

AS I REMEMBER THE MERWINSVILLE HOTEL

By Virginia Hastings Smith

Turning six years of age on October 26, 1931, I didn't know we were moving into an historical point of interest. Times were hard. Dad had lost his job. Bills were piling up and we had to move again. Dad's parents, after renting several places in Gaylordsville, moved into the old hotel in 1916. According to New Milford land records, the hotel was purchased by my grandmother, Ellen Hastings, in 1922 from Edward Hurd.

The exterior of the building was painted white, but with soot from the trains and the elements, it became a dull grey. Two brick chimneys were on each end of the building. There were openings for a stove pipe but no fireplace on the first, second or third floors.

Open porches ran the full length of the west side on the first and second floors, with a roof over the second floor. There were no porches on the north or south end. Small porches covering an entrance door and a window on each side of the door were on the east side first and second floors. Again, a roof covered the second floor porch.

My grandparents occupied the entire first floor. There was a spare bedroom that opened off the kitchen on the northeast corner of the building. My grandfather, Michael Hastings, was a railroad section foreman. He had a desk in that room where he kept his records. He was responsible for track maintenance. Crews were sent as far as Great Barrington, Massachusetts to the north and to Norwalk, Connecticut to the south.

Next to this bedroom, also off the kitchen, there was another room used as a pantry. A stairway led upstairs to a small room, probably used by hired help during active hotel days. A door opened onto the second floor porch. Under this room, on the first floor was another small room with an entry door going onto the west porch.

The kitchen was heated with a large cookstove. There was a long, shallow soapstone sink. A single cold water tap brought water from a spring. Prior to our move, water was pumped via a hand pump bolted to a shelf beside the sink. The spring was located deep in the woods across from the east side of the hotel. When we moved in, my father laid new pipe and had water run into a reservoir located up on the hill just in back of the hotel. Dual lines were laid to supply grandparents on the first floor and to us on the south and second floor. Water came to the house by gravity. The water lines broke only once that I remember. Starting at the reservoir, they were uncovered and luckily the break was found halfway down the hill. The other problem was pipes freezing in the winter. Many a time a blowtorch was used to thaw them out. The solution was to let the water run during frigid weather. In 1931 there was no electricity. Oil lamps were used. Soon after electricity was put in. A telephone followed in a few years. Heat was supplied by a large kitchen range and a potbellied stove in the living room.

Wood was cut on the hillside back of the hotel. My grandfather hired local men to help load it, using a horse and wagon. I remember Joseph Elsinger and Richard Thomas helping him. The wood was brought to the barn across from the train station. A large gas-run stationary saw cut up the logs.

An outhouse, with two rooms, with two holes respectively, served us until 1946.

An everyday living room was next to the kitchen on the west side. Double doors and a single door opened off the living room into a room that was the main bedroom. Again, another set of double doors and a single door opened into the formal sitting room. An oriental rug covered the floor. Dark green velvet covered horse hair sofa, love seat, two arm chairs and two "no-arm" chairs, a marble top table, wood end tables and several lamps were the furniture. Two two lamps were large and painted with flowers and the smaller ones were the same, double-tiered and used kerosene. When we moved to our new house, one large lamp was converted to electricity.

I remember sitting on the sofa but didn't stay long because the horse hair pricked. Also in this living room was a RCA Victor victrola housed in the top of a dark wooden cabinet. Underneath was space to keep the celluloid records (78s). As needed, you put a new metal needle in place, placed the record on the turntable, put the needle arm at the beginning on the outside of the record, cranked up the machine until it wouldn't go any further, released the brake on the turntable and MUSIC, MUSIC, MUSIC!

My grandparents were Catholic. My dad built a wooden altar and painted it white. My grandmother accrued statues of the Sacred Heart, Virgin Mary and St. Joseph (about 3'). The parish priest from New Milford would come every First Friday of the month to give communion. As I grew older, I set the beside table for communion for my grandmother. She spent a good share of the last years of her life in bed. She died in 1939.

Opposite the bedroom was a hallway - closed on both sides, then a stairway leading on both sides to the cellar. The south stairway was closed off. At the end of the hall was the entrance room from the first floor porch. A dumbwaiter (a large enclosed shelved unit) was used to carry fresh food from the cellar kitchen when the hotel was in its prime. It was later kept as a storage closet.

An icebox housed perishable foods. One side would accommodate a large block of ice. As it melted, a basin under the box caught the runoff. You just had to remember to empty it. The iceman came once a week. A 25 cent block of ice just about made it for the week.

Mr. Osheroff from Cornwall peddled fresh meat once a week. I always got a hot dog to eat raw if I was around when he came. Mr. Murray, who lived on Spring Street in New Milford, came with fresh fish. He would have a big piece of cod and two or three pounds or more would be purchased. It was put in cheesecloth and boiled. New potatoes and a cod flavored cream sauce were wonderful.

Next to this entry room was the summer kitchen because it was cooler. My grandmother had a Maytag washing machine run by a motor. She would stick the long, tubular exhaust out an open window. It was NOISY!!! The washer was kept in this room. Water was heated on the woodburning kitchen range, then carried by pailful to the washer. This room was connected by an odd, narrow door to the formal living room. You had to go up two steps, over the sill, and down two steps.

Opening off the formal living room and the summer kitchen were enclosed stairs leading to a landing and

up more stairs to the second floor. Another set of stairs led from their everyday living room and from the kitchen. These stairs still exist.

The south end of the first floor was the original ticket office for the trains. The new freight train station was in operation when we arrived. The trains were a constant part of our lives. Passenger service 9:30 a.m. down to Norwalk, Connecticut and up at 11:00 a.m. heading to Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Two tracks ran across the front of the hotel. The inside track was a siding. Access was by a manual switch to the north and south. Another siding started just south of the hotel, again accessed by a manual switch. A creamery was located off this siding. In later years coal and feed cars were left for the local business.

The train would go down at 4:00 p.m. and up at 6:00 p.m. It cost me 25 cents one way to ride to New Milford. A freight train would go up and back during the day and again during the night. The whole building would shake. When coal was used for fuel, the smoke stack would blow black cinders. Many a time my mother would have to redo the wash. We finally got them not to blow the whistle right in front of the house. Also big chunks of burning coal would fly off the engine area, causing a grass fire along the tracks. Many a night local folks were called out to help put out the fires.

The south end room served as an entry to our apartment on the second floor. Our apartment consisted of a kitchen, living room, four bedrooms, and a pantry. My last bedroom opened onto the east porch, now the Frank Piliero Memorial Balcony.

The north side, second floor, had two large rooms;

two small rooms opened off the east room. From the main stairway two narrow stairways took you to the third floor landing. This opened into a full length room that was known as the ballroom. Small, low ceiling rooms opened off the east and west sides. These were once used as dressing rooms. I presume the roads were dirty and muddy at times so one had to change into proper ball attire.

I never went into the cellar much. A room at the base of the stairs served as a storage room for winter vegetables (onions, potatoes, carrots, cabbage, etc.). I was told there was a wine cellar and a mahogany bar down there. The bar wood was used to make a closet in one of our bedrooms.

A wooden platform ran off the lower west porch of the hotel past another building that was the old store. We used it for storage and a garage. The road that ran on the east side of the hotel had no name. It was named Browns Forge in later years.

Across the road, the dirt bank was not holding. My grandparents put in a stone wall across the back and part way up the road past the hotel. On the south and across from the road there was a two story barn (once used for carriages). My grandfather had a saw set up to cut his wood and stored wood on the other side. Upstairs was a chicken house.

Heating the living quarters for us was by wood initially, then coal, then oil. Emptying ashes from the wood and coal stoves was not easy. Hot water was heated on the cookstove. We later had a stove with a water reservoir.

A building on the north side of the hotel was originally a school. We used it as a barn, storing hay and a

horse named Prince and a donkey named Jerry. These two animals lived together for years, sharing the expanse of pastures on the west side of the railroad tracks. The donkey continuously jumped the fence, particularly if the horse was being used to haul wood, vegetables or hay. Mr. Hyde, who lived in what is now the Hanley home, would be sore than upset as the donkey would devour and trample his vegetable garden. When Jerry finished there, he would head up to Jake Grisell's garden. I don't know where the donkey went, but remember Grandpa riding him bareback down Station Hill, never to return again. The horse cried and cried, wouldn't eat, and I'm sure died of a broken heart.

Across the track and north of the hotel was a large wooden water tank. The trains would stop to take on water for the boilers. The overflow ran through a culvert and emptied onto a slope, southerly. This was great in winter time as it froze. We would slide the full length of the pasture to the brook. Also across the track was a wonderful sand bank. In later years the town of New Milford would truck out sand. Still on the opposite side of the track, a narrow dirt road travelled down to a big open pasture. Along the fence bittersweet grew at random. Chestnut trees and walnut trees supplied us with nuts.

Mail was delivered via train. Clarence Evans would bring a bag of mail and put it on a hook apparatus on a raised platform across and on the west side of the track a little north of the hotel. As the train came by, the mailbag was whisked off the hook. Incoming mail was thrown off the moving train in a heavy weight mailbag. Most of the time the bag would lank successfully. There were the rare times when the bag burst open. We all scrambled to help Clarence gather it all. Later the train slowed to toss the mail off by the

station.

I timed my trips to Honan's store so that I could hitch a ride with Clarence one way or the other. When my grandparents were living, Clarence would hang the mail bag. We would then come in for a cup of tea. The teapot was always on the stove. His cup and saucer were always on the table. I guess he didn't trust the cleanliness of the cup. He would pour a small amount of tea in his cup, swish it around and then throw the tea under the table. Eventually, this wore a hole in the linoleum. I never said anything; just wondered if my grandfather noticed.

My grandmother had a cement sidewalk laid in front of both entry doors and one to the outhouse. A cement curb enclosed the back area of the hotel. It also prevented cars from driving too close. Two white oxheart cherry trees were in this area. The beautiful spring blossoms eventually produced cherries that my mother canned.

Living at the hotel was an unusual experience now that I think about it. It was a special way of life. I went to Waller District School for first grade, then second and third together. Fourth to sixth grade was at the Gaylord District School. I walked to the Waller School. Norman Wyble contracted to provide transportation from the Pomeroy lumber yard at the foot of Station Hill. All the kids east of the Housatonic River could ride to the Gaylord School. Seventh, eighth and four years of high school, we were picked up at the old Honan's Store (now the Gaylordsville Cafe) and bussed to the high school building on East Street in New Milford.

Mr. Gentilli from Danbury delivered fresh fruit and vegetables. He and his sons did this for years.

Watkins products were a part of our lives, from spices to liniments. Mr. and Mrs. Sachs had a clothing store in New Milford on Railroad Street. Mr. Sachs also sold goods door to door. My mother bought underwear and house dresses. My Dad always got his heavy-duty work overalls and work boots from him. The Red Rose Tea Company had a delivery truck that supplied tea, coffee and cocoa. Saving coupons earned from buying these products merited a set of dishes. I have a pitcher still. Bork and Stevens delivered bread and pastries. I remember I had to have "Buttercup Bread" advertised by the Lone Ranger on the radio.

I was fascinated by the Fuller Brush salesman. We always got the full demonstration of all his latest products.

My grandfather attended St. Francis Xavier Church in New Milford via horse and wagon. When we came in 1931, my Dad had a Model T Ford. It had two doors. Two people could sit in the back seat. A fold-up seat on the front passenger side allowed entry into the back seat area. I remember my Dad cranking up the engine and then making a mad dash to pull the throttle out before the crank stopped turning. As I got older, I was allowed to pull the throttle when he gave me the signal. The radiator would freeze in winter. He would have to thaw it out with kettles of hot water.

Another interesting car was a four-door Studebaker sedan. The side and back windows had shades. The back seat was spacious. Two fold-up seats were in back of the front seat. You would ride facing backward.

The old Honan's Store in the village provided our staples. We brought our own jugs for vinegar and

molasses. The store also had many hardware items, plus you could purchase kerosene and gasoline. The Post Office was housed at the Honan's Store. We didn't have a private box so had to ask for our mail.

Most of the open field was harvested for hay. Picking it up was done with a pitchfork onto the hay wagon. It was wonderful to ride on top back to the barn. At the far end of the field was a huge barn also to house hay. I never went there as hobos used it to sleep in. In a third of the field Grandpa raised potatoes (Green Mountain). At harvest time he would dig them during the day and let them dry. When I came home from school, I helped grade and basket them. The small potatoes we cooked for the pigs.

Hobos were men who travelled via the empty railroad box cars. They usually knew where they could stop for a free meal, take a bath and wash clothes. They stopped at the hotel starting in the early spring through fall. There were regulars that my grandfather knew. They slept in the barn north of the hotel or in the big barn at the end of the hay field. They never did us any harm but my mother and I always stayed clear when any were around. Usually there was one at a time. The most one would stay would be three days. With the rumblings of World War II, this way of life stopped. My grandmother died and my grandfather moved to his daughter's home in New Milford.

Our vegetable garden was across the road in back of the hotel, up a flat top hill. Asparagus always fascinated me. It was all over the place. We did try to confine it to a bed but it didn't always work.

When I was a teenager, I invited village kids and held a dance up in the ballroom. Amanda Parker helped

me clean up the floor (mopping and waxing). Music was from a record player. Electricity was supplied by extension cords from downstairs. We square danced and bebopped. My mom supplied refreshments. My parents never complained but I bet the ceiling dropped plaster dust.

My parents kept our apartment comfortable. After my grandparents passed away, many a time I stayed by myself. When the wind would blow, the chimneys would whistle, the linoleum in the kitchen would raise up and down. We always had mice but our cat family kept that population in check.

In 1945 my Dad purchased land on Route 7 just north of the now Firemen's Field. The north boundary was the home of an elderly lady, Flora Hall. A severe winter burst the water pipes at the hotel. My parents moved into their new home in February, 1946. The hotel then served as storage for the Gaylordsville Fire Department carnival stands. My Dad used the south end first floor as a carpentry workshop.

When my Dad died in 1963, the surrounding 100 acres had already been sold. In 1963 I inherited the hotel. When I inquired about the taxes, it was considered worthless, so I paid none.

Later, perhaps in 1964, I sold the hotel building to Edward Dolan, Barbara Thorland's father, for \$300.00. He continued to use the building as a workshop and storage area until it was finally abandoned. He later deeded it to the Merwinsville Hotel Restoration group in 1971 for \$1.00.