

Mohonk Preserve Inc.

Historical/Cultural Note No. 10

The Shawangunk Hermit's Hut

March 1985

In the early days of the Mohonk School there was a bimonthly publication The Mohonk Sentinel. The following article appeared in the February 1926 issue.

THE SHAWANGUNK HERMIT

A short time ago, two men hunting in the Trapps mountains, stumbled on a hut built in the side of a cliff between two large rocks. They said that an old man who had the appearance of a hermit lived there, and that, from the looks of several barrels of soaking corn, he was somewhat of a moonshiner also.

Weeks passed, then one day some things were stolen from the various huts which have been built by the boys. Immediately suspicion was centered on the old hermit. Several parties went over to visit him, but were unsuccessful in even finding the hut. Then one day shortly afterward, a boy who happened to be wandering around the Trapps stumbled accidentally on the hut. The next day, a group of fellows walked over and did some looking around to see if they could locate any of the stolen articles. On the third day after the re-discovery of the hermit, the sheriff was notified that a man was living on the estate without permission. Accompanied by two or three deputies and boys from school, he took a truck and drove over. The old man surrendered without a fight, and allowed himself to be put into the truck. Meanwhile, the sheriff's men pulled down part of his shack, and destroyed practically all of his winter supplies, which, from all accounts, he had just gathered. None of the stolen articles were found.

While riding back on the truck with his captors, he told the story of his past life, which was rather interesting. It seems that, born in Switzerland, he came to this country some years ago and started in the cattle business in California. He secured twenty-seven head of cattle, and by hard labor and good luck they increased to twenty thousand in a short time. He sold his herd and received a tidy sum for it. He was taken

sick, and went to the hospital, then, when well, he came east and finally settled, penniless, in the before mentioned hut in the mountains, where he expected to spend the winter.

When the old hermit appeared in court, the judge sentenced him for the winter because of a previously committed theft to stock his hut.

HUTS

The huts are being enjoyed more than ever ever since real winter has set in. Who would not like to snowshoe or ski through the beautiful winter woods where the snow is soft and deep, the evergreens are piled high with shining crystals, and everything takes on a peculiar shape under its white coverlet; and then, after a long tramp in the tingling air, to stop in at a cosy hut and sit before a roaring fire, gulping down a warming cup of coffee or tea. Little wonder indeed that the huts have become more popular this winter.

We wish to congratulate Roger Forman and Fred Carey on the excellent cabin which they have constructed in real lumberjack style in less than two months.

At least a part of the mystery concerning the articles stolen from the huts has been cleared up by the capture of two of the robbers. It was due principally to the clever detective work of George Young, the sheriff assigned to the Mohonk Estate, that these culprits were found. They confessed to have taken some of the more valuable articles which had disappeared from one of the huts. They received a reprimand and a warning and were forced to return the articles to their rightful owners. Whether it was this example or merely the arrival of the snow, which leaves tell-tale tracks, the thefts from all the huts have entirely ceased.

The following is offered to supplement the Sentinel accounts.

I was a member of the Straight-Eight (there were 8 members), which had the hut west of the lower part of the Laurel Ledge Road. The chimney, which I helped build, is still standing. It was our group that lost the tools that were not found at the Hermit's Hut. We never did know where they went to. As I recall, it was Henry Dougherty who rediscovered the hermit. He was along when George Young, who was outside superintendent, and deputy sheriff, arrested him. He seemed quite willing to go and philosophized that perhaps the county jail would be more comfortable in winter than his perch on the ledge. The hut is located a few hundred yards southwest of the S-turn on Overcliff Road and looks out over Sleepy Hollow swamp. It is a delightful location and I have often been there since for picnics.

There was no evidence that the barrel of field corn, which he had, was used for making alcohol. We presumed that he was going to cook it and eat it. There were also apples and even fresh milk. How he had acquired the latter, other than milking a cow in a pasture, was a mystery. He had done a good job in closing in the two ends of the shelter with chestnut poles. Apparently, he was good at whittling and had carved out heavy wooden soles which he was going to attach to his leather uppers. When he was arrested his shoes were in bad shape. As I recall, they were wired together with copper wire. Also, he had whittled out what appeared to be spits. I have these and the wooden soles in my collection.

In 1973, when I took Nicholas Shoumatoff to see the hermit's hut, he hypothesized that this natural shelter could well have been used by the nomadic Paleo Indians (about 12,600 years ago) as a vantage point from which to watch for herds of caribou and mastodons in the Wallkill Valley.

As an item of incidental interest, the Hermit's Hut site was used for the falcon hacking by the Cornell Peregrine Fund in 1977, '78 and '79. A 1979 male from this site (or the hacking site at Millbrook) and a female hacked from Sea Island, New Jersey in 1980, nested under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in 1983. This marked the first time that a released New York peregrine nested. Three young were raised and banded.

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The Shawangunk Hermit's Hut



The East End of the Hut



The West End of the Hut

by Albert K. Smiley
11 Dec. 1925

The Shawangunk
Hermit's Hut



View to the Southwest



View to the Northeast

by Albert K. Smiley
11 Dec. 1925