

Section 2.1

History of the Upper Neversink

The story of “Upper Neversink” is slow and winding. Those same words could describe the water as it finds its way in two branches downward to the river itself. The land and the water drew early settlers to the area.

Tanneries played a huge part in the development of “Upper Neversink”. There were four tanneries in the area. Men were needed to work in the tanneries themselves; they were needed to draw in the raw hides and to draw out the tanned ones. They were needed to fell the trees; to peel the bark; and to transport the bark to the tanneries.

The streams were pure and sparkling when the early settlers arrived. The ill effects of tannery acids would damage the streams for many years to come. Interestingly all the tanneries were located on the East Branch with the exception of one that was located below the joining of the waters. The west Branch had many sawmills that sat on stream banks so they could use waterpower. This meant that sawdust leached down into the stream and did damage, too.

West Branch

We are fortunate to have different chroniclers of life in the West Branch. By 1713 the Hanford family had arrived in America from England. By 1872, one of the Hanford descendants was settling in the West branch at what they called the “Upper Neighborhood”. More towards Frost Valley was known as the “Lower Neighborhood”. Marcia Hanford Joslin writes in her letters that there were seven families in the Upper Neighborhood when her family arrived. That area became known as “Branch”. The first post office in the area was opened on January 14, 1884 with William P Alverson as postmaster. The last Branch post office closed in 1957.

We know that the Hanfords and other men of the area hauled bark to the tanneries and later they made hemlock shingles and later yet they made hoops for barrels and pails. Some worked for Clarence Roof at the well-known property Winton. Others may have worked at the Forstmann estate at Frost Valley. The Forstmann estate later formed the nucleus for the YMCA holdings.

The number of trout that were caught in the west Branch seems unbelievable. John Burroughs wrote of one expedition where they caught trout in excess and ate them for breakfast, lunch and supper. He also told of seeing the empty pigeons nests along the stream as they fished. (This is after the passenger pigeon was essentially killed off to extinction.)

Streams coming down off the mountainsides powered the East Branch and West Branch on their way to the Neversink River. On the West Branch, some of the major streams were: the Biscuit, High Fall Brook (same name, different brook than the one feeding into the Rondout), the Round Pond outlet and others.

East Branch

Three tanneries on the East Branch were enough to furnish a lot of employment and to do a lot of damage to the stream. The community of Denning hosted a tannery, as did Ladleton. The one near the original Sullivan – Ulster line was in Dewittville. These were truly important industries for the valley.

George Walter Erts, the unofficial historian of Denning, reported that there were 8 sawmills up the East Branch. Ladleton was first known as Pardeesville. The turning mill there produced so many ladles that the name changed to Ladleton.

DeWittville was first known as Potterville. Robert Dice wrote about the road up to the Sullivan-Ulster line. It seems that the road went directly over a subterranean vat of old tanbark from the tannery. Each spring the tanbark worked its way to the surface defying all the rock and gravel that were dumped into the road to keep the tanbark down.

Two Branches Join Together

Whence the two branches meet and join and the river takes on substance. The slowly winding river is deceptive as it makes its way down to stoke the thirst of the Neversink Reservoir. The “normal” river winds slowly and offers opportunities for swimming, fishing. On the rare day when the stormy skies unload more than the river can handle - bridges wash out; riverbanks relocate and the inexorable power of a river gone wild sometimes takes a life.

The fourth tannery was located in Claryville down from the Reformed Church on the left. Presently a tannery chimney remains to show us the location.

One should not forget tales of the supernatural that were in favor at that time. *The Tannery Witch* tells a gruesome story. Bob Dice in his detailed map of *Uper Neversing (1780s-1840s)* shows locations for the “ghostly lady in black” and the “headless Claryville ghost”.

Historians tell us that the Divine Cemetery served as the final resting place for many of the earliest settlers. The cemetery was located on the far side of the river and was part of the Camp 4H Pines property. It is reported that the stones were all fieldstones and that there was no record of the burials except in the memories of the early settlers. As the Neversink raged through the area, as it tended to do, all visible trace of the cemetery disappeared. Historians mourn the loss and still look for some record of who was buried there.

Halls Mills is the last community before the Neversink courses towards the reservoirs. There the covered bridge remains standing and unused as a final testament to an earlier time. This was the second covered bridge at Halls Mills; the first having been located upstream until it lost a battle with fiercely rising waters.

Many books have been written about the joys of fishing on the Neversink River. Those fishermen mourned the river as it was. They joined the residents of the area in their sadness for the past.

We’re told two gristmills were located on the streams and two covered bridges briefly held reign, one on the West Branch and one on the East Branch. A cranberry bog was described as being near Halls Mills. Tanning brought prosperity to the area and tanning decimated the area in return. The past is an exciting story in local history.

--Historian Carol Smythe

References

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