

In Search of a Railroad in Kelly Hollow



A History in Six Chapters

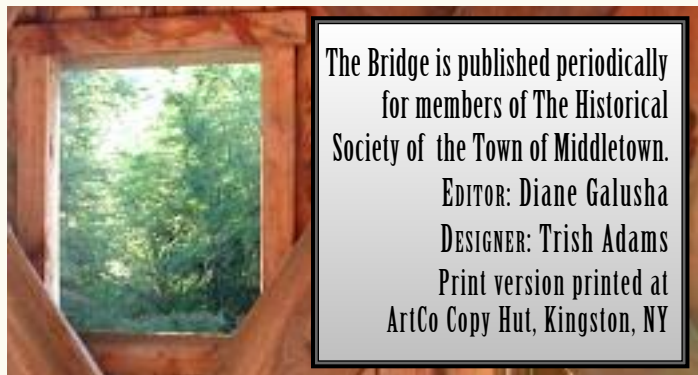
Text and map by Dr. Michael Kudish

A railroad in Kelly Hollow? I had heard about Owen's Mill and its railroad and could not believe it existed at first. However, after searching the hollow more than a dozen times and having done some reading on the area's history, I finally found the old railroad grade and its associated sawmill.

But that is only part of the complex history of this secluded hollow that spans the Towns of Middletown and Hardenburgh and is nestled between Mill Brook Ridge and the Mill Brook Valley. Allow me to summarize this fascinating story in six brief chapters.

This was Owens Mill. Though the postcard says Arena, the mill was located in Kelly Hollow in the Millbrook valley. That's the former Kelly farm in the background. Note the railroad trestle which carried logs into the mill from left.

continued on page 2



The Bridge is published periodically
for members of The Historical
Society of the Town of Middletown.

EDITOR: Diane Galusha

DESIGNER: Trish Adams

Print version printed at
ArtCo Copy Hut, Kingston, NY

continued from page 1

CHAPTER ONE: Settlement & John Burroughs' visit, 1860s

John Burroughs visited Kelly Hollow in 1868 and wrote about it in his essay "Birch Browsings." He tells us that Kelly Hollow (he does not mention it by name, but I've determined from his detailed descriptions that this is indeed where he was) had only recently been settled and the land cleared for farms when he tramped through in June 1868 on his way to Thomas' (now Beecher) Lake on a fishing expedition. Most of the Catskills he knew, especially around Roxbury where he grew up, was settled at least half a century earlier.

With his great-granddaughter, Joan Burroughs, I hiked the route the naturalist had taken a century and a half ago. We looked at the Gavett Farm where John had left his team of horses for two nights. We looked at the Kelly Farm where he asked for directions. We found the rock where he camped for the first night. Many foundations of farmhouses, barns, silos, and outbuildings are still there. The stone walls and stone piles are still there, too, forming complex networks in the woods.

A NEW RAILROAD.

From our Grant Mills Correspondent:

James Owens' new railroad is daily gaining in length and is now several miles long. On Sunday last a party composed of Hosea Butler, A. J. Shafer, John and Albert Youngs, with Henry Youngs acting as breaksman (sic) took a hair raising ride the length of the road on one of Mr. Owen's large log cars. The road being sufficiently steep to give the car great speed the whole length was covered in an exceedingly short time. Although it was enough to make one's brain whirl as they sped around curves and over trestles, yet they were very enthusiastic and are confident that Mr. Owens' railroad will be a perfect success.

Catskill Mountain News,
October 23, 1908

CHAPTER TWO: James Owen & his sawmill, 1907-1909

Because of poor soils, short growing season at these higher elevations, isolation and distance from markets, Kelly Hollow farms were abandoned in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By November 1907, James Owen purchased the timber on what had been the Kelly farm and used the farmhouse as lodging for his workers. He proceeded in 1908 to build a sawmill and a narrow-gauge railroad — one report says was a mile long to supply it. By July 1909, the timber had been depleted sooner than expected; the mill and railroad were removed.

How we found the sawmill site is a real detective story. A published photo of Owen's Mill locates it in "Arena, NY." I had assumed for years that the mill was in or near the hamlet of Arena, on the East Branch Delaware River. But the topography didn't match. Articles in *The Catskill Mountain News* from 1907 to 1909 placed the mill in Kelly Hollow, 5.9 miles up the Mill Brook Valley from the Delaware & Eastern Railroad station in Arena, and another mile up to the Kelly Farm. So why does the caption state "Arena, NY"? Because Arena was the nearest post office at the time. The closer Grant Mills Post Office had closed shortly after a flood in December 1901.

I carefully studied this old sawmill photo, which must have been taken around 1908 not long after the mill was built. The fields were still open then. I compared the buildings in the background with the foundations of the Kelly farmhouse, possible carriage house, barn with silo, and three outbuildings. The arrangement of these buildings was exactly the same! I noticed that, if I were to draw a straight line on the photo from the silo past the southeast corner of the farmhouse, the line would lead to the middle of the mill.

So on July 5, 2020, explorers Laurie and Tom Rankin and I went to the silo foundation. We measured the compass bearing from the silo to the southeast corner of the farmhouse and followed this bearing until we came to the stream. There, we found a few subtle traces that some structure had existed. There were a few metal spikes, some landforms with unnatural 90-degree angles, two aspen trees indicating that the site was once open, and the old Kelly Hollow Road ending abruptly at the mill site.

In the photo, a narrow-gauged railroad enters the mill on a trestle from the northwest. If one hikes northwest from the mill site today, the railroad grade is evident; a

segment of the current Long Loop hiking trail occupies it. Dips and ravines were spanned by wooden trestles of which nothing remains. I had hiked this section of trail many times looking for the railroad and had no idea that I was walking directly upon it. The beginning of the railroad was somewhere near the present lean-to, making it 0.7 mile long and dropping some 80 feet in elevation to the mill.

Owen must have logged the forest bordering the large clearings that had been Kelly pastures. In addition to the railroad, there were some log roads which I have followed to their ends (see map) partway up Mill Brook Ridge. The *Catskill Mountain News* articles reported that Owen's lumber was hauled down Mill Brook Road in wagons pulled by teams of horses to Arena where it was shipped on the Delaware & Eastern Railroad to market.

CHAPTER THREE: Logging for Corbett & Stuart, early 1920s

Corbett & Stuart's large wood acid plant was in Corbett, 3 miles below Downsville along the Delaware & Northern (formerly Eastern) Railroad. It operated between 1912 and 1934. They cut mostly young hardwoods in many locations in the region including Kelly Hollow. Long-time Mill Brook resident and historian Leonard Utter told me that in 1921 Corbett & Stuart purchased the Gavett Farm, then owned by the Johnson family. Because James Owen had logged the southeast portion of Kelly Hollow over a decade earlier, I suspect that Corbett & Stuart had cut wood at the north end of Kelly Hollow on forest surrounding the abandoned Gavett pastures.

Corbett & Stuart also owned tracts in the Mill Brook Valley surrounding the Tuscarora Club, west of Kelly Hollow. The company was active there into the late 1920s.

CHAPTER FOUR: State land acquisition & tree planting, 1926

Just as I had erroneously assumed that Owen's Mill was in Arena and that Corbett & Stuart had built the railroad in Kelly Hollow, I also had erroneously assumed that all of the plantations in Kelly Hollow were put in by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation surveyor John Van Benschoten sent me a map drawn by predecessor surveyor Edward G. West. He had helped plant the conifer stands with the State Conservation Department.



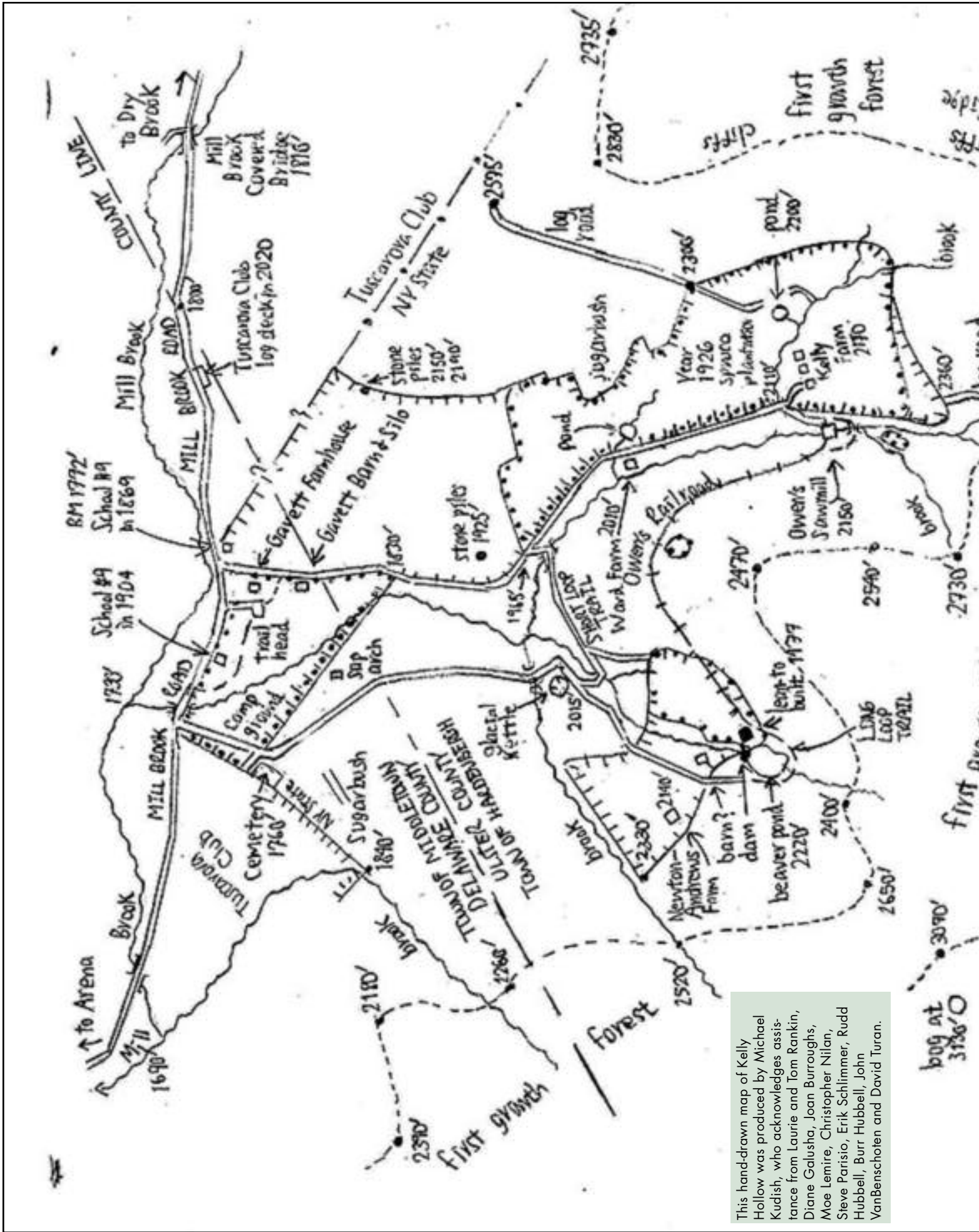
This wall is believed to have been part of the barn foundation on the Kelly homestead. In 1868, naturalist John Burroughs visited the farm, occupied by Irish immigrants Thomas and Catherine Quinn Kelly and their six children.

The map was dated 1926, just after the state purchased lands on the east side of Kelly Hollow. (Ed West later became Superintendent of Land Acquisition for the State.) Therefore, the Norway spruce which make up the bulk of the reforestation are about ten years older than I had previously thought.

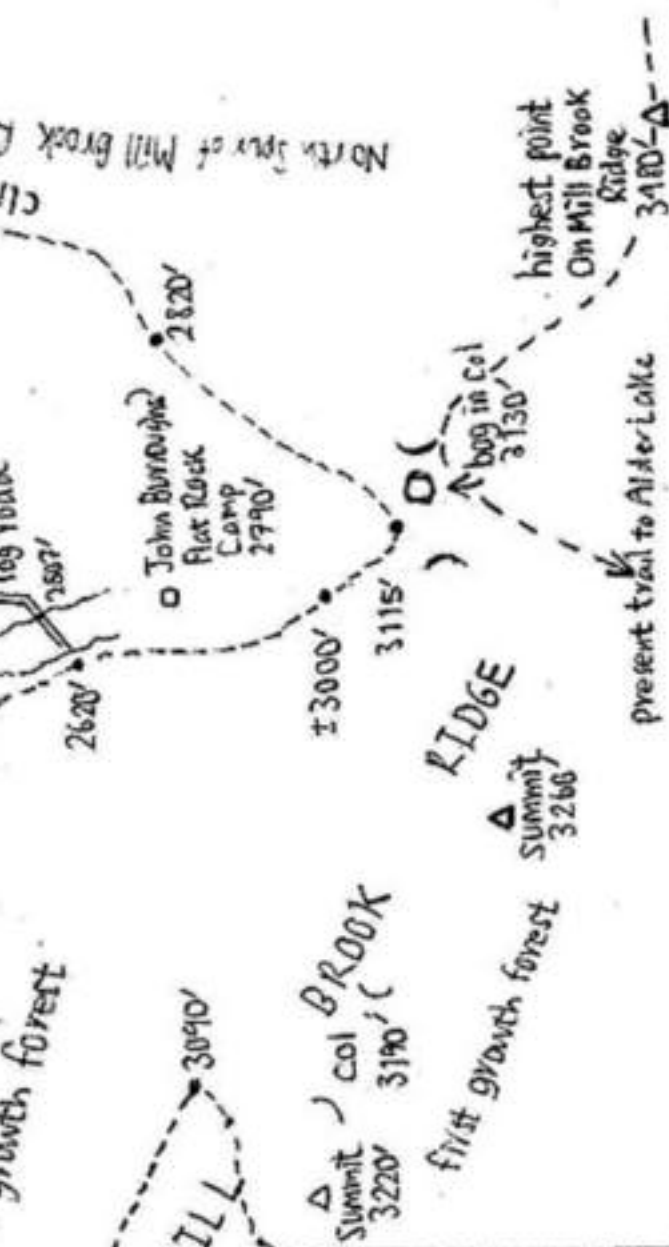
Only on the Gavett Farm was a diversity of coniferous species planted including Norway spruce, white spruce, red pine, and a tree species which I have found nowhere else introduced into the Catskills: jack pine. This plantation was done later, on the west side of Kelly Hollow, acquired by the state between 1933 and 1935. It is possible, then, that the Civilian Conservation Corps put in the spruce and pine plantations on the Gavett farm, plus two stone-lined fire-fighting ponds on the Ward and Kelly farms in the 1930s. The CCC built at least two such ponds in other places in the Mill Brook Valley.

These plantations tell us where the abandoned pastures were because spruces and pines are planted only in open fields – not in the woods surrounding them. However, there are a few places in Kelly Hollow that had been

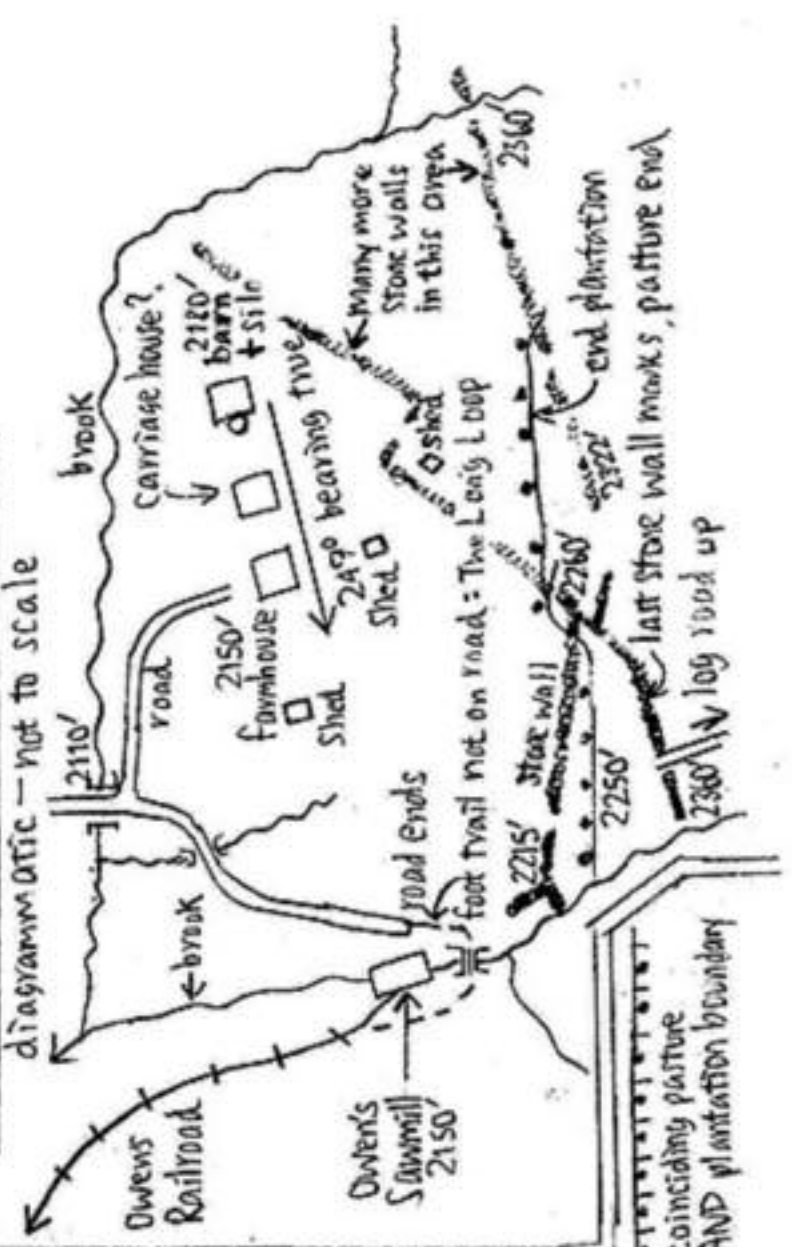
continued on page 6



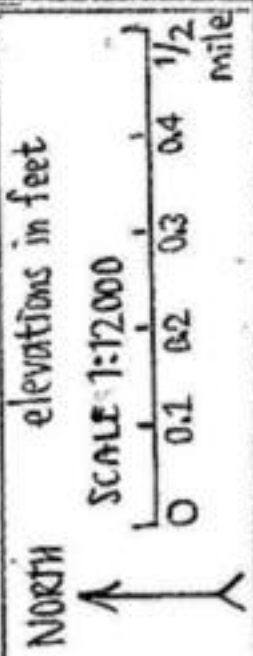
This hand-drawn map of Kelly Hollow was produced by Michael Kudish, who acknowledges assistance from Laurie and Tom Rankin, Diane Galusha, Joan Burroughs, Moe Lemire, Christopher Nilan, Steve Parisio, Erik Schlimmer, Rudd Hubbell, Burr Hubbell, John VanBenschoten and David Turan.



INSET MAP: KELLY FARM DETAIL
 diagrammatic - not to scale



Coykendall lands,
 then Nassau Bay Scouts,
 logged 1979,
 Sold to NY State 1980



MAP OF KELLY HOLLOW
 Town of Middletown, Delaware Co.
 Town of Hardenbergh, Ulster Co.
 New York State

MICHAEL KUDISH JAN. 24, 2021

- LEGEND**
- roads
 - ~ streams
 - foundations
 - existing buildings
 - △ summits
 -) (cols)
 - County line
 - - - - boundary of 1st growth and logged forest
 - pasture boundary
 - plantation boundary

continued from page 3

pastured but where Norway spruce were not planted (see map); evidence of these old pastures is stone piles and stone walls under now native hardwoods.

CHAPTER FIVE: Recreation, 1970s to the present

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation in 1977 developed trails and a lean-to in Kelly Hollow. Former farm roads, log roads, and the Owen's railroad were turned into the Long Loop and Short Loop Trails. The lean-to was built next to the beaver pond, which comes and goes depending upon beaver activity. Kelly Hollow has become a favorite place for hiking, camping, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

CHAPTER SIX: What remains: First growth forest

After all the human activity that has occurred on the Kelly Hollow landscape, if one bushwhacks up Mill Brook Ridge high enough – above an average elevation of about 2620 feet - one finds forest that has never been farmed, logged, barked for hemlock, or burned by people. This first growth forest, also called primeval or virgin forest, is forest left over; it is the forest that no one wanted. It was difficult to access; trees were stunted and deformed. Mill Brook Ridge marks the far west end of the largest continuous first growth forest tract in the Catskills – some 25 square miles stretching all the way east to Winnisook Lake.

Kelly Hollow has experienced a range of human land uses. Many folks who visit believe it contains a primeval forest. That pristine, untouched forest is, in fact, still there, but only high up on Mill Brook Ridge where folks seldom go.

What a place to teach and learn forest history!

Michael Kudish is passionate about forests and railroads and has written many books and articles about both. The Catskills forest — its botany, soils, prehistory and industrial sites – has been his life's work. He has also documented railroads in the Catskills and Adirondacks. A long-time professor at Paul Smith's College, he retired to the Catskills in 2005 and lives surrounded by his extensive archives in Arkville.



Newell and Emma Gavett Andrews were among early Kelly Hollow settlers. Newell was a veteran of the Civil War, serving in the 2nd Connecticut Heavy Artillery.

Published sources: *Catskill Mountain News* (NYShistoric newspapers.org); *Beers Atlases of Delaware and Ulster Counties*, 1869 and 1875; USGS maps, NYS DEC maps and documents.



Dr. Michael Kudish reading the barometer he carries with him on all of his research hikes to determine air pressure and thus elevation at various points on his route.



The cellar hole of the Ward family house is perched at the edge of a ravine. David Ward, a wheelwright from Ireland, and wife Jenette Gordon Ward, who hailed from Scotland, lived on this patch of ground for about 20 years before moving to New Kingston prior to 1892.

Secrets of Kelly Hollow

We'll explore the natural, industrial and human history of this mountain clove on a 3.5-mile hike on a State trail with Michael Kudish and Diane Galusha on Saturday, May 15. Visit the site of Owen's Mill and its railroad, see remnants of farmsteads and hear the stories of the Gavett, Ward, Kelly, Newton and Andrews families. Space is limited, registration is required. \$10. FMI and to reserve a space: 845-586-4973. Rain date May 16.

This was the farmhouse on the former Levi Blaisdell and Nancy Brown Gavett farm at the base of Kelly Hollow. The woman is unidentified but the photo is believed to have been taken when Embry Johnson owned the place.



COMING UP!

Visit mtownhistory.org for details on these and other events

SAT
MAY
15

Saturday, May 15

SECRETS OF KELLY HOLLOW

History Hike with Mike Kudish and Diane Galusha.

SAT
MAY
29

Saturday, May 29

DEDICATION OF HISTORIC MARKER

Mountain Athletic Club Grounds, Village Park, Wagner Ave., Fleischmanns. Noon

SAT
JULY
10

Saturday, July 10

8TH LIVING HISTORY CEMETERY TOUR

Margaretville. Meet 15 people from the past. Call 845-586-4736 after June 1 to reserve a tour time.

SAT
JULY
31

Saturday, July 31

GIANT JUMBLE SALE

HSM hall and grounds, 778 Cemetery Road, Margaretville. 9-3.

SAT
AUG
21

Saturday, Aug. 21

HISTORY ON WHEELS

Tour Denny Herzberg's vintage car collection. HSM fundraiser. Denver, 2-4 p.m.

HEADSTONE CLEANING OFFERED

A team of HSM volunteers is ready to clean monuments at cemeteries in and around Middletown this spring, using a safe and very effective cleansing agent and method. A donation of \$30 cleans a single one-sided headstone; a \$50 donation will clean two headstones or a two-sided monument. Before-and-after photos will be provided to those who take advantage of this limited time offer. Send a check and contact information to HSM, PO Box 734, Margaretville, NY 12455. Someone will be in touch to collect details. FMI: 845-586-4973 or history@catskill.net.

THE 55¢ POST

THE 55¢ POST is an exclusive feature for members who receive *The Bridge* via e-mail. Because your newsletter requires no stamp, you get an "extra"!

The unidentified man in this horseless carriage would feel right at home on the upcoming Covered Bridge Rally to be held June 12 starting at the Catskill Park Visitors Center in Mt. Tremper. Automobiles of all vintages are welcome to travel the route that runs along the Catskill Mountains Scenic Byway (Route 28) then up the Big Indian-Olivera Valley to Sullivan County and back to Delaware County via Andes, a 140-mile round trip. Four covered bridges will be visited during this non-competitive event — the Van Tran Bridge in Livingston Manor, and the Beaverkill, Downsville and Hamden Covered Bridges.

The fee is \$50 per car. To register, contact Rallymaster Robert Selkowitz at 845-657-6982; 1903autorun@gmail.com. Ask him about the Catskill Conquest Rally to be held September 25!



READY FOR A ROAD TRIP?

WIN THIS QUILT!

Light-weight, cotton, 72" x 108" (double), featuring "Bird of Paradise" squares from American Folk Art Museum, made by Jackie Purdy to benefit HSM.

See the quilt and get your tickets at the HSM Giant Jumble Sale July 31 or contact us at history@catskill.net.

Drawing October 23, 2021

HSM EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Diane Galusha, PRESIDENT

Bill Blish, VICE PRESIDENT

Marilyn Pitetti, TREASURER

Amy Taylor, SECRETARY TRUSTEES: Henry

Friedman, Agnes Laub, Pat Moore,

Barbara Moses, Josef Schoell, Doris Warner

www.mtowntownhistory.org

history@catskill.net

Find us



on Facebook!

