

A HISTORY OF THE KEENE VALLEY COUNTRY CLUB

THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS.

(This is adapted from notes provided by Winifred Notman Hyson Prince- August 1936, printed in the book to celebrate the centenary of the Country Club.)

A narrow, deep-rutted road led past the gray schoolhouse, with its bell tower and outside staircase, to the tangle of burdocks and poison ivy around the bridge over the Ausable River.

The road was inhabited by cows that lowered their horns and pawed the ground., which was scary for anyone passing by. North of this road stretched a high fence, solid and impenetrable, the boards laid like a stockade. Above the fence towered the black smokestack of a lumber mill, whose machine-saw hummed through the days and whose shrill whistles penetrated the valley air, telling the noon hour to all who lived or tramped between the summit of Hopkins and the highest ledges of Porter.

South of the road, between the schoolhouse and the river, were half a dozen straggling houses with tumbling barns, sheds and outhouses. There were spots where one did not linger to escape the too pungent odors. Typhoid was also present from time to time.

There was a house by the bridge that belonged to Lont Hammer - one room and a shed-not the kind of place one wanted to enter.

Next to the schoolhouse was a squat, ungainly clapboard building forming one of three sides of a square that was open to passers-by on the road.

The Gay Nineties were passing. Horses and buggies were still unchallenged. A family that packed its trunks and its members, from the oldest to the youngest, aboard trains, and had come several hundred miles to escape the ills of stifling and unhealthy cities, was content to explore life and scenery within the limits of a few square miles for an entire summer. A family that had trudged up hills and sometimes down, to relieve the bonny horses as they walked from Westport to Keene Valley, did not foresee that someday they would breakfast early, then drive four hundred miles for a cool dinner with family in an air-conditioned restaurant.

For a generation, Keene Valley had seen a summer population of city-bred people looking for a life style which was connected to the land and mountains. Sometimes descendants of New England pioneers whom the lumbering industry had helped to sustain for a brief period, watched with stunned tolerance and some chagrin, while these city folk possessed themselves of the pasture lands and the woodlots. From these outsiders came a cash income which became more and more essential to the valley's existence.

As a second and third generation of young people from the city population joined one another each summer a more active inter-family life grew up. By the summer of

1902, this had expressed itself in a number of ways that showed the need for a new kind of community life.

In the valley, the hotels that had been popular for twenty years were not developing in line with social life elsewhere as flexibly as St. Huberts Inn at the top of Beede's Hill. On a Saturday night, more than one anxious parent or grandparent listened for the sound of hooves on the bridge or barn floor before closing a satisfied eye. The hotel and golf course which Orlando Beede had established (later to become the Ausable Club) was an hour's drive away.

What to do? A desert golf course was laid out on the tufted sands of the Mason Young Plateau, overlying the baseball diamond, where grazing cows were interrupted by the crowds that came to watch the Keene Valley team play foreigners from Jay, Wilmington or Mineville. In those games, athletic sons of the Back Bay fielded balls batted by iron miners or lumberjacks. However, the golf course did not do well.

About this time, Mr. and Mrs. Notman had completed the purchase of the parcels of land between the schoolhouse and the river, and had lost no time in razing the buildings. Two or three were salvaged. Two small houses on the Hamner lot were placed at right angles to each other to form one house and the original schoolhouse was preserved at the cost of much rebuilding. Between these two buildings lay a waste, broken by cellars of the demolished houses and made green by woods. The waste was graded and two tennis courts were marked out.

In the thirty years that Mr. Notman had been coming to the valley, he had made many friends, among them, some permanent residents. He had tramped the woods and climbed the mountains with them, he had dug gardens with them and watched them build. Their isolation in the long winters impressed itself on him and he and his wife were happy, when they indulged their fancy for slum clearance, to turn over to the leading men of the village the rebuilt Hamner house as a men's club. This began in 1900.

In the summer of 1902, the Mason Young cottage on the plateau was occupied by Dr. and Mrs. Alan R. Marquand of Princeton. There was a tennis court of sorts and it was rolled and watered by Dr. Marquand and his friend The Reverend Walter Lowrie, for use between prodigious feats of mountaineering. Many people gathered to play tennis, drink teas and talk, and while they glanced without interest at the golf course that surrounded them, it seemed to some of them that a tennis club in the valley was possible and desirable.

This next letter is a copy of a letter written by Mr. Eleanor C. Marquand, of Princeton New Jersey to Mrs. Prince, dated June 22nd 1936.

"My dear Mrs. Prince,

I am so interested to know that you are to write the history of the K.V. Country Club.

We had the Mason-Young house only one summer in 1902, which date I can place definitely, as Sarnia was then just six months old. There was a tennis court of sorts next to the house and my husband and Walter Lowrie decided it should be put to use. As they had none of the usual means of marking out the court, they resorted to my very feminine suggestion of laying it out with the tape and hairpins, of which they bought up the entire village supply. They had so much fun over it that they eventually invited the neighbors in to play with them; and these gatherings became so large and popular that they suggested the possibility of a permanent meeting place. The foundation of the Country Club in the summer of 1903 was the result.

With kindest regards, Sincerely yours, Eleanor C. Marquand.”

(The copy of this letter is held in the archives of the K.V. library.)

(Continuing Reflections by Mrs. Winifred Notman Prince)

And so came about those dignified Victorian calls and discreet negotiations that Miss Sarah Lowrie has described so delightfully. From the interplay of thoughts, a plan was evolved that drew together the various groups of summer residents of the valley and made use of all the available resources. On September 11, 1903 The Essex County Republican reported.

“The grounds around the Keene Valley Country Club house are being graded, tennis courts built, and a golf ground arranged. The Country Club has a fine membership and the clubhouse is a ver popular place of amusement”

The function of afternoon tea as an opportunity for a good talk was emphasized, and a grave decision determined the size, shape and height from the floor of the tea table. The order was given to the village cabinet maker, Perry Sleepe, to make a clover-leaf table in accordance with measurements furnished by the ladies. The blue Canton china was chosen during the winter and the shelves to hold it involved further planning the next summer. (Some of this blue china still exists!)

One of the first events at the Club was a production of “Alice in Wonderland”. The performance took place in the Club House with benches arranged in the round room.

The mens locker room had been converted from the old schoolhouse. The ladies locker building had a somewhat less-revered origin than the men’s locker building. Its original location was on the village street, between the schoolhouse and Sunny Jim and there was dispensed alcohol. Mr. and Mrs. Notman did not approve of this being so close to the Club grounds, so they purchased the property and the locker room was moved to its present site. The saloon promptly moved diagonally across the street intersection, which was equally desirable from its point of view.

In the fall of 1905 Mr. Notman purchased the sawmill lot from Fletcher Beede, which doubled the amount of land that was available for club use.

Saturday afternoons in those days were crowded at the Country Club. The emerging weekend design was restricted in favor of the traditional Sunday observance. During the summer of 1902, some of the summer residents, over tea and sandwiches discussed how and where to incorporate tennis courts. Dr. Laight was reluctant to have the meadow be used in this way, and the idea of creating a lake, a dream of Mr. and Mrs. Notman, was deemed too impractical, so the land between the road and the river, newly purchased by the Notmans as part of their slum clearance, was chosen for the site of the new country club.

Four small buildings had been salvaged from the rural slum area and could be made to serve. The Lont Hammer two room house.

The automobile had not yet made Keene Valley accessible for a weekend visit and only a few devotees came for short stays. The permanent summer residents returned from the deep woods on Friday afternoon to be mentally and physically prepared for Sunday morning in church. It was reasonable, therefore, that Saturday afternoon would find everyone at the club, watching events planned by the sports committee or by the entertainment committee and enjoying the hospitality provided by the reception committee. Tennis tournaments have always been the chief activity of the sports committee. For years, informal tournaments were held on many Saturdays during the summer, starting at nine in the morning and finishing at dusk. All the contestants lived in the valley as it was too far for other tennis teams to come to play.

The swimming pool was built about 1916. There have always been those who wished that Keene Valley had a lake.

The Country Club has lived through thirty-four years of profound change in the social habits and attitudes of Americans. Hardly a three seater buggy remains. On a mountain top, an airplane engine hums a counterpoint to the sound of the wind in the trees. The jazz age has come and gone, leaving a group of young parents whose aim is to bring up their children in simplicity, close to the soil, knowing the rain on their faces and the sun on their backs, as their great-grandparents, or perhaps their great-great-grandparents had known it.

Included here is a notification from the KEENE VALLEY COUNTRY CLUB.

Officers and Directors: 1923-1924

President: Charles J. Hatfield.

First Vice-President: H. Barrett Learned

Second Vice-President: Mrs. Andrew F. Derr

Treasurer: George Notman

Secretary: Miss Anna Elizabeth Ranney

Ledyard Cogswell. Frederick H. Comstock. Charles Gibson. Edward B. Hodge. Walter Lloyd-Smith. Samuel Pierson Lockwood. Miss Sarah D. Lowrie. John Macrea. Mrs. Allan Maquand. Mrs. George Notman. Livingston L. Taylor. William R. Taylor. Mrs. Burns Weston.

To members of the Keene Valley Country Club.

You will be interested to know that through the generosity of Miss Ellen B. Laight of Salem, Mass., and Keene Valley, New York, the Keene Valley Country Club has been offered as a gift an extensive tract of land in Keene Valley situated near the grounds of the present Club. Besides a small parcel of land west of the Ausable River along the main street of the village, the tract includes a large meadow east of that river, an upland pasture and woods together with a house, the home of the late Dr. Charles Laight- and several small buildings near the house. This tract, included within Lot 23 of Mallory's Grant, contains rather more than sixty acres. It is given by Mss Laight to the Club as a memorial to her father, Dr. CHARLES LAIGHT, who for nearly five years, from September 22, 1902 to March 31, 1907 - the day of his death in Rome, Italy-served as first president of the Keene Valley Country Club.

On Sept. 15th, 1923 the Club decided at a special meeting of its officers and directors to accept this handsome gift. In accordance with this decision a resolution duly drawn to this effect was placed on the records of the Club.

For the past 21 years (1902-1923) the status of the K.V.C.C. has been that of a purely voluntary organization. During this entire period the success of the Club has been largely dependent on the public spirit of Mr. and Mrs. George Notman, who have leased annually since 1902 their land for its varied uses. Any one at all intimately acquainted with the Club's facilities will understand how well situated its present location has been for its continuous development as a valley center of social life during the summer seasons. To any children, parents, and a more or less transitory group of guests it has proved to be a delightful resort, and is now after twenty-one years a place filled with pleasant memories. It should be understood that the directors of the Club have no intention of disturbing the old arrangement in respect to location. However, with the gradual development of Keene Valley as a place of summer homes, it may in time become desirable to modify the old arrangement. The problem with which your officers and directors are immediately concerned is simply this: to hold the old location of the Club and at the same time to avail themselves of Miss Laight's gift so that by slow degrees they may bring the new tract of land into use for various Club purposes as these purposes become clear and desirable. The proper solution of this problem will take time and thought, for it is important in our judgment to retain simple standards for the sake of maintaining that widespread and co-operative spirit which thus far has marked our voluntary and rather informal organization.

Two decisions have already been reached: (i) formally to accept Miss Laight's gift; and (ii) to lease the meadow, a parcel of some thirty acres, for the term of three years: (iv) to arrange for the immediate construction of golf green for purposes of so-called court golf on about an acre of meadow land near the old Club grounds: and (v) to put into condition for summer rental and occupancy Dr. Laight's house and grounds, a

project necessarily involving some improvement of the roadway leading from the main street of the village to the house.

To carry forward several of these projects, it is necessary to have in hand at the disposal of the treasurer three thousand dollars (\$3,000). In the judgment of your directors, it has been thought best to solicit this amount for the present year (1923-1924) in the shape of thirty (30) contributions or subscriptions of one hundred dollars (\$100) each from thirty contributors - in other words from any thirty friends of the Club who either recently or in the past have enjoyed its privileges and are willing and able axt once to lend their aid in the maintenance of the the new projects. The directors would have it understood that contributions or subscriptions so made shall be repaid (without interest) out of any surplus income that may accrue to the Club from rentals or otherwise over and above an amount essential, in the discretion of the directors, toward application to the needs of the Club. The term for repayment shall not be fixed.

Signed: Charles J. Hatfield, President.

Remarks by Rev. William Rivers Taylor, D.D. at the dedication of the Laight Memorial Bench.

We have been moved to the erection of this modest memorial by an impulse in which there is, to my mind at least, an interesting mingling of affection for a man with affection for a place.

He was born in New York in 1846. His family originally came from England. He passed most summers in Keene Valley. His winters in New York and Dresden, Germany and Rome. He died in Rome in April, 1907 and was buried in the Protestant cemetery there. The family first came to Keene Valey in 1881. The following year they built their house. He had no desire for regular practice, but as there was no resident physician here he responded day and night to calls to attend the sick to whom his kind, sympathetic, cheerful manner must have brought a comfort that was no small reinforcement to the medicine that he gave. He was more than the family physician; he was the family friend and counsellor.

When the Country Club was organized he was the one of whom everyone thought at once for the first President. Now, by the generous and beautiful act of his daughter, whom some of us remember as she drove her pony cart up and down the Valley road, a vision of childish beauty and happiness, the house, with its surrounding meadows and woods, has become the property of the Club. Where could a memorial of him be more appropriately placed.

On behalf of your Keene Valley neighbors and friends, dear Miss Laight, especially the members of the Keene Valley Country Club, I want to thank you again for your noble gift, to express the pleasure we fell in your presence here today and to tell you with what happiness we dedicate this memorial to your father.

(The bench has now been moved (2012) by past President Randy Titsworth with the help of young Scot McLelland to the main campus of the Country Club. It occupies a central space and is enjoyed by many.)

Here are some notes taken from remarks made by Elliott B. Macrae in connection with the 50th anniversary of the Keene Valley Club, Thursday August 21st, 1952.

“It will be my privilege to introduce those who will take part in the 50th anniversary celebration of the K.V.C.C. This little club has brought joy to a great many people. We owe much to those who have gone before, and we must do our best to keep the club on an even keel so it will be here for another fifty years. It is interesting to note that there has been such a continuity in the membership. In some instances we are now in the third or fourth generation of the early members. We are truly a family club.

In 2002 the Country Club celebrated its centenary. A large tent was erected on the lawn in front of the clubhouse and a grand time was had by all.

Here is a paragraph from Winifred Prince Hyson’s history written in August 1952.

And I cannot help wondering what Debby Wolfe and Zanny Learned will remember and tell about on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Club. What people will they remember? Are any of us giving them what we received from Mrs. Comstock, Mrs. Glover, Dr. and Mrs. Laight, all of the Lowries and the Ranneys and the Hodges? I’m not speaking of the lumps of sugar wrapped in a lemon slice that Mrs. Comstock would slip to us between tennis matches, or the chocolate cake that Mrs. Glover would bring on a Tuesday, but the rich Irish humor that the MacIntoshes used to sweeten the excellent British tea and the echoes of a far-off wonder world that the Laights and the Lowries suggested, the absolute integrity of the Merle-Smiths and Taylors; the Notman’s belief that ugliness can be made beautiful.

We have lost old members and gained new ones. Presidents come and go. The Board of Directors changes over time but the ethos of the Club remains unchanged. Children’s tennis, adult tennis, swimming in the pool, Casserole suppers, Square dances, new member gatherings. A great place to meet and greet new friends and catch up with old friends.

Finally, a rhyme sent to Mrs. Winifred Prince Hyson by Diana Nachbur (nee Adams.) Mrs. Adams put on pageants at the Club and here is a rhyme recited by an eight year old cousin which became a family favourite.

“When I grow up I’ll be so tall
That I can catch most any ball
That Daddy throws.

And I won't fear a single thing -
Like shadows that the firelight flings
Against the wall.

Oh, I will have a pony fat
As now I have a dog and cat
Which always fight.

Nor will I have a nurse at all
To bore me with her bedtime call
When it's still light.

Oh how I long to grow..... and grow!
I hope the time won't go too slow
Till I grow up.