individualized, simplistic style of these so-called cottages such as "Yarrow" owned by Mrs. Mary

Mapes Dodge, "Yamuga" by Mrs. Frances Fisher Wood (the noted Japanese scholar), author Lillie Hamilton French's "Wind and Wing," and "Penny Royal" occupied by Dora Wheeler Keith. Of rough lumber, stone and shingles, these structures merged visually with the open fields and wooded areas. The *Godey's* article is well illustrated with a sketch of the lodge, as well as 8 photographs of private dwellings.

Whatever her source of information, Carolyn Halsted garnered much. She detailed the wide variety of recreational pursuits available as well as outdoor flower fetes, corn roasts, picnics and campfires. Of all the events, the "harvest festival," or by some considered "a midsummer night's dream," was the most dramatic. She writes, "The woods and fields are stripped of their blossoms and branches--gorgeous maple leaves, goldenrod and purple asters deck ox-cart and hayrick filled with the transformed inhabitants of the community, while others join the procession afoot as Persephone and her nymphs, Rip Van Winkle and Hendrick Hudson with his men in Dutch jackets and peaked hats, or as sprites and gnomes with the Culprit Fay. This festive procession wends its way through the woods and up the mountain-road, finally returning to the inn to a bounteous harvest-home, where all the delicacies have been prepared that the valley-farms can boast."

It all seems so long ago, an era of far less sophistication. c/191993