

IN THE SOURLANDS

Cycling and Social Change in the Sourlands

By Caroline Katmann

As was the case in most of America, the turn of the 20th Century was a time of great changes in the Sourlands. By the end of the 19th Century much of the timber in the region had been logged off and the redware potteries defunct due to lack of lumber, decreased water volume, depletion of clay deposits and competition from potteries in Trenton. The San Jose scale (an agricultural pest introduced to California from China in the 1870s) had decimated over half of the two million peach bearing trees in the region. Subsistence farming was under siege from erosion and the depletion of the rocky soil. Small Sourland farms also fell victim to rail transport, which brought higher quality goods and produce to the area. Improved roads also made it easier for Sourland residents to travel to towns to buy their goods. As people left the Sourlands looking for work, schoolhouses closed and churches suffered.

“As ways of earning a living on the Mountain were reduced or disappeared and the population fell, isolation and a hardscrabble existence were the lot of those who remained.” (*New Jersey’s Sourland Mountain*. T.J. Luce. Sourland Planning Council. 2001.)

This decline in prosperity resulted in second-growth forests reclaiming land that had been lumbered off, then farmed, and finally abandoned. “As it reverted to an earlier state the Mountain took on a new mystique – a remote place, wild and picturesque, its narrow dirt roads twisting around boulders beneath a shadowy canopy of trees, passing an occasional run-down shack and its sometimes eccentric occupants.” (*New Jersey’s Sourland Mountain*)

At the same time that the social, economic and natural landscapes of the Sourlands were changing so drastically, people began interacting with the Sourlands in different ways. The region became a popular destination for city folks, hunters, hikers and nature lovers. And for cyclists. Especially women cyclists. According to Jack Koeppel, lifelong resident of Hopewell Valley and volunteer archivist for the Hopewell Valley Historical Society, there is a connection between the commencement of women’s independence from the confines of home and endless housekeeping chores and women’s cycling in the early 1900s. With the development of the “safety bicycle” in the 1880’s more and more groups of men and women could be seen out and about cycling in the Sourlands. The introduction of the “drop-down” frame in 1887 allowed women to ride a bicycle while retaining their modesty. One cannot help marvel at the thought that the thriving recreational use of the Sourlands by cyclists today all started with a few courageous and determined women who managed to cycle the hills of the Sourlands in unwieldy long dresses and hats!

“Let me tell you what I think of bicycling. I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. It gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel...the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood.”

Susan B. Anthony 1896

These social changes and other fascinating tales about early recreation in the Sourlands will be the topic of a talk by Jack Koeppel, sponsored by the Sourland Conservancy, on Thursday, November 10th at the Hopewell Presbyterian Church. Mr. Koeppel's presentation, *Early Recreation in the Sourlands*, is based on a collection of 700 photographs (originally 4" x 5" glass plates) originally discovered in the historic home of Alice Frisbie and Mary Thornton in Pennington. The photos were taken by two brothers, George and Walter Frisbie. They show people enjoying life in the Sourlands at a time when most photos documented growth, productivity and hard work.

In 1986, Mr. Koeppel and the Hopewell Valley Historic Society, borrowed the plates originally intending to create a calendar for their organization. However, due to their historic significance, the Society approached the family about donating the entire collection and the photos quickly became the starting point for an extensive research and cataloging project.

"The photos have proven to be a time capsule for the period and their historic significance continues to unfold," explains Mr. Koeppel. See these historic photos for yourself and learn more about early recreation in the Sourlands. Registration information for Jack Koeppel's talk is available through the Conservancy's eNewsletter. Subscribe at www.sourland.org.

Celebrate the long tradition of cycling the Sourlands on Saturday, September 10th by registering for the Fifth Annual Sourland Spectacular bicycle rally, at www.sourlandspectacular.com. Four beautiful but hilly routes from 23 miles to 63 miles are available, followed by a delicious lunch, home-made dessert and socializing. Proceeds from the Sourland Spectacular support the Sourland Conservancy's mission to protect, promote and preserve the unique character of the Sourland Mountain region.

Caroline Katmann is the Executive Director of the Sourland Conservancy. To learn more about the Conservancy's work, please visit www.sourland.org.