

Introduction:

***Just a Tot in Tannersville:* The Grown-Up Tot's Rationale**

How this project began

The book you hold in your hands began as a history of a modest family and modest house in Tannersville, N.Y., a small "high peaks" town in the northern Catskill Mountains known best in recent decades for its proximity to the Hunter Mountain ski area.

The project was prompted in the summer of 2007, when during a visit to Tannersville to explore my personal "memory lane," I took special note of the current "Four-Corners" intersection that was the locus of family activity from the 1930s through the 1980s. I took some photos, reflected on the decades of work and play, and realized that only a few in my family recall being in the center of the hustle-and-bustle of Tannersville's post WWII Armenian resort boom. On the drive to my home in Newburyport, Mass., I seized upon the idea of assembling a history of my family's years in Tannersville, a history that would preserve and convey the richness of my youthful experiences for any future generations that might be interested.

In the ensuing weeks, I drafted a few outlines, but complicating matters was that by profession I have been variously a journalist, historian, and museum professional – the practice of each requiring thorough research and presentation of context. I concluded that this project would be half-baked and incomplete unless my personal observations were supported by a firm foundation of local history context. The project before me became larger than I had envisioned. Therefore, the entire first section of this book is a micro-history of the Tannersville Four-Corners from its earliest times, devoted to setting the stage for the personal recollections to come. The second section of the book begins with my family's arrival on the mountaintop in the 1930s, and includes not only my personal observations and experiences, but also the wider context of Tannersville's narrowly-framed post-WWII hotel boom. One might say there are actually two "books" bound between the covers of one.

After beginning work on the project, and upon more reflection, I realized that my own recollections really did have legitimate validity, even in their youthful naiveté, since no one else could claim my singular Railroad Avenue observation post at the center of

bustling summer life. Finally, I came to view the entire project as a historian's exercise in discipline – an exercise in taming nostalgia, verifying memories, and corroborating everything with evidence. So it is my hope that the result serves as not only a valid micro-slice of local history for those interested in Tannersville, but also as a case study for anyone who may have thoughts of navigating their own intersection of personal memoir and local history.

The project is part house history, part family history, part personal memoir, part Tannersville history, and part the history of Tannersville's brief post-WWII mini-boom years. It includes my recollections of working at my grandmother's summer lodging house, my grandfather's limousine service, and my observations of 1950s Tannersville life from my vantage point between two bustling summer hotels. But it does not pretend to take a place alongside the hundreds of memoirs written about other Catskill Mountain resort areas to the south.

Everybody knows the Borscht Belt. Who knows the Yogurt Belt?

Stacks of books have been written about the Jewish experience in the southern Catskills, the so-called 1950s-60s "Borscht Belt" of hotels, resorts, bungalow colonies, and summer camps. Countless authors, passionate about their subject, have written novels, short stories, screenplays, non-fiction, scholarly works, and heartfelt first-person accounts of their Catskill Mountain summers. In the southern Catskills, thousands of post-WWII Baby Boomers attended summer camps. (I still remember the stories told to me by my college friends. Remember Allan Sherman's "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh," the song about summer camp experience? I feel that I knew the kids caricatured in the song.) Economically, the "Borscht Belt" held on and prospered longer as a summer destination than Tannersville and the northern Catskills. As a result, more physical evidence remains today of the crumbling hotels and camps. In Tannersville, most of the evidence of its "grand hotel" era of the late 19th and early 20th century has vanished. Until publication of *Pioneer Days in the High Peaks* by Leah Showers Wiltse (1999), there was no single book specifically about the village of Tannersville. So it would appear that there is a far larger audience for material about the southern Catskills.

Besides, the northern Catskills present a more drawn out, but different story. The northern Catskills have exerted a powerful draw on writers and artists since

the beginning of the 19th century. Long before the “grand hotel” era, Washington Irving captured the imagination of readers with *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and the story of *Rip Van Winkle*. Henry David Thoreau and William Cullen Bryant were visitors to the Catskills. The Catskills served as the muse to landscape painter Thomas Cole and his numerous and celebrated protégés. By the late 19th century, with the advent of rail service, the “Big Three” hotels (Catskill Mountain House, Kaaterskill Hotel, & Laurel House), plus hundreds of hotels and boarding houses in Tannersville and the surrounding towns, were packed all summer with vacationers from New York City. Yet the history of Tannersville in the late 19th century includes one unsettling aspect. Some believe that establishment of the exclusive enclaves like Elka Park and the Onteora Club was in part a reaction to the growing presence of Jewish clientele at the mountain hotels. Some hotel advertisements of the period in the Ulster & Delaware Railroad Guides stated “No Hebrews.” Nevertheless, Jewish-owned hotels and boarding houses proliferated in Tannersville, and proudly advertised their kosher kitchens. In the early decades of the 20th century, judging from newspaper accounts and listings of Tannersville summer boarders, the majority of hotel guests were Jewish.

In 1893 Simon Epstein opened the first Jewish boarding house in Hunter, the Grand View House – four years after anti-Semitic harassment at his previous boarding house business in Saxton, N.Y. This was the beginning – by 1920 there were a hundred Jewish boarding houses in the area, with seven kosher butchers working in the town. However, the automobile made Sullivan and Ulster counties more accessible. Conversely, the more treacherous roads in the high peaks region tended to discourage automobile use, at least until the roads were improved. As a result, the newest waves of development favored the easy rolling hills of the southern Catskills.

The high peaks area would undergo waves of transition, with the original hotel proprietors selling out to Jewish hoteliers in the early 1900s, who in turn sold to businessmen from other ethnic groups in the ensuing decades. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Tannersville had become known as the “Yogurt Belt” because of the number of hotels catering to Armenian-Americans, but it received little notice in comparison to the “Borscht Belt.” It was this Armenian-influenced “Yogurt Belt”-era Tannersville that I came to know.

In retrospect, the 1950s Haines Falls-Tannersville-Hunter area was a showcase of “multi-cultural diversity” long before either of the words acquired today’s politically-correct baggage. In summer, the towns had their Armenian, Italian, Irish, Swedish, German, and Hungarian hotels or boarding houses. Tannersville had an Orthodox Jewish population that was supported by numerous Main Street shops. The “diversity” was not unlike what I was familiar with as a young boy in New York City.

But there is one catch. I am not of Armenian heritage. In fact, as an 8-year-old I could not find the country on a map. In fact, my family history was solidly rooted in the Connecticut-Vermont “Apple Pie Belt.” Therefore these pages present my WASP Yankee-boy observations of the scene, of being intoxicated by the exotic music from the Main Street clubs and by the exotic smells from the hotel kitchens. In some ways it was a lonely point of view. Unlike the many published “Borscht Belt” memoirs that portray group solidarity on every page, my personal 1950s Tannersville experience has no particular connection to a larger story but my own.

The intersection of personal memoir & history

A journalist/historian/museum professional takes the subject of “interpretation” seriously. It is like a public trust, a commitment to the readers of the present and future, a mission to enhance understanding.

Those in the profession usually come to be neurotically comprehensive in their work. The approach of this historian/journalist, at least, is to dig deeply to root-out the raw material of documented fact, which is then used (1) to lay out a broad foundation of context, and (2) to present cogent and well-supported interpretive findings. In *Part I: Setting the Scene – A Micro-History of the Tannersville Four-Corners*, the process was straightforward. In *Part II: Recollections of a Railroad Avenue Boy on the Busy Summer Life of the 1950s*, however, I found myself at a very foggy intersection of personal memory and factual history.

The challenge throughout Part II was (1) to tell the story of 1950s Tannersville through the uncorrupted first-person accounts of a boy; and then (2) to illuminate those naive, youthful observations with the hindsight of maturity, and better yet, sources and facts. Regarding the first part of the challenge, I felt it would be wrong to tamper with the purity of my own memories, to “reinterpret” memory. Therefore my youthful observations are kept separate from the facts and figures about Tannersville that were researched as an adult. I have tried to leave original impressions

alone. Regarding the second part of the challenge, the aim was to pursue and present the facts even though they might not agree with my first-person experience and understanding at the time.

For example, when I was a boy, Tannersville's summer economy was in decline, but I could not see it. To me it was bustling from morning till night. This illustrates the lesson that things are not always as they seem, even to a firsthand observer. A tiny ant carried away by a flowing rivulet of water has no idea whether it is caught in a light spring rain or a tidal wave. As the ant toils away in the all-consuming present, it does not see the big picture, and is blithely unaware of the approaching anteater. Conditions make it impossible.

It may not be possible to have true grasp of history without first working, or just living, to gain the advantage of a longer or wider view. More concisely, in my view, there is no real knowledge without context; no real understanding without perspective.

The intersection of personal memoir and history is addressed in further detail in Appendix III: An Essay of Interest to Local Historians. Other appendices provide additional context to support the main text, and include regional & local maps, and an overview of Tannersville's late 19th century "grand hotel" era.

Tannersville today

My youthful recollections of Tannersville ended in the mid-1960s, just about the time the Hunter Mountain ski area was gaining momentum. A few years later and Tannersville would become busier in winter than in summer. The rise of the ski area business coincided with the decline of the ethnic resort business. In subsequent years Tannersville was a comparatively sleepy place in the summer. The year-round population dwindled from a high of 656

in 1930 to 448 in 2000, and remains close to that figure. But in more recent visits to Tannersville, the efforts to polish the town's year-round image have been quite evident. For example, in the 1990s, many Main Street business buildings looked decidedly worn. In mid-winter, when the buildings are encased in ice and snow, one might not notice the flaking paint, loose clapboards, and wind-burned shrubs. But in summer, there was a distinct shabbiness. In the past few years, however, there has been a slow rejuvenation of summer activity. This has coincided with initiatives by the Hunter Foundation, the Catskill Mountain Foundation, and private businesses to improve the appearance of properties along Main Street. These initiatives are heartening to see. To an outsider this would appear to be an indication of citizen pride, responsibility, and "ownership" among the town's fewer-than-500 year-round residents. Undoubtedly the people of Tannersville know better than anyone that they have a special place to nurture. Despite the ebb-and-flow of the Tannersville tourist economy through the seasons and the decades, the powerful draw of the region's natural beauty remains.

My wish for this project

At the very least, Part II of this project will likely jump-start some memories among those who lived through the 1950s in Tannersville. In Part I, newcomers may find information about local history that is not covered anywhere else. Beyond that, if any historians, memoirists, genealogists, or chroniclers of "life under the radar" gain any insights from my musings on the practice, value, and use of local history, it will be a distinct bonus.

**– Reginald W. Bacon
Newburyport, Mass.
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A note to researchers:

Readers researching earlier times in Tannersville will find the maps and appendices especially useful. Such readers will probably want to bookmark the map on page 37, *The Four-Corners Through the Years*. Detailed and keyed annotations follow on pages 38-39. *Appendix I: Maps* includes a selection of maps that provide regional as well as neighborhood context. *Appendix II: Hotel History*, also includes a map showing the location of hotels in central Tannersville. Combined, the maps and annotations aim to add understanding to the text in Part I.

Part II includes maps that help illustrate the personal recollections of the author. On page 46 is a diagram that shows the configuration of the Richmond home in the 1950s. On page 54 is a map of the neighborhood in the mid-1950s.

Both the endnotes and bibliography include an array of primary and secondary sources invaluable to the future Tannersville/Catskills researcher, plus current, if impermanent, links to online materials.

Two-books-in-one? Note that Part I, the history context, and Part II, the author's recollections, are indexed separately.