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Golden Years in Sharon Springs

Jackie Turnquist

Jean Bakkom and Sandy Manko are a tremendous resource for anyone with an interest in Sharon Springs. They gave an interesting and entertaining slide-show presentation on the glory days of Sharon Springs at the September program. Working around the three major influences of the development and demise of Sharon Springs (topography, transportation and social change), they wended their way from the beginnings of the town (two hamlets, actually) to its present day struggles.

Sharon Springs began as two hamlets separated by a steep hill. Rockville, named for the rocky ledge that lies parallel to the Mohawk Valley and the Springs area, located down a steep ravine housing a grist mill and saw mill. The social lives of the farming families of Rockville centered on their families and church. There was limited travel to and from Rockville until 1806, when the Great Western Turnpike was built, opening their markets and setting the stage for the next century of growth. The tricky location of the springs area made horse and wagon travel very risky. This all changed in 1825 when the Erie Canal was completed, providing easy access to the springs from the north, and opening up the area to growth. The first boarding house was built by David Eldridge to accommodate tourists coming to “take the waters” – a very trendy activity. As travel was very difficult overall in those days due to the lack of adequate roads, when people did travel, they went to a destination and stayed, bringing the whole family, and often servants. So, by 1836 there was major growth, helped along by the completion of the Albany to Palatine railroad.

A New York corporation built the Great House high on Northern Hill, later called The Pavilion when it was enlarged by Mr. Gardner. It could hold up to 500 guests. The building stood until the late 1940, when the staunchly Republican Mrs. Gardner stated that if FDR was elected again, she would tear down the building. FDR was re-elected. Topography made access to the spring area difficult, but improved transportation overcame that obstacle. The hilly nature of the hamlet made it difficult to support growth and provide amenities, yet from 1840 through 1900 there was a tremendous amount of building to support the influx of tourists coming to experience the health benefits of the various mineral springs. These were the Glory Days. Various hotels, including The American (1850), The United States (1861), The Union Hotel (1865-1970), The Roseboro, and The Washington (recently collapsed in a snowstorm) were built, and visitors included Generals Sherman, Grant and McClellan and members of the Vanderbilt family.



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From [New York](#) (<http://www.usgwarchives.org/ny/schoharie/postcards/ppcs-schoharie.html>)

In 1871, Rockville and the Springs were incorporated into Sharon Springs. A rail spur came to Sharon Springs, providing a method for the farmers to ship their produce. Also, hops became a large crop, and people would come from Albany and beyond to help with the harvest; hence the building of the Hop Hotel and other accommodations for the workers and their families.

As the baths, the benefits of mineral waters, and Sharon Springs became more renowned, the number of buildings and amenities increased. Sewer and water lines were installed; general stores, a theater (the Sharon Academy) and special buildings for the different health treatments (such as the Inhalation Bath in 1871) were built.

Originally, it was the social-elite from the East Coast who came to enjoy the baths; but as this activity became less fashionable within their set, the Jewish community, with its close ties to Europe (where mineral baths were still fashionable) began to come to Sharon Springs. Travel became less difficult, so people did not stay in one location as long. Then, a series of events occurred, taking its toll on the prosperity of the spa community: World War I, the hop crop failure in 1920, Prohibition, a major fire in 1926 which wiped out a large part of the business district, including the Sharon Academy and Sharon House, and then the Great Depression.

The town did not give up, however, and new facilities were built, making the town a recognized destination for world-class spa treatments. The Imperial Baths, The Adler (1928), two magnesium spring temples (good for internal organ ailments), and the Blue Stone Spring (specifically for eye treatments) were built. The Adler cost \$250,000 and housed 150 rooms, baths, theater and a ballroom. It closed in 2004, but is the main acquisition of recent investors. People continued to come to Sharon Springs, and the mineral waters were made world famous when their quality were recognized at the Paris World Exhibition and the New York World's Fair.

While the primary purpose for coming to Sharon Springs was the spa and mineral waters, visiting families found they had a great deal of free time. To fill that time, many activities were enjoyed: wagon rides, an opera house, pleasure driving, bicycling, strolls, afternoon and evening concerts. There was also the Mansion House, which catered to gentlemen, and the Casino Hotel which housed a bowling alley. Other types of accommodations were available including Rooming Houses, which provided rooms only, and Cooker Houses, where guests brought and prepared their own meals (the Wellington House is an example). There was Smith's Swimming Pool, Smalley's Theater, a ski area, a golf course which opened in 1932, and the Village Pool (originally a pond providing ice to the hotels, it opened in 1950). The introduction and expansion of automobile travel required better roads (and better drivers: a Miss Empie was learning to drive, and had her car perched at the top of Washington Street. She attempted to negotiate the hill, but problems arose, and she had extreme difficulty in stopping the vehicle at the bottom of the hill. The car commenced to enter the hotel situated at the base of the hill, cross through a room with several people relaxing in chairs, exited the rear wall

and landed on top of a new car – parked behind the hotel to keep it “safe”. Route 20 (the Great Western Turnpike) was rerouted and widened to accommodate this traffic, and new types of “do-it-yourself” accommodations were built. In 1954, the New York State Thruway was constructed, drawing drivers away from Route 20, and hence, Sharon Springs.

A synagogue was built in 1904, and after World War II, the portion of visitors who were Jewish expanded as German government paid for the treatment of concentration camp victims as part of their restitution. By far, the Jewish community has made up the majority of the visitors to the spa town in recent times, although, with the closing of the last of the hotels and spas, the Golden Age is long over, and few if any visitors come to “take the waters”. In 1989, a schoolhouse and three room (!) outhouse were moved to create a museum complex, which is open during the summer by the Sharon Springs Historical Society. There are several businesses in the town, located in the old buildings, and a few of the hotels have seen renovation (some more successful than others). Recently, a Korean business group has purchased several of the closed buildings, with the proposed intent of resurrecting the spa tourism in the area. Progress has been slow, but perhaps we will once again see Sharon Springs prosper. Jean Bakkom and Sandy Manko did a superb job entertaining and enlightening us with their talk and slides on this wonderfully intriguing town.

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