

ONE



A PLACE IN THE COUNTRY

BILL SMITH: The settlers came in the early nineteenth century on foot or by horse and wagon. Later on they took stagecoaches. When the O & W Railroad—the New York, Ontario & Western—came through in the 1870s and built a series of creameries and transported milk to New York City, the center part of Sullivan County opened up.

The Jews started arriving toward the end of the century. The men, who were farmers, would leave their wives and children on the farm for the winter. They'd go to the city, take any job that was available, and come back whenever they could. Sometimes they were away for





a whole winter. In the summer they would return. The lucky ones made contacts in the city and brought people up to summer in the country. Mothers would move children to outer housing, and the rest of the family would sleep wherever they could. The bed of the farmer and his wife would be given over to boarders. That's how the early people made a living. It was a survival net, a day-to-day thing for many of them.

JULIE SLUTSKY: My grandfather Charles Slutsky had been a farmer in Russia, so after he came to America he went to Ulster County with his wife and family to buy a farm. Little by little they began taking in boarders over the summer and buying up adjoining property. You find the same story all over the Mountains, except ours is the oldest existing hotel in the entire area. Our roots stretch back to 1901.

Life back then was very hard. My grandfather and my father dug cellars and sold firewood—anything to stay afloat. In the winters my father worked in an umbrella factory in New York City. For years the people from the umbrella factory came up as guests.

One day when my father, Joseph, was grown and ready to be on his own, my grandfather suggested they divide the property. “Take whichever side you want,” my father said.

“No, you make the choice,” my grandfather insisted.

So my father selected the site of the present Nevele Hotel, and my grandfather's site became the Fallsview. There is a waterfall on the Nevele property. Years ago, eleven schoolteachers were picnicking by the falls, and they decided to name it for the number of their group spelled backward. That's how “Nevele” came about. The Fallsview got its name because you can see the falls from that hotel.

My brother Ben and I grew up on the property and attended a one-room schoolhouse that today stands on the Nevele grounds. I used to walk to school through the fields.

Two exclusive resorts used to exist in the area when I was a kid. One was called Mt. Meenahga House—the Indian word for huckleberry—and it was 1,200 feet above Ellenville. The place was built on 100 acres in 1881 by a man named Terwilliger. It had miles and miles of walks and drives, lots of laurel, sweetbrier, and wild flowers. Mt. Meenahga was restricted to Gentiles and catered to the carriage trade. Then around 1920, a Jewish family named Kurtz that made its money in the cloak-and-suit business bought the place. The Nevele was pretty

PRECEDING PAGES

RIGHT: A Russian-Jewish family posing on the lawn of a Monticello resort, 1937. LEFT: A typical hotel of the early years — the Biltmore, constructed in 1920.



well established by then, and we would stage band competitions in Ellenville with them.

Of all the places in Ulster County when I was a kid, Yama Farm was probably the most elegant. I believe President Wilson stayed there when he visited the Catskills after World War I. I saw him coming through the region with a brigade of security people.

Guests came up to Yama Farm in chauffeur-driven limousines and paid up to \$100 a day for a cottage and servants. That was unheard of in the 1920s. Tammany people from New York City were frequent guests. Governor Al Smith stayed there; his daughter and her husband went there for their honeymoon.

But the Nevele was far from luxurious. Ben and I were brought up in the hard school. We were a working farm until 1938, and Ben and I did our share of chores. We furrowed the fields, picked crops, milked cows. The local boys who worked in the summers as waiters used to go out to the fields in their uniforms to pitch hay and then come back into the dining room. As hard as they tried, they could never quite brush off every last piece of hay from their uniforms. Ben

LEFT: The trip by car from New York City could take up to eight hours — and that was good time. These drivers made it up to the Nevele in the winter. RIGHT: The old Nevele in a winter setting.

and I worked in the hotel too—busboys, waiters, maintenance work—whatever had to be done, we did.

ESTHER STRASSBERG: My parents, Philip and Dora Goldstein, came from Russia and Poland, and my father worked as a designer of men's clothing in New York City. My mother used to tell us how she would put her baby in the carriage outside, and the cinders from the elevated trains would fall all over it. She kept asking my father to get her a place in the country.

My father read an advertisement in a Jewish newspaper about farms for sale in Monticello. So he went up there with a partner (whom he later bought out), and they found a farm and boardinghouse on 200 acres. It was owned by a man named John Hill and his son Arthur, and it catered to a Gentile crowd of what we used to call the "intelligentsia." They named the place the Beauty Maple House, and it opened for business in 1904. It was the first Jewish boardinghouse in the area.

We were a large family, five boys and two girls, and we all grew up in Monticello and went to the one-room schoolhouse in School District Number 6. I still remember seeing signs in Ferndale that said JEWS NOT ALLOWED. And nobody ever threw the signs down.

ARTHUR SHULMAN: There was anti-Semitism in the area; Jews were in the minority. Yet there was ambivalence because the Gentiles made a lot of money from the resort trade. Immigrant and first-generation American Jews banded together in the Catskills, and they felt comfortable there. There was really no other place to go for vacations, because so many places were restricted. We were in the Catskills because my father had tuberculosis, and the area with higher elevation had a reputation for TB cures. He got up there around 1929.

FRED GASTHALTER: My father, Sam, was six years old in 1906, when he came up to Parksville with his father, a hat maker from New York City, who suffered from TB. Parksville, Ferndale, Liberty—those towns are higher than most of Sullivan County. The Town of Liberty was known for its sanitariums, including the famous Loomis and Workmen's Circle sanitariums. Naturally, the hotels didn't want the stigma of anything connected to TB, so they distanced themselves

from the Liberty post office. Grossinger's and Young's Gap were both in Liberty, but Grossinger's said they were in Ferndale, and Young's Gap said they were in Parksville.

We were the second Jewish family in Parksville. My grandfather bought a small farm and a few years later started taking in boarders. Some people complained the altitude in Parksville was too high for them. It's 1,670 feet, which is just 100 feet higher than the neighboring towns. I still get that argument. Maybe they're afraid of getting nosebleeds. I tell them, "Check it out with your doctor—provided he's under eighty years old."

By 1920, my grandfather had passed away, and my father was running the place by himself. He named the place the Paramount from the Paramount Theatre in Manhattan.

Parksville became a big hotel area; there were so many of them along Route 17. Young's Gap was probably the most famous of them all. In the late 1920s, it had an indoor pool, a gym, a ballroom, and room for 400 guests.

ESTHER STRASSBERG: In the 1920s, many of the boardinghouses expanded into hotels. By 1929, twenty-five years after he opened the Beauty Maple House, my father had to decide whether to expand or give up. He decided to expand. You know what that means: boarders become guests and prices go up. We could no longer charge \$18 a week including three meals a day.

We remodeled so that we could cater to 550 people. We added the things hotels had, like nice public rooms and a social staff, and we changed the name. My father decided to call the hotel after me, the first daughter after five boys. That's how we became Esther Manor.

We also bought little bungalow colonies on all sides of us, so we would know who our neighbors would be. And the bungalow renters were entitled to use all of the Esther Manor facilities, watch all the entertainment. And for a little extra they could eat in our dining room.

Before they came up for the summer, they had to give us a deposit of half their rental. Before they took occupancy, they paid the balance. In this way we got capital to fix up and maintain the place before the season. We didn't have to borrow from the banks. A lot of other people had trouble getting loans and paying back with interest. Many couldn't make the payments. We never had that problem.

BILL SMITH: The resorts in the Catskills always had problems borrowing money to put in improvements or just to stay afloat. Places kept expanding and the competition was intense. If one hotel put in an elevator, another put in two elevators. If one installed a swimming pool, another installed a larger pool. Success was a fickle thing—whether the season was good, whether the family made money. Some owners got tied up with money lenders at such high prices they couldn't meet the payments. Sometimes a large hotel held the mortgages on a few smaller places and eventually swallowed them up. Some people even leased out or rented their hotels for a season while doing other things, hoping to raise enough money to be able to come back and make their place a going proposition.

DAVE LEVINSON: Pop and Mom, Max and Dora Levinson, arrived at Greenfield Park, the present location of Tamarack Lodge, on January 3, 1900. They were born in Minsk, Russia, but had lived in New York since 1885. Pop was visiting some friends in Woodridge and thought it was healthier up there than in New York—the air was clean and good. So he bought a dairy farm of about fifty acres with about twenty-five cows and four horses.

At that time there were six girls in the family. (Later I came along and then two more girls.) Pop brought them all up here and went back to work as a tailor in New York. My sisters would complain to Mom: they thought Pop bought the farm for his health—so why was he in New York and they were here?

In 1903, Pop saw that his neighbors were making a living by catering to boarders, so he built six bedrooms, added on to the little house that they had, and went into the boardinghouse business. They charged \$3.50 per person per week for all the milk you could drink, all the eggs you could eat, plus whatever meat you got fed. Whatever little profit he made went into more rooms, and that's how Tamarack grew.

Back in 1905, when the Ellenville National Bank was the Home National Bank, Pop went to borrow \$500. Old man Cox, president of the bank, said, "Max, how long you a farmer?" Pop said, "About five years." Cox said, "It's about time you shouldn't need any money."

So Pop said, "Well, if you can't give me the money, I'll have to wait till the summer and pay my bills then instead of now. I don't like to be behind in my bills, but you're forcing me into it."

Lo and behold, at the end of the month the bank statement comes, and they'd made a mistake and gave Pop \$800 too much money to his deposit. Pop went to the bank and withdrew the money.

A couple of weeks later, they discovered their mistake and called Pop down to the bank. They told him what happened.

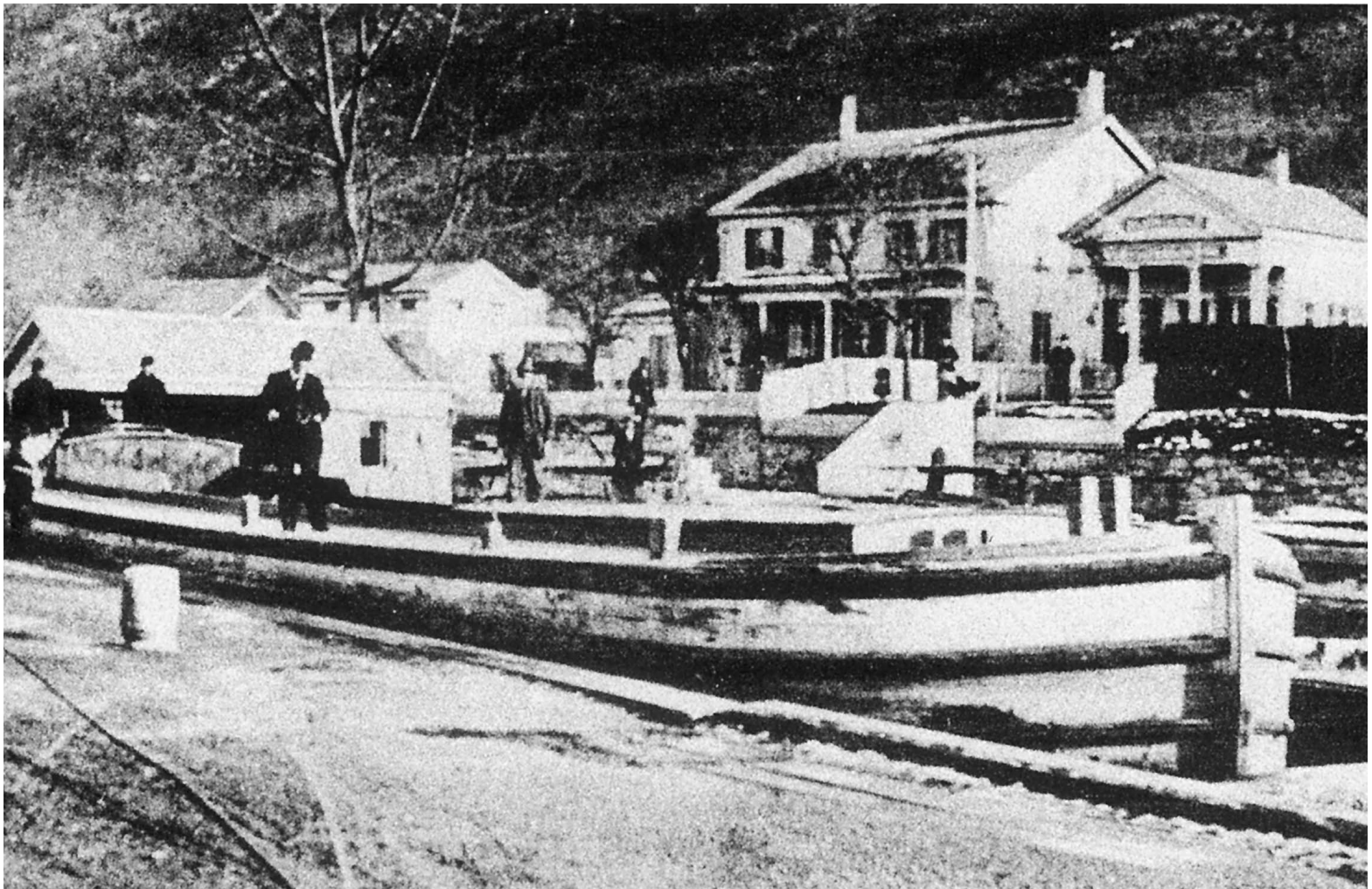
Pop said, "Mr. Cox, I don't read English too well. I thought all that money was mine, and I spent it. All I can do now is give you a note for \$800."

Well, they had no other choice. They took the note, and Pop paid it off. But that was how he got his credit established. He always got money after that.

Pop continued to be a dairy farmer even with the hotel.

He was an orthodox Jew but very liberal-minded. When I was about eight years old, Pop wanted me to learn Hebrew. There were no Jewish kids around at that time. I wouldn't sit down and study unless my friends, Olden Townsend and Oscar Newkirk, learned Hebrew with me. So Pop gave them a couple of pennies, and they studied with me. Later on Olden Townsend, who became a doctor, came up

An Ellenville scene in the post-Civil War years. The large building in the rear is the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company freight office.



here to visit, and he said to my father, “Mr. Levinson, let me see if I can still write my name in Jewish.” And he was able to. Olden’s grandfather, by the way, had been a colonel or general in the Civil War. I knew him. There were a lot of Civil War veterans around when I was a kid.

There was no telephone here in the early days, no electricity—they used kerosene lights. Of course there were no cars. We had a pair of mustangs, and my sister Daisy would drive them with an old dash wagon and would go racing down the country roads. The Gentile neighbors would cry out, “Daisy, you’re gonna break your damn fool neck someday.” Once those mustangs ran away from her, and she almost *was* killed.

Later on, our neighbor bought a Model T Ford, but come winter-time the car was jacked up and put away. Nobody plowed the snow. I’d go to school with a horse and sleigh, taking the milk down to the creamery with me.

We went to a one-room schoolhouse through the eighth grade. It had been around since the 1850s or maybe even before. In 1933, our schools became centralized, and the buses began to pick up the children. But the schoolhouse is still there with the two outhouses and the woodshed.

I was sixteen when we began building the main house in 1926. I was reading the blueprints. The architect and carpenter would call me at school to see if it was all right to make certain changes. And the principal would call me out of the classroom and say, “Dave, I think we’ll have to put a telephone at your desk.” I always felt tied to the hotel. A lot of the boys in Ellenville got out of school and they’d be on the streets, kibitzing around. But I wanted to get back. There was always something to do.

In 1929, a young woman came up on the O & W Railroad on a Friday night. I escorted her to her room. It was a dormitory with eighteen beds in the old casino, which we divided in half for boys and girls. She had reserved a room with a private bath and was very disappointed, but she stayed and had a good time. Still, she swore she’d never come back. So, in order not to lose a customer, I married her. That was my motto: “Never lose a guest.”

Around the time we got married, we discontinued the farm. We were down to ten or twelve cows by then. I had begun to realize the

smell of barn didn't leave me, and so I decided it was time to sell the cows.

Tamarack Lodge grew to 300 rooms, but I never wanted to be the Tiffany of the Mountains. We were the Woolworth's of the Mountains, and we were always full. God was good to us.

Pop died in 1948 at the age of ninety, but Mom lived until 1965 when she was ninety-four. She used to tell the story of her grandfather who on Simchath Torah—you know, the holiday where everybody has a feast and drinks a little—he drank a bit too much, and he sat down and cried that at the age of ninety-five he was an orphan.

My sister Rose, who passed away at the age of ninety-seven in June 1989, built the Stevensville Lake Hotel with our aunt and Harry Dinnestein in 1924. She had lost her husband at the time, and Pop thought it would be a good idea for her to go into the hotel business. He helped her out with it. They sold out to Harry in 1952. My sister Bess, who married a Sussman, ran the Kiamesha Country Club in Kiamesha Lake, and Jan Peerce was their band leader from 1928 to 1932.

I've been around long enough to remember them all: the Beerkill down the road—1905, the Nevele—1901, Grossinger's—1914, Morningside early 1900s after us, the Flagler Hotel in Fallsburg—1910 or so. We weren't the first boardinghouse in the area, but there weren't too many others when we came.

MIKE STRAUSS: I first came up to the Catskills in 1918, with the O & W Railroad, and getting up those mountains was tough. The train had two locomotives to drag you there. You'd come to Summitville, a turnoff point. From there a branch went northeast to Ellenville, heading toward Kingston, while the main line continued right on to Roscoe directly northwest.

MAX GOLDBERG: In the early days most people came up on the train. You had to close the windows all the way up because the soot would choke you. Farmers would pick you up at the station with a horse and wagon.

"Come to our place, it's the best!"

"Hey, come to ours, we're a real hotel!"

"I'm charging twelve dollars."



Along the O & W: the old Ferndale line. From here the train crossed a long, high bridge to Liberty.

“I’m charging thirteen, but with three delicious meals a day.”
 “Only fifteen dollars—best food, best view. Come with me!”
 You listened. You went where you thought you’d get the best deal.

DAVE LEVINSON: Pop and I would pick up the guests at the railroad station with a horse and wagon. This was before there was a line to Ellenville. By the time the railroad stopped at Ellenville, there were taxis already—the Model T Fords, the Pierce-Arrows, the Chandlers, the Winstons. People ran jitney businesses and would take our guests to and from the station.

Then later on, around 1928, the Model A Ford came out, and people started coming in their own cars, driving up over the Wurtsboro Mountain. We were eighteen miles away, in Greenfield Park, a two-hour drive in those days.

MIKE STRAUSS: If you came on a Friday, it was bumper to bumper all the way from New York City to Wurtsboro. It could take you seven, eight hours making good time. As you went through Suffern, Tuxedo,

Chester, Goshen on those narrow two-lane highways, policemen with badges on their overalls would stop you if you went over fifteen miles an hour. However, the chances of going that fast were slim because of the heavy traffic.

Kids would stand at the base of the Wurtsboro Mountain, where there's a little creek. They would fill cans of water from the creek, and for a nickel or a dime, they'd throw water on the burning brakes as the cars came down the hill. Brakes burned much more easily in those times. There'd always be a pile of empty soup cans on the bank of the creek.

ROBERT MERRILL: When I began coming up to the Catskills in the 1930s, the trip could take a whole day. Cars always overheated, and we'd spend all that time filling the radiators. The hills were monstrous. Cars couldn't make it up. One summer I got as far as Wurtsboro Mountain, but then the car wouldn't go any further. I sold it for \$40 and hitchhiked the rest of the way.

CHARLES BRETT: My earliest memory of the Mountains goes back to 1919, when I went up with my grandmother, my aunt, and two cousins. We took a ferry from downtown Manhattan to Weehawken, New Jersey, where we got the train. We stayed at a place called Eliyuchem, and the owner met us at the station in Mountain Dale with a wagon pulled by two big horses. Eliyuchem was about eleven miles from the station, and it took about an hour to get there. The area was very rural with only dirt roads. We called it a farm—it had chickens and cows—but there really wasn't any farming. For the entire summer, the rental cost \$40 for the room that my grandmother and I shared.

In the great big kitchen, there was a large coal stove, and it was lit every morning ready for cooking. Everybody shared the big ice box—there were no refrigerators back then. Eliyuchem was a true *kochalayn*—literally “cook alone”—where guests shared a kitchen and cooked their own food. My grandmother would make a big pot of oatmeal, and everybody would sit at a long table covered with a patterned oilcloth. We'd have the oatmeal and possibly a soft-boiled egg. There were no reserved seats—the first place you got, you sat. After breakfast, while the adults cleaned up, the kids would run out and play. I loved to pick green apples and blueberries and just be free in the country.

Saturday nights we would go to a nearby hotel for Yiddish entertainment. Although I was American-born, we all spoke Yiddish most of the time. A popular entertainment then was the mock marriage where the man dressed up as the bride, and the woman dressed up as the groom. The so-called cantor would sing, “Ven mir giest arayn dos galikhel, vert zi shvangerik.” What it meant was “When the golden liquid is poured in, she’ll get pregnant.” I didn’t understand why everyone laughed hilariously.

The oldest memories remain the most vivid.

ROBERT TOWERS: About sixty years ago, there was a black man who called himself Mendel. He was a wandering musician who’d go around and play on the lawns.

MAX GOLDBERG: I started when I was twelve, walking from hotel to hotel with my father, playing music on the lawns, collecting pennies in a hat. I played the clarinet, and he played the drum. We walked from Woodridge to Fallsburg to South Fallsburg to Monticello to Liberty.

Then my father hired a horse and wagon. Horses eat too, so we had to work even harder. My parents spoke only Yiddish, and Yiddish songs—klezmer music—was what we played: “Di Zilberne Khasene,” “Sheyn vi di L’vone,” “Di Grine Kuzine.” We played the bulgars, the freylekhs, the horas—lively music that they all danced to. The people gave me pennies and sometimes a nickel. At the end of a day, we had about \$8, maybe \$50 at the end of a week.

We rented a bungalow for the whole summer for \$50. Most of the money that we made, my father sent to my mother in New York City. She had four more sons at home to feed.

While we played on the lawns, the boss would sometimes say, “Come in and play in the lobby.” Then he would ask us to play in the dining room. There was always a piano there, and I’d play it. When we were inside the hotel, the boss would say, “It’s not nice for you to go around and collect money. Let me make the collections. You go into the kitchen and eat.” We ate whatever was brought back from the dining room. There was a lot of good food left over.

MIKE STRAUSS: Back in the 1920s people in the smaller hotels used to wait on the porch or out on the lawn for the arrival of local peddlers

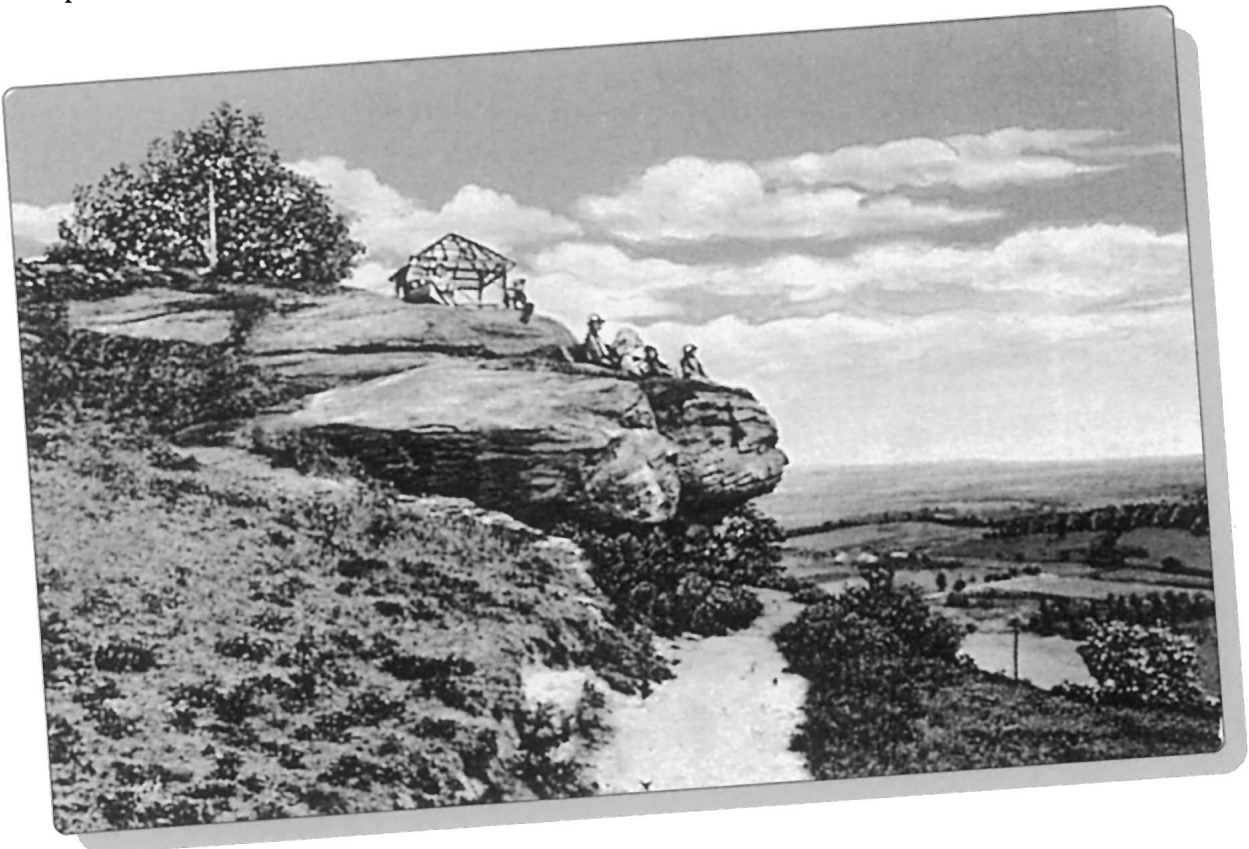
after lunch. They were the forerunners of the Good Humor Man, and they were one of the highlights of the day. They would come in a horse and buggy, stop in front of the hotel, and ring a handbell. Guests would come running out, yelling, "The ice cream man is here!" The peddlers sold ice cream out of a big wooden tub the size of a garbage pail. Three-flavored bricks cost a nickel.

BILL SMITH: Otto Hillig of Liberty was the big photographer in those early years. His camera had a chrome die that printed the name of a hotel on the print. Hillig sold more than 10,000 postcards to the hotels, which in turn sold them to guests. They'd send them to friends and relatives all over the country. It was a great form of cheap advertising.

RUTH SELTZER: In the late 1920s, my father would take me, my mother, and my sister up to Rubin's Farm in Liberty in his furniture truck. The truck had an open top and didn't go that fast. It seemed like it took us forever to get there.

After he brought us up, my father would go back to work in the city, but he'd come up most weekends to be with us. We stayed from the Fourth of July to Labor Day, and in those days it was very inexpensive.

A Catskill scene by Otto Hillig, famed early Catskill photographer.



Rubin's Farm was very small—only about fifty people. The owners spoke Yiddish and also English. They took a liking to me and taught me country things, like how to milk a cow. I'd drink the milk straight from the cow—it was warm and delicious. My sister would go, "Yuck, I'm going to vomit."

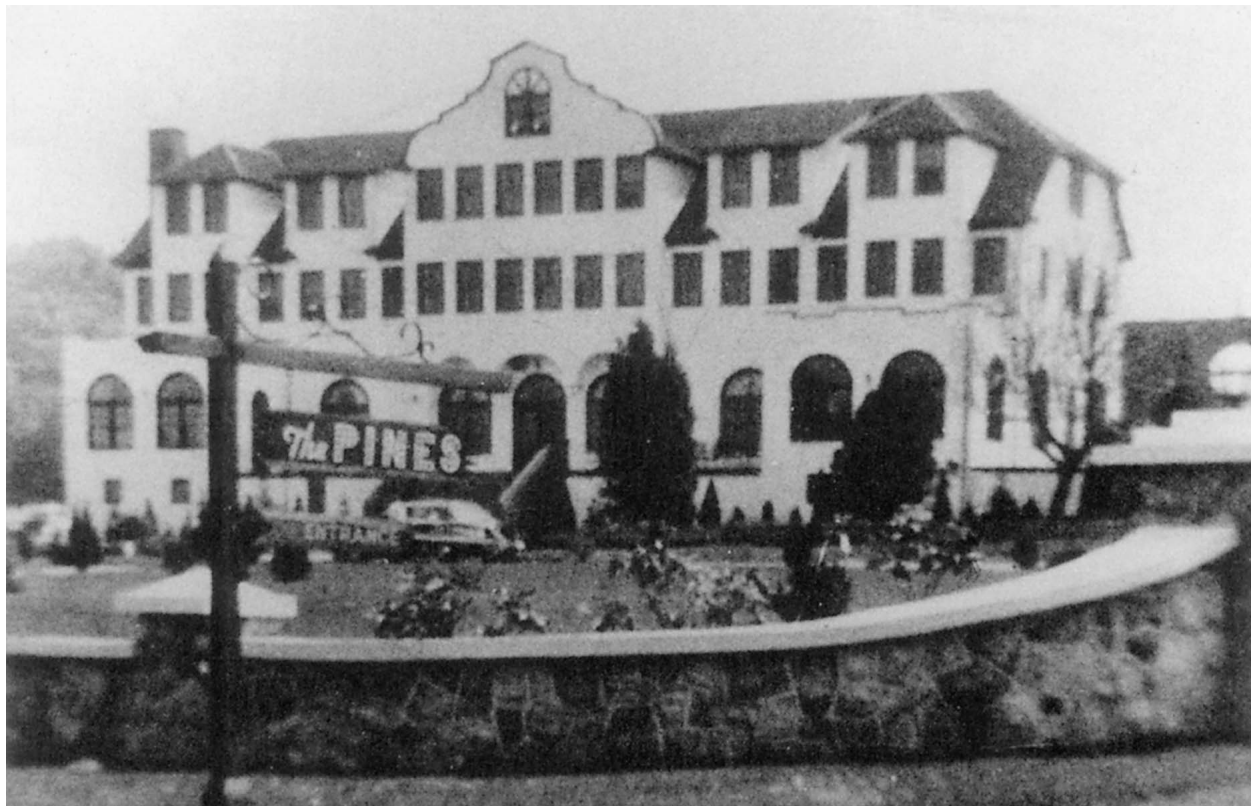
For a city kid, it was a wonderful experience. I had never seen a chicken or a cow before then. We would pick blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries and fill big straw baskets or tin pails. We'd bring them into the kitchen, and they would make pies and jams. Rubin's was a *kochalayn*, and we would eat family style at a table covered with blue-and-white-check oilcloth. Whoever heard of linens in those days?

We were near Grossinger's but we spent all our time on the farm. There was a real old-fashioned casino, actually a converted barn with a stage and seats.

MORTY FRANKEL: Spenser's Bungalow Colony in Phillipsport was run by Gentiles, but all the guests were Jewish. Back of the pastures, beyond the farms, were wide barge canals with cement walls. There was no water in them by the time we were there, and we kids would play all kinds of games in them.

We'd go to pick berries, and the grown-ups would warn us, "Don't get caught by the Mountain People up there." Sure enough, just like in the picture *Deliverance*, regular mountain people lived up there.

The "feel" of an old hotel: the original building of the Pines.



They all seemed so big, with long full beards, dressed in overalls. We'd be picking berries or exploring, and sometimes they'd come out. We'd run all the way down the mountain till we got back to Spenser's place.

One summer we went to a kochalayn in Mountain Dale. It was like a farm with little cottages, and people made their own entertainment at night. The owner was called Mighty Adam. He was a Jewish fellow with a beard and mane; he looked like a hermit. He used to entertain people by using his hand to pound nails through two-by-fours, and he would bite nails in half. Remember the wagon wheels that they had on farms? Adam would pick one up and hold it over his head. People would come from all around to see Mighty Adam.

CHASKELE RITTER: The Ridge Mountain Hotel in Parksville was a small hotel that my family and I went to during the Roaring Twenties. My grandfather was the ritual slaughterer there for many years. I remember the adults milking the cows and bringing the milk straight to the table. And when the chickens dropped their eggs, my father and his friends used to take them and eat them.

There was a little casino on the premises that we used as a synagogue on Saturdays. Leibele Waldman, a well-known cantor and my boyhood idol, was a guest at the hotel, and sometimes he sang for the crowd. Later on, when I became a well-known cantor myself, I often thought about hearing Leibele Waldman pray at that small hotel in Parksville.

FLORA BERGER: We spent several summers before the war at Hardin's Farm, off Route 17 in Ferndale. It was a working farm, with white buildings. The main house was surrounded by a brook, and there were beautiful hills all around. Mrs. Hardin was always in the kitchen. Mr. Hardin was the handyman, and their two daughters were the waitresses and chambermaids.

All the clientele were friends, Jewish, and mostly New York City schoolteachers. There were about twenty-four to thirty guests for the eight-week season. It was a family crowd with a lot of young children always running around.

You paid \$12 a week per adult and \$5 or \$6 for children for a four-room cottage and three meals a day. The shower was outdoors in a wooden stall, and the water was cold. Meals were served in the dining room of the main house, and you ate at long tables, eight to



Scenes at a Swan Lake bungalow colony around 1940. Husbands came up for the weekends; wives stayed all summer.



Beauty contests were always a favorite at Catskill resorts.

ten at a table, family style. The food was good but quite simple, with very little variation. Desserts would be a plain sponge cake one night, a chocolate cake the next. My children would never drink the milk because it came right from the cows.

The guests made their own entertainment. To tell the truth, during the week, there was absolutely nothing to do. I could just scream from boredom. I'd go crazy from looking at the babbling brook and all of the trees. How many times can you play Mah-Jongg?

But on the weekends, when the men came up, it was different. The couples would get together, and the men would tell stories about their week of work. There would be a lot of jokes and hilarity.

What made Hardin's distinctive was that the owners were a black family. There was absolutely no prejudice. It was unusual for those days.

MAX GOLDBERG: The Flagler was top of the line. I stayed there once paying \$17 a week on a due bill. You know what a due bill was? The hotel owed money to somebody for an advertisement. I gave the money to the guy who ran the ad, and he crossed off from the account: "The Flagler—I took off \$17 . . . Goldbergs."

MIKE STRAUSS: The Flagler was originally a Gentile and genteel boardinghouse in Fallsburg that opened in the 1870s. It advertised

spacious grounds and games like lawn tennis and croquet. Then two Jewish men bought it and made it the place to be throughout the 1920s.

Grossinger's was still growing up, and there was no Concord, when I came there with my family in 1918. The Flagler had eighty rooms, fifty baths, hot and cold water, a telephone in every room. On the main floor there was a big lobby, a sun parlor, and a writing room. It was the first hotel in the Mountains to have an elevator and one of the first in the country to have a stucco exterior. Most of the others were clapboard.

The Flagler also had a compact nine-hole golf course. But all you could do in the winter, as far as sports was concerned, was ice skate. I skated on the Neversink River when it was just glare ice right behind the hotel.

ROBERT TOWERS: In the hotels of the '20s and '30s, a resident social staff planned the nighttime activity. There would be a social director who would organize shows for each night, a blues singer, a dance team, a dramatic actor who did readings from plays, and a tummler—the porch clown who hung around with the guests during the day. He'd clown around by the pool, make jokes in the card room, do routines in the dining room. When he went on at night, they loved him—he was their own kid. (Eddie Cantor might sit back and ask, "So, what's so funny about him?")

JOHNNY PRANSKY: When Al Beckman and I started out as agents, we booked entire social staffs for the season. There was a small place in Greenfield Park owned by a woman named Mary Kanfer. Listen to the social staff that we booked for her: Red Buttons was the comedian. He got about \$50 for the whole summer. Red was a cute little son of a gun, and he tummeled all over. Joey Adams was the social director, and Jules Dassin was on the dramatic staff. That Mary Kanfer sure got her money's worth!

JOEY ADAMS: Everybody began in the Mountains. The first hotel I appeared at was the Olympic Hotel because my uncle owned it. Then I worked in the Beerkill Lodge in the late '30s, heading an entertainment staff that included Robert Alda, Red Buttons, Frances Forbes, and Bill Castle. I got \$15 a week because I was the head guy, but I



Alan “Blackie” Schackner outside his Loch Sheldrake bungalow with guest William Bendix. In 1940 the two appeared on Broadway in William Saroyan’s *The Time of Your Life*.

was also a busboy. Robert Alda was getting \$10 a week and worked as a waiter at the same time. Bill Castle, who became a Hollywood producer, got the same. Red Buttons got \$5 a week. That was big money because we also made money as waiters, busboys, delivering things, working in the kitchen, cleaning the rooms.

There was no such thing as “star” or “entertainer.” We had a job, and we just did the entertainment because we loved it. All the entertainers had a little something extra in them. They’d try out shtik without knowing they were trying it out.

I made fun of real things that were happening, conversations that I overheard.

You heard a woman say, “Close the window. It’s cold outside.”

“So if I close the window, will it be warm outside?”

The food, the weather, the atmosphere—when you heard what people were saying, you tried it out. I made my staff eat with the people, talk with them, dance with them. That’s where we learned how.

In the Mountains, we could kid each other, roast each other. You’d pass someone and say hello, and he’d say “Is Joey angry at me?”

“Why?”

“He didn’t insult me once.”

Nowadays there’s no such thing as ad-lib or instant humor. A guy walks on stage, he’s ready. If someone says hello, he’s got thirty answers prepared.

In the Catskills I learned how to mingle, to talk to people, not just do shows. We never thought of what it would become. We just enjoyed it, making humor out of all the situations.

ALAN “BLACKIE” SCHACKNER: My first contact with the Mountains was in the summer of 1938, when I was about twenty and a member of the social staff at Young’s Gap Hotel. I was the novelty act. All the girls who worked there were called prima donnas. The comics were the comica. And any kind of musical act was called the novelty.

My salary for the season was \$200 plus room and board with double portions. My job was to play the harmonica on show nights and do some acting when needed. I also had to take care of the swimming pool and dance with the guests.

I’m a big 5’6” with my shoes on. One time I was told to push a lady around the dance floor who was about 6’2”. She must have

weighed about 200 pounds. I wasn't too crazy about the idea, but the hotel owner, Ma Holder, said, "You dance with her or you lose your job." I danced.

The big act at Young's Gap was Artie Lewis and Peggy Ames, a famous old vaudeville team. Their jokes included:

"How did you find the steak last night?"

"I picked up the potato and there it was."

And then there was this one:

"Waiter, I want to send back the steak."

"I can't take it back."

"Why not?"

"You bent it."

I got to know a lot of show business people then. One fellow I became friendly with I used to call Moishe. His real name was Merrill Miller. That was before he changed it to Robert Merrill.

ROBERT MERRILL: Young's Gap was the second hotel I worked in; I started in Schroon Manor in the Adirondacks, as a straight man to

"Blackie" Schackner kneels in front of a group of social staffers enjoying a Catskill afternoon.

