

Return to the Catskills

By Sonia Fuentes

On November 2, 2013, I traveled to the Catskill Mountains of New York to be one of ten inaugural inductees into the Hall of Distinction of the Monticello Central School District, from whose high school I had graduated as valedictorian in 1946. It was a voyage into my past.

I had first come to the village of Woodridge in the Catskills in 1936 with my parents and brother, after fleeing from the Nazi regime in my birthplace, Berlin, Germany.

Woodridge, with a population of about seven hundred, was one of the villages in an area that used to be known as the "Borscht Belt" (named for the beet-based soup popular among Jews), in a range of the Appalachian Mountains in southeastern New York.

The Catskills were a popular vacation spot for New York City Jews from the 1920s to the 1970s. Borscht Belt hotels, bungalow colonies, and rooming houses were frequented by middle- and working-class Jewish New Yorkers. The area was known for the many famous comedians and other entertainers who got their start there and for hotels like Grossinger's and the Concord that were legend. But all that ended a long time ago. As early as 1965, declines at many Catskill resorts were apparent. There were a number of reasons for this, including competition from other vacation spots and cheap air fares to Europe.

In Woodridge, my parents rented a rooming house for five years and, in turn, rented out those rooms for the summer season, which ran from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

When our five-year rental was up in 1941, my parents built the Pine Tree Bungalow Colony on fifty acres of land about 1 1/4 miles from downtown Monticello, a much larger village. Monticello had a winter population of about 3,500, which swelled to 75,000 - 100,000 during the summer season.

Monticello
My hostess and former classmate, Joan Rhulen Farrow, picked me up at the airport and drove me around the area before and after the induction ceremony. Wherever we drove, I saw not only the villages, towns and people there today, but in my mind's eye those I remembered from the 1930s and '40s.

A sign pointing to Ellenville reminded me of Joe and Ethel Kooperman, a husband-and-wife team, who were my parents' lawyers. Ethel was my inspiration for going to law school. They had lived and had their office in Ellenville's Wayside Inn, a four-story wooden hotel in the center of town. Sadly, a fire destroyed the Wayside Inn in October 1967.

Joan told me that beyond the two of us, very few members of our class remain alive, and of those who are alive, some are seriously ill.

Sadly, the village and the area are in a depressed state. Many of the stores in Monticello are shut, and jobs are few. Monticello has no movie theater and that is also true of some of the other

villages in the area.

I remembered the movie theater that had been there in my day, the Rialto. When the owner of the theater changed the price of admission from \$.25 to \$.50, I, along with other students, picketed the theater.

Monticello has become much more diversified. In our class of about a hundred, there was one African-American student. Now the mayor is an African-American. Statistics reveal that of the current population of 6,741, thirty-one percent are African-American and thirty percent are Hispanic.

Induction ceremony

The Hall of Distinction was established to honor outstanding graduates, former students, and former employees. During the ceremony, each Hall of Distinction inductee gave a three-minute talk. I shared a story from my memoir, *Eat First - You Don't Know What They'll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter*. I discussed the time in my senior year of high school when I intervened to stop the sale of our bungalow colony because that would have meant that my family would relocate, and I wanted to graduate with my high school class.

After the ceremony, the ten plaques for the inductees were unveiled, each of which contained a picture of the inductee and some biographical material.

Woodridge

As we drove to Woodridge, the stories I remembered came teeming into my mind. In a small village like Woodridge, everyone knows everyone else and stories abound. It is almost fifty years since I moved to Woodridge but the stories are with me still. Perhaps they started me on the path to being a storyteller.

We met with Joan Collins, who was sworn in as Woodridge's first woman mayor on December 7, 2012. She joined us in Joan Farrow's car and we drove around Woodridge together.

Joan Collins pointed out Glen Wild Road, where the Alamac Hotel had stood. The Alamac was owned by the parents of Rosalie Shapiro and her cousin, Joyce, who attended my annual birthday parties. They were the wealthiest children who attended and the only ones who never brought a present.

Woodridge played a role in the story of a musician with the NBC Symphony Orchestra. His wife and daughter lived in Woodridge, but he spent most of his time in New York City with the NBC Symphony Orchestra. When his affair with a woman violinist in the orchestra turned sour, he killed her and fled to Woodridge, seeking his wife's protection. Instead, she turned him in and he was arrested, found guilty of the murder, and imprisoned.

Another sensational Woodridge case involved Abe Laskowitz, a cattle dealer who was convicted of hiring men to set an arson fire in 1932 that destroyed a property on which he held a mortgage. Laskowitz was sentenced to serve at least eight years prison, but he never served a day! His lawyer's

maneuvering kept him out of prison.

We passed the premises of what had been the Inter-County Farmers Cooperative Association, Inc. The Inter-County had been formed in the mid-1930s by the Jewish Agricultural Society and individual farmers to meet the farmers' needs for feed during the Depression.

After our tour of the village, Joan Farrow and I said good-bye to Joan Collins and returned to Monticello.

So ended my just-over-one-day in the Catskills, a very special trip into my past. ☺

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