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The Trapps at Time & The Valleys Museum

Oct 23, 2015

By **John Conway** - *sullivan county historian*

For nearly two hundred years beginning before the Revolutionary War, there was a small isolated community buried deep in the Shawangunk Mountains of Ulster County where rugged men and women scratched out a meager living. The place was known as the Trapps.

The name comes from the Dutch word, Trappen, meaning stairs, which roughly describes the appearance of the gap in the mountain in which the community is nestled. The name has a bit of a mysterious ring to it, but it does not begin to do justice to the mysterious nature of the place itself.

A handful of families lived in the Trapps for more than a century, and over the years folks with names like Burger, Enderly, Harp, and Van Leuven did whatever was necessary to survive. The men peeled bark for the tanneries, logged acres of

timber for charcoal and cut ice for refrigeration. They shaved hoops for barrel staves used in the burgeoning Ulster County cement industry and cut and shaped rock into the millstones used to grind grain in mills throughout the country.

Women and children churned butter, boiled sap into maple syrup and grew apples and pears, selling as much as they could. They also played an integral role in the fabled Shawangunk huckleberry picking industry. None of these ventures provided much more than subsistence and most of them did not require leaving the Trapps.

And while that changed somewhat after the Civil War, when the growth of the Ulster County tourism industry provided construction jobs throughout the region for the men of the Trapps, the community remained isolated and many of its people reclusive. Even as the proliferation of grand resort hotels changed the primitive nature of the surrounding area and new and improved roads made travel easier, life within the Trapps remained largely unaffected. Even as writers and painters of the famed Catskill Mountain School - Burroughs, Cole, Durand and others - brought national renown to the surrounding landscape, the Trapps managed to continue as a mystery to those outside its confines.

Instead, it seems, the Trapps became a place of legend and folklore. Few outsiders knew of its existence, and fewer still ever visited. Some of the incredible stories that became part of the Trapps



Robi Josephson(left) and Bob Larsen authors of "An Unforgiving Land: Hardscrabble Life in the Trapps, a Vanished Shawangunk Mountain Hamlet."

legend were true; most were not, but for decades it was almost impossible to know which were which.

That all changed in 2013 when Black Dome Press published the book, “An Unforgiving Land: Hardscrabble Life in the Trapps, a Vanished Shawangunk Mountain Hamlet” by Robi Josephson and Bob Larsen, which is undeniably the definitive work on the history of the community. Now, Robi Josephson brings her knowledge and insight into the strange life of those who populated this mysterious town to Time & the Valleys Museum in Grahamsville, where she will deliver a presentation on Sunday, October 25 at 2 p.m.

Larsen, who is now 91 years old, is the acknowledged expert on the history of the Trapps, having begun to earnestly research the topic in the 1970s, amassing an extensive collection which is housed today at the Daniel Smiley Research Center of the Mohonk Preserve. His age and occasional frailty prevents him from doing many interviews or programs these days, but his co-author has more than taken up the slack. In fact, Josephson's knowledge of and enthusiasm for the subject is immediately obvious whenever she discusses it.

Having worked for several years at the Mohonk Preserve, Josephson became acquainted with Larsen as he began accumulating information about the Trapps and quickly became a collaborator and eventually a co-author.

And Josephson's frequent discussions of the Trapps are not just about the distant past. She points out that the book contains considerable information about the fairly recent restoration of some of the community, including at least one of the buildings overseen by well-known Sullivan County contractor Zeke Boyle.

Boyle's work is lauded in the book, and he notes in one passage that he could “almost feel the presence of past generations in the frameless plank and batten walls.”

The lengthy restoration project Boyle directed on one of the old cabins in the community was just the first of several undertaken since 2000. The remains of an old saw mill were discovered and cleaned up as was the site of a former blacksmith shop. A kiosk has been erected that details the industrial history of the community. More and more of the story of the special people who called the Trapps home is now being told.

“These people may not have had a lot for themselves,” Boyle says in the book, “but they used everything they had.”

And that was life in the Trapps.

Robi Josephson's program on the Trapps will be held at the Community Room of the Daniel Pierce Library in Grahamsville at 2 PM on Sunday, October 25. It is free and open to the public and she will have available for sale copies of the book, “An Unforgiving Land: Hardscrabble Life in the Trapps, a Vanished Shawangunk Mountain Hamlet.”

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