



Deerpark Diary

Town of Deerpark 1863 School House Museum

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Mongaup Falls – Scenic Natural Wonder to Hydro Electric Dam at Rio

By Lynn M Burns

Deerpark Co-Historian

The Tri-State area saw an influx of out-of-town visitors at the turn of the century. This was described in the September 2019 issue of the “Deerpark Diary.” But where did the local citizenry visit to get away for a weekend or a week-long trek? The nearby Mongaup and Bushkill Falls provided one answer. The falls were located just a few miles west of Port Jervis, NY on the Mongaup River, which formed a natural boundary between Orange and Sullivan Counties. The falls were our very own scenic natural wonder.

These spectacular falls certainly saw their share of enthusiasts. Initially, along the shores of the river, rough and crude campsites sprang up, and later on improved campsites and small lodges were constructed. Auto clubs from, Westtown, Goshen and Warwick formed caravans and drove to the area for daily picnics and weeklong sight-seeing, swimming, hunting and fishing.

The Mongaup and Bushkill Falls were a magnet for sight-seers, daredevils, and tragedies.

among themselves, tried an experiment by going over the Mongaup Falls in a rowboat last Sunday. When the boat stopped rather suddenly, and Charlie told your scribe very confidentially they had all the fun they anticipated.”



grounds and have spent much time and money in the improvement of their property. Such a camp is “Camp Lee” situated in Sullivan County, near Rio, on the beautiful Mongaup River, two miles below the Mongaup Falls. All who have visited the Mongaup Falls will agree that no more picturesque or beautiful spots exists.

“Camp Lee,” as might be inferred from the name, is owned by our townsman, Horace Lee. Mr. Lee purchased a large farm house on the bank of the Mongaup River. It is a fine old house and very commodious. Two large and old-fashioned fireplaces are in the house and a large piazza extends nearly the entire length of its front.

“Since Mr. Lee has become the owner of the property he has made many improvements. As many as twenty people have stopped in the house at one time.

“A large party from Middletown and Westtown go there every year and of course Port Jervis doesn’t get left and the families of Horace Lee, Chas. Lord, E. M. Gordon and others of our citizens have taken advantage of “Camp Lee.” Campers are so enthusiastic over the locality that it is the intention of Mr. Lee to build a bowling alley on the place before next summer.

“It will not be inhabited during September and Mr. Lee informs us that he would be willing to let any responsible parties have the use of the building.

“A large number of pictures of the camp, which are on exhibition in Mr. Lee’s grocery store, give a very clear idea of the surrounding country.”

Waterfall High Jinx

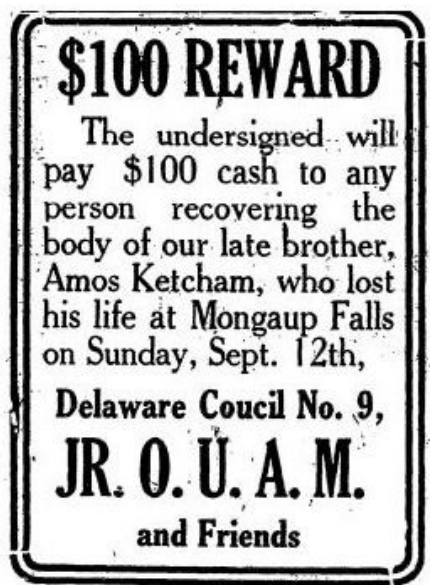
Tri-State Union
Aug. 29, 1889

“Ever since the excursion last week to the falls, the Niagara fever is prevalent here. John Bonker and Charlie Hawkins thinking they would have a little fun

Beautiful “Camp Lee”

Tri-States Union
Aug. 15, 1895
One of the Most Attractive of Nearby Summer Resorts

“Camping has become such a popular way of passing the summer that some of our citizens have purchased camping



Ketcham's Body is Recovered at Mongaup Falls

The Evening Gazette
September 20, 1920

"The body of Amos Ketcham, who drowned in the Mongaup Falls Sunday evening, Sept. 12, was recovered Sunday morning at 7:35 o'clock by John McLaughlin, Eugene Nyce, T. Fred Collier and Thomas Collier.

"The body was found about six feet from the place where the unfortunate young man fell in the falls. It had lodged and was fastened in a crevice in the rocks in the heart of the falls. He had evidently grasped a bunch of shrubbery.

"Mr. McLaughlin and his companions started out very early Sunday morning, took a rope tackle, some other ropes and grappling hooks with them, that they might lower one of their party, over the high rocks to the water's edge and there grapple. Mr. McLaughlin volunteered to go down the rope, and was successful in the first attempt.

"After dislodging the body, the men found it was necessary to let it go over the falls to the pool below, as it was impossible to raise it over the high rocks. While on their way to Mr. Reed's farm to telephone to Mr. Gilbert Ketcham, the father, the party met him on his way to the falls and Undertaker Terwilliger and Woolsey were notified and immediately went after the body."

Movie Thriller Pulled off at Mongaup Falls

The Evening Gazette
May 23, 1921

"Sunday, a movie troop camped at Mongaup Falls and took a few pictures of a very thrilling rescue at the foot of the falls. A large dummy was thrown overboard at the top of the falls and of course the hero dove into the stream and rescued a real live girl from the city and vicinity saw the play. This is not the first time that movie troops have used these falls for their plays. It is indeed a novel spot for such"

A New Era Begins at Mongaup Falls Commission Holds Hearing on Mongaup Power Plant

The Evening Gazette
May 15, 1922

"Albany - May 13 - The Orange County Hydro-Electric Corporation plans to build a large dam on the Mongaup River, near Port Jervis and construct a hydro-electric plant with a capacity of 6,000 horse power of electricity.

"The details of the project were submitted to Public Service Commissioner Blakeslee Friday under an application by the company for permission to build and operate the electric development plant. The electricity to be generated is not to be sold to the consumer, the Orange County Public Service Co., Middletown, having contracted for the entire output for 50 years period. The company also asked permission to issue the bonds and stock for the purpose of financing the project.

"There was no opposition to the company's application. Edward Bisland and M.E. Galligan represented the Sullivan County Board of Supervisors. They asked that the company be required to place all county highways disturbed to their original condition.

"H.J. Memmens of New York, represented the company whose generating plant is to be constructed near Mongaup Falls. The company is ready to go ahead with the construction."

Hydro Electric Co. Begins Work at the Mongaup Falls Dam Port Jervis Daily Union June 14, 1922

"Engineer Frisell, of the Orange County Hydro Electric Company of Middletown, has begun operations at Mongaup Falls, for the construction of the large dam in the Mongaup River for the great electric power plant. He is in the city on Tuesday in search of laborers.

"The Tri-States Garage, at 57 Front Street, has the contract for the transportation of Port Jervis workmen to and from Mongaup Falls. A large force of carpenters, laborers, masons and other trades will be kept busy this summer at the dam. There is plenty of work to be done. Residents of the area will have no difficulty in securing employment with Engineer Frisell and his company.

"Carpenters are now at work building camp houses for the accommodation of the workers."

Big Job Being Done At Mongaup Falls The Evening Gazette August 12, 1922

"To anyone familiar to Mongaup Falls, who has not been there this season, a visit to this scenic spot at present will be something of a revelation, and also an object lesson as to the way big undertakings moved when handled in an efficient manner. A Gazette representative on Friday visited the scene of operations of the Atlantic Utilities Corp. who are building the dam for the Mongaup Falls Hydro-Electric Development across the Mongaup River above the falls, and was astonished at noting what has been accomplished in about two months.

"Under the guidance of Major J. Cole, superintendent, and L.E. Frisell, resident engineer, all parts of the work were visited, from the lower level where the power house is to be and to the falls above where the dam is being built. Cofferdams have been built at both points and the actual construction of both structures will soon be under way, the preliminary work taking much more time than the building of the dam and

power house. At the ledge of rocks at the falls several buildings housing engines and drilling apparatus, concrete mixers, etc., and work is progressing all along this section.

"On Friday the drillers were drilling holes in the ledge, which will have to be partially dynamited away to make room for the pipeline running from the falls to the power house. Above this point men were at work removing rocks, loosened by previous blasts, a huge steel derrick 150 feet in height, conveying large boulders from the path of the pipe to the bank higher up. At the power house, another derrick was being erected and workmen were removing the bank to make room for the walls of the building. Major Cole informed the Gazette man that there were about 100 men at work at present at different parts of the tract, and he expected to have the work completed by the end of the year.

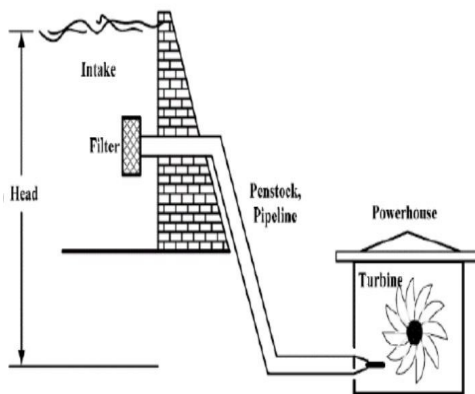
"Not the least interesting part of the enterprise is the model camp for workmen, foremen and superintendent, situated at the forks of the road leading to Mongaup Falls and Mongaup Valley. The first building reached on coming from Port Jervis is the office and store house, where the clerical work is done and supplies are kept.

"Beyond the store house is the mess hall, with a fine airy kitchen at the rear and two long tables, capable of seating 150, in the front. At the side is a small dining room for the entertainment of guests. Three large bunk houses front on the road to Mongaup Valley, where the men are comfortably housed with a wash house in the rear with running water Piped into the Black Brook. A substantial dam across the brook makes a fine swimming pool for the men.

"In the triangle between the two roads is situated The Hacienda, or guest house, with accommodations for twelve persons. A wide veranda runs across the front of the house, and the interior contains a cozy living room, bed rooms, with two iron cots in each, and a commodious bath room. A radio outfit affords evening amusement, keeping the men in touch with events in the world at large. Everything about the camp is as clean and sanitary as it is possible to make it.

"After the dam is completed there will have to be considerable timber cut off along the river in the territory that will be flooded and a new road built higher up the bank, as the water will submerge the present road for a considerable distance. The reservoir will

extend for about two miles above the dam, and while the falls themselves will lose a great deal of their attraction at certain seasons of the year, this artificial lake will add a new beauty to the landscape along the charming road. Before another spring Port Jervis streets, homes and business places will be lighted and industries operated by power that has lain idle for centuries to be finally put to work by modern engineering genius and enterprise."



Big Blast Exploded at Mongaup Falls

Port Jervis Union
August 31, 1922

"Mongaup Falls, Sullivan County, 14 miles from this city was the scene of a gigantic blast of rock late on Wednesday afternoon under the direction of the Atlantic Construction Co. contractors for the big dam. Six holes were drilled 35 feet deep and six inches in diameter, filled with dynamite and the powerful charge exploded with an electric battery. Thousands of tons of rocks were displaced"

Big Turbines Arrive

The Evening Gazette
November 28, 1922

"The three large turbines weighing seven tons each, for the big power plant at Mongaup Falls, are being transferred to the falls today on trucks belonging to J. Mencoiff."

Said Bootleggers Interfered with work

The Evening Gazette
December 28, 1922

"Claiming work on their \$1,000,000 project of turning Mongaup Falls into a big power plant was retarded by the arrival of bootleggers in the construction camp, the Atlantic Utility Company warning them to cease operations, appealed to the authorities at Albany.

"State troopers, Sergeant Hopkins and Trooper Mangan, were assigned to the case, on Saturday arresting John Moran of Monticello, who was said to have in his automobile four cans of alleged whiskey.

"The arrest was made at 10:30 in the evening, Moran being brought before Justice Brady at Monticello, who held him in \$500 bail to await action of the grand jury. Moran it was said could not furnish bail. His car was confiscated, the alleged whiskey being held for evidence. A continued search was made for other alleged bootleggers."

Blaster Loses Life in River At Mongaup Falls

Port Jervis Union
February 19, 1923

"John Kiernan, 30 years old, from Somerville, Mass., employed as a dynamite blaster and driller by the Atlantic Utilities Corporation at Mongaup Falls, was drowned in the Mongaup River above the falls at 11 o'clock on Sunday morning by falling through the ice.

"Kiernan had worked at Mongaup Falls for the past four months and has been engaged in drilling and blasting to break up the ice floe. He was crossing a section of the ice which was in use as a bridge for the laborers with wheel barrows when the ice gave way and he fell into the deep and swift water. From the conditions which prevail at present in the Mongaup River, it will be a long time before the body is recovered although every effort is being made by the company."

Great Hydro-Electric Plant at Mongaup Falls Finished

**Mongaup Falls Power Plant in
Operation Soon;
Dam, Power House, 2,600-foot
Pipe About Ready**

**Three-quarters of a
Million Dollars Spent
In Making Famous Spot into
Plant for
Generating 5,000 Horsepower
– 2 Mile
Lake to be Bordered by
Country Club**

***The Port Jervis Union*
June 21, 1923**

The Half-Mile Snake

“Perhaps the most notable and noticeable part of the entire plant is the long wooden pipe of Oregon fir, that wends its way down from the dam to the power house, dropping 110 feet in its descent along the roadway. Work on this pipeline was commenced last fall, and was continued practically all winter. Work was begun at the lower end, and there were about fifty staves necessary to go around the “barrel,” for that is about how it was built. The staves are four inches thick, and were prepared in the mills in Oregon and brought across country ready to be used. The end of each 12-foot stave has a slit into which a steel piece is fitted to make the junctions tight and solid. Around the outside are large steel hoops about three inches apart, which have to be tightened once more before the water is let in. We didn’t count the number of staves or hoops, but you might figure about five hoops to a “barrel” at the upper end of the pipe and six at the lower, where the water pressure will be greatest when in use.”

Note...Sections of this nearly 100 year old wooden pipe can still be seen in area above the dam.

Water Turned Into 8-Foot Pipe At Mongaup Falls Dam Saturday Night –

Lake Now Slowly Rising

***The Port Jervis Union*
June 25, 1923**

“Water was turned into the 2,600-foot pipe at the new dam on Saturday at midnight, after the water had been shut from the outlet to the river four hours to give the lake a chance to rise. The water is being put into the huge eight-foot pipe slowly so as to give the wood a chance to swell properly and evenly. Today some of the water is being let out the opening in the dam, so that it will not get higher than needed at present.

“Chief of Construction Frisell stated that he expected to start the machinery with the force of the water about Wednesday, and see how the power plant operates. So far everything has worked out just as planned.”

Power Coming From Mongaup Falls Today

***The Evening Gazette*
July 10, 1923**

“Work on the transmission system from the falls to the distributing plant at Cuddebackville was completed last night and the power was immediately turned on. Everything worked with precision and the engineers were naturally gratified at the success of the undertaking.

“The hard part of the job is now done. There remains considerable cleaning up, however, and a force of men will be kept the rest of the summer for that purpose. Three cottages will also be erected at the plant permanently. This big water power plant will undoubtedly mean much for the industrial development of this section”

_____ ... _____

Rio Dam today

aerial photo courtesy

R. Perez

