

MERWINS TALES



MERWINSVILLE HOTEL RESTORATION

THE STATION HOTEL AND THE RAILROAD

- as written in the History of Gaylordsville by John Flynn

The history of the hotel begins in 1837, when surveyors for the Housatonic Railroad were looking for the best route up the valley through Gaylordsville. They spent a few nights in the hotel, west of the river, that was run by Sylvanus Merwin, who was a shrewd businessman. During their evening conversation they discussed their day's work, and Mr. Merwin was able to learn the exact path the rails would follow. With an eye to the future he bought land east of the village through which the railroad must pass, and started building a second hotel there. When the lawyers for the railroad arrived to negotiate for a right-of-way through his property, Mr. Merwin was in a position to bargain. He insisted that they agree to use the hotel as a meal stop for all passenger trains, and the station must be called Merwinsville. The railroad needed the land, and the hotel, being somewhat midway between the ends of the proposed line, Bridgeport and Pittsfield, would make an excellent meal stop, so they agreed to the terms. When the first train arrived in 1843 the hotel was ready.

An addition was built on the south end of the hotel to house the ticket office and waiting rooms, and the insatiable Merwin became the station agent. Mr. Merwin seems to have been determined to make the hotel area a center of activity. He built a store south of the hotel, and a schoolhouse north of it. The store was run by a Mr. Graves, who was related to Mrs. Merwin. The school was for girls, some of whom probably boarded in the hotel, but local girls also attended.

Merwin's Hotel was unique for its time - a large and gracious hotel in the foothills of northwest Connecticut. The three-story structure was architecturally interesting with a

nine-column Georgian exterior, latticed balconies, and ample windows. Inside, the four first-floor dining rooms were tastefully decorated. The food was brought up from the basement kitchen and bakery on a dumbwaiter. The trains only stopped for twenty minutes so everything had to be ready when they arrived. Some of the cooking was done by Mrs. Merwin, but they also employed a chef, Edward Hallock. Mr. Hallock was a colorful character. He always wore a skull cap and carried his pipe and tobacco in a large



pouch. He made his own clothes, and it was not unusual to see him in brightly colored calico trousers. The 'Mod' clothes of the '70's would have been just his style. When speaking of Mr. and Mrs. Merwin - to someone else - he usually referred to them as the 'old rooster and the old hen'.

Water for the kitchen came from a spring on the hillside to the east. There was also a wash

For more information about the Hotel, visit our website; www.merwinstvillehotel.org

stand in the station and one on the second floor. A watering trough across the drive also was kept full by the spring.

From the ground floor of the hotel four stairways merged in a center landing from where two stairways continued to the second floor. Here were the bedrooms and a lounge. Three doors led to the balcony that stretched the full length of the building. This was the first floor porch that had six doors leading into the station and dining rooms.

Two narrow, steep, stairways lead up to the third floor. Here a grand ballroom provided room for dances and weekend entertainment. The Harvey Girls performed there in the 1890's and square dances drew farmers and their families from the surrounding countryside. The ballroom ran the whole length of the main building, and was lined on both sides with small dressing rooms. Three chandeliers provided light for the dancers. Across the road a long shed provided shelter for their horses.

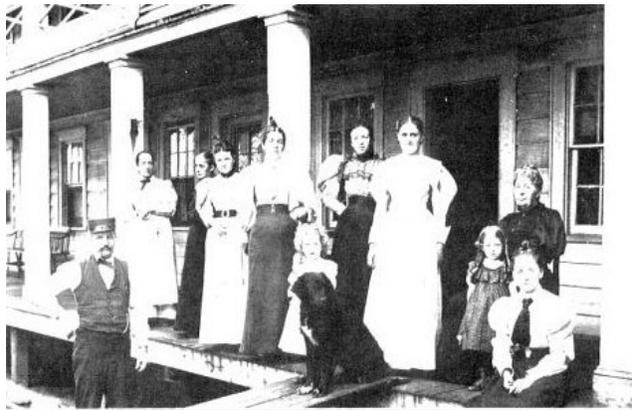
The hotel was also a stop for the east-west stage, providing a connection to many points, and adding to the activity. The stage arrived on Stagecoach Road, which ran just north of the schoolhouse. It then entered the area east of the hotel and had to make a u-turn before leaving. This area was not a public road at that time, and was closed at night by a gate near the school.

But the grand days of the Merwinstville Hotel could not last. In 1858 ten or twelve customers could be expected from each train for the fifty-cent meals in addition to the train crew, who apparently ate free. In the 1870's, however, the advent of the railroad dining car made the meal stop unnecessary and the contract was terminated in 1877.

Merwin's son-in-law, Ed Hurd, had taken over as station agent. He had been telegraph operator in Shelton while the Merwins' daughter was the operator at Merwinstville.

They became acquainted by telegraph, and eventually she became Mrs. Hurd. Upon Mr. Merwin's death in 1884 the Hurds became owners of the hotel.

They tried several ways to increase business. Summer boarders helped for a while, as did dinner dances held in the ballroom. In 1890 an oyster dinner and dancing to the music of a band from Bridgeport cost the invited guest \$1.25. In spite of his efforts, however, the hotel seemed doomed. First the school closed. Then the store, which Edward Honan had taken over from Mr. Graves, was closed when in 1901 Mr. Honan purchased the store built by Peter Gaylord. Mr. Hurd finally closed the hotel as a losing venture, but continued as station



Station Agent, Ed Hurd and Mrs. Hurd at left of picture.

agent, with John Bandzura helping with the freight.

Around 1905 the railroad informed Mr. Hurd that they were going to replace him with a younger man. Whereupon Mr. Hurd informed them that if they were getting a new agent they would have to get a new station also, as they could not use his without him. They took him at his word, and built a ticket office on the end of the freight house, which was about fifty yards down the track. Mr. Bandzura acted as agent until the new man, Frank Odium arrived. Bandzura then took over the station at South Kent, which the railroad called Woodrow. In 1915 the old freight house was torn down and replaced with a

combination passenger station and freight house. On February 1, 1918, the station was renamed Gaylordsville. The agents that followed were: Edward Shea, Hardy Moyer, Ezra Atkins, Mr. Towey, John Lynch.

Soon after the ticket office left the hotel the building was purchased by Michael Hastings,



a railroad section foreman (1916). The Hastings used the ground floor as an apartment. One of the former waiting rooms became their kitchen. Several years later their son James married and had an apartment upstairs. They occupied the hotel until 1947.

No one lived in the building after that. Mr. Hastings was a carpenter and had a shop in the rooms that had housed the railroad station. For a number of years the Fire Department used the former dining rooms for storing their carnival materials.

The building was purchased by Edward Dolan and used in much the same manner. A fire in the building in 1970 ended its use for both of these purposes and it became completely vacant, prey to souvenir hunters.

But wait, there's more....

For a number of years one resident of Gaylordsville had been trying to promote the idea of restoring the hotel to its former grandeur. George Haase had purchased a home on Riverview Road near the former lumberyard, and not far from the hotel. It was not until the summer of 1971 that he got any-

one to listen to his plans. Gerald Nahley, the new owner of Honan's Market, was one of the first to respond, and together the two recruited townspeople to join in the project.

Though disreputable to look at, the building was found to be structurally sound. The owner, Mr. Dolan, agreed to give it to a non-profit corporation, and steps were taken to form such a group. Its officers were George Haase, John Flynn, Gerald Nahley, Barbara Thorland, and Elwin Smith. Once the project got underway many local residents responded enthusiastically. Fund raising projects were held and donations received. A local contractor was employed to jack and level the building so work on the foundation could proceed.

Over the years much has been accomplished at the hotel. (As of the 3rd edition of the History of Gaylordsville, 1989) there is now a finished basement with a wine cellar, and several parties have been held down there. The first floor has a parlor on the north end furnished with period antiques. On the south end of the first floor the station waiting room has been recreated with much authentic railroad memorabilia such as a stove used on the a railway caboose donated by a member, and freight ledgers and railway documents. There is a post office box section from the early Gaylordsville Post Office donated by former Postmaster Mabel Honan.

That brings us to the present. The current board of directors is continuing the renovation efforts by restoring the hotel back to its historic spirit. Focused efforts are now underway to raise the necessary funds to keep the restoration process moving forward. As in any building from the mid 1800's, there is always something that needs to be renovated, rebuilt or replaced. The Hotel always can use a fresh coat of stain and the ballroom on the third floor would once again love to hold dances.

Be a part of history. Help us write the next chapter. [Become a Merwinsville Hotel Restoration Member.](#) Please mail in your completed membership form along with your membership dues or Building Fund donation.

Thank you.

A Historic Railroad Hotel located in Gaylordsville

MERWINSVILLE HOTEL RESTORATION

1 Browns Forge Road
Gaylordsville, CT 06755

Phone: 860.350.4443

E-mail:
info@merwinsvillehotel.org

www.merwinsvillehotel.org

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Merwinsville Hotel Restoration

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