Mohonk Preserve, Inc.

Historical Cultural Note No. 13

24 August 1985

Wintergreen Oil Manufacture in the Shawangunks

As a result of showing visitors the Research Center and talking about resource utilization in the Shawangunks, different aspects of the "wintergreen industry" subsequently were brought to my attention. The results, with the assistance of a recent field trip with Paul Huth, are the basis of this account.

I learned from Alfred B. Smiley that there was once a wintergreen still located beside Peterskill Road where the first stream (south of Route 44-55) crosses. It was operated by one of the Otis Family (originally spelled Otz). This would have been the father or grandfather of the Raymond Otis that Al and I knew. Ray worked at Minnewaska for many years and during World War II cut wood by the cord in the Trapps for Mohonk. The Otis family once lived at the site of the former Laurel Inn, now the Minnewaska Park parking lot.

This summer after a Mohonk visit Miss Ethel DuBois, who had a sister who lived in Ellenville, sent me the following information from her file.

W I N T E R G R E E N I N D U S T R Y

One of the very early industries in this area before the turn of the century was the gathering and distilling of wintergreen leaves to obtain wintergreen oil for use in flavorings and medicine. Quantities of wintergreen leaves were purchased at a cent a pound from local people who made a business of gathering them.

Probably as early as 1850-60 Thomas Yarrow had a distillery at his home at the foot of the mountain. There the distilling was done in huge copper kettles, the oil dropping to the bottom and a white, milky substance remaining. When a flood in August, 1915, destroyed this still, some of the kettles were later found many miles away near Accord.

Another early distillery flourishing about 1875 was that owned by Frank P. Dowe and situated on top of the mountain near where the present Cragsmoor road leaves route 52. Mr. Dowe drove a horse and peddler's wagon through the surrounding area--Kingston, Newburgh, Walden--carrying "essential oils," but primarily wintergreen oil, which in those days sold for $8 or $9 a pound. Later the Dowe family moved to East Mountaindale and established at Panther Hill what became a thriving distillery.

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Unfortunately, the source, author and date were not available.

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On the 23rd we explored the area where the stream crosses Peterskill Road. This is 1.2 miles SW of the Park entrance gate and the only regularly flowing stream between Route 44-55 and Fly Brook. We found no evidence of building or chimney foundation either upstream or downstream of the Peterskill Road. The downstream side seemed a more likely location because the slope of the land toward the Peterskill would have allowed a shorter pipe (or trough) to the still.

We looked for a possible nearby source of wintergreen leaves. For some 950 feet, along the stream to the west of the road, there is a dense mixed coniferous-hardwood forest with a considerable ground cover of mountain laurel. In an estimated three acres we found less than a dozen wintergreen plants. Adjacent to the road on exposed slabs of conglomerate, there were scattered wintergreen plants, but not really numerous enough to seem to make a harvest feasible. It is our guess that, as of the time of the industry, the forest might have been much more open as a result of earlier forest fires, and hence more suitable for wintergreen.

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Note:
I propose to name this stream— Wintergreen Stream. D.S.