

DOWN MEMORY LANE

A Publication of the Chestnut Ridge Historical Society

Vol. XIV No. 3 Fall 2009

EARLY INDIAN CREEK VALLEY



Building Melcroft

CRHS archives Garnet Kalp Shaffer

The Connellsville Courier for May 30, 1918 shouted the headlines. Industry in the Indian Creek valley! "Rapid progress" in building a coal town near the junction of Champion Run and Indian Creek. Five houses were complete, twenty more begun. Koppers Company planned to carve out of the wooded hills a total of 500 houses for future employees. The town was named "Melcroft," after Koppers company owners, A.W. and R.B. *Mellon* and H.W. *Croft*. America was at war, a million U.S. soldiers were in Europe, and coal was crucial. Koppers made headway with 'Headings' at three sites, aiming to ship coal as soon as possible. Construction of a rail bridge across Indian Creek was planned. A further Courier piece on September 28th excitedly noted that West Penn Power was to build a line "over the mountain" to the mine and bring the "modern world" to the valley. A hundred houses were already built. The vigor of these words tacitly imply that Melcroft was the first industry in Indian Creek Valley.

Not so.

From the time of the first settlers, Indian Creek valley was agricultural. Although good land, it was not as rich as the limestone soils of Lancaster nor as productive as the broad coves of Bedford. The ridges on both sides of Indian Creek were heavily forested and clearing and transforming them into productive fields took decades, challenging the hardy Scots-Irish, German, Swiss-German, and Welsh settlers. Although the soils near the stream itself were the most fertile, eventually most of the ridges were also cleared to produce rye, corn, oats, and wheat. Not surprisingly, large areas were devoted to flax, a crop of many uses which Scots immigrants knew well.

ORIENTATION

Briefly, let's look at the creek that shaped the valley. We know little about it in pre-historic times except that the Allegheny Moun-

tains are probably older and were once higher than the Rockies. Today, however, Indian Creek (once also called Salt Lick), draining as it does the western slopes of Laurel Hill and the eastern slopes of Chestnut Ridge, is an important part of the Yough/Mon watershed. Its headwaters rise near the present Turnpike and confluence above Kregar (also once known as Franklin). Small tributaries add their flow near the spot where Rt. 381 now crosses. Later, it flows under Hunter Lane, and is joined by Mud Lick, a stream draining broad farmlands to the north and west. Camp Run, a free-flowing trout stream, soon enlarges the main creek. A mile beyond, Indian Creek curves behind Jones Mills and twists south. Its volume increases when Roaring Run (augmented by Pike Run) joins it near Champion. Streams from the west add to the flow. Champion Run enlarges the stream. Back Creek, with its two major branches draining a thousand acres of Laurel Hill flows into Indian Creek near Indian Head. The enlarged stream later pours into the Yough east of Connellsville.

EARLY MILLS OF VALLEY

Why the geography lesson? Simply to suggest that water-power shaped the culture of the valley. Indian Creek is the basis of native industry. Watershed farm and woodland not only produced timber, grain, flax, wool, hides, and foodstuffs, those products had to be converted into consumer products—and these industries required water power.

Early, of course, farmers needed rye, wheat, and oats ground into flour and feed. Grist mills arose using water power to turn grinding stones; such early mills were often simple affairs and family owned. Others had already built water-powered saw-mills to cut the virgin timber above Kregar, and, as the population grew, mills became more sophisticated. Because sheep needed to be clipped annually and their wool prepared for spinning and weaving, carding mills that cleaned and "carded" the wool fibers were needed, reducing time-consuming hand carding (and reducing costs). Mills to "full" the wool stabilized and shrunk the finished cloth. Scots settlers arrived with generations of experience in such tasks and their efforts soon flourished.

Tanneries also needed much water power to produce goods—processes not often thought of today. The valley farm economy demanded leather of various textures and finishes—reins, bridles, horse collars, straps, saddles, lead lines, halters—as did the home—boots, shoes, belts, doeskin vests, buckskin breeches, hats, rain-wear. Essential, too, in this "horse" economy were ancillary talents: harness makers, shoemakers, wagon and sled makers. Blacksmiths made more than horseshoes: sickles, sythes, axes, froes—every sort of farm tool.

(continued on page 3)