

## Poughkeepsie's Woodcliff Pleasure Park by Vivian Yess Wadlin

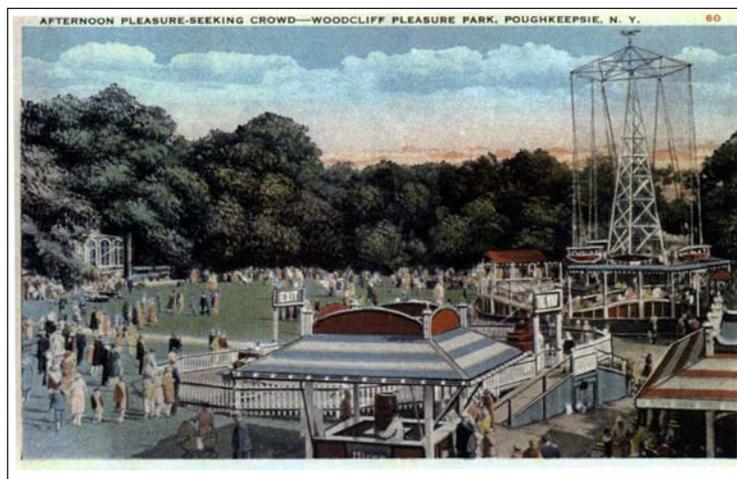
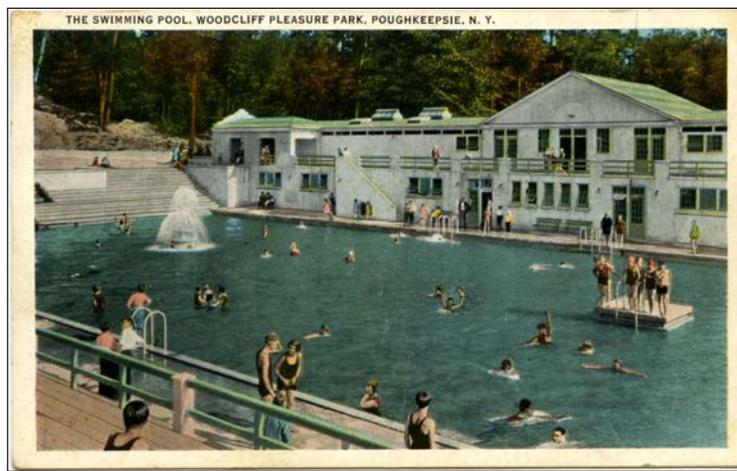
July 14, 1927, at 7 pm, it opened. Finally, Poughkeepsie had something to compete with other famous amusement parks up and down the Hudson, and in nearby cities and states. Poughkeepsie welcomed the Woodcliff Pleasure Park.

Geographically the closest similar site was the Kingston Point Park across the Hudson and about seventeen miles north. It was more of a local park than an amusement venue. However, 5,000 people would disembark from one of many Hudson River Day Line ships to “take the air,” stroll the paths, enjoy the rides, row the lake, and spend the day... and the dollar. Often, though, these travelers were on their way to the Catskill's big hotels. The Day Lines dropped them off and the long trains took them to the mountains.

The target market for Woodcliff amusement park was the burgeoning population of upwardly mobile, but lower-income workers surging into the countryside for a day away with the family. The Woodcliff Pleasure Park was made for them.

The site, as offered in one of its grand-opening newspaper advertisements, (*Rhinebeck Gazette* newspaper, July 9, 1927), was introduced as “The Woodcliff Pleasure Park, The Worlds Most Beautiful Amusement Resort.” Woodcliff offered something more important than ephemeral beauty— Woodcliff was thrilling.

The “Blue Streak,” Woodcliff's rollercoaster left your heart at the top as it roared down toward the cliff edge and the Hudson



Top: View of park looking west toward the Hudson River. Center: The pool that was touted to accommodate 3,000 bathers. Bottom: Crowds milling about the park and one of the amusement park's rides. Above images are courtesy of the Marist College Archives and Special Collections.

River. Reaching almost 70 miles an hour, it had an abrupt turn that kept you from the river's currents. Billed in ads as the “Blue Streak Scenic Railway, Largest of

Record—Thrills and Safety, 137 Ft. Elevation from its Peak to the Hudson River Level.” The Blue Streak stood at the western edge of the park's 27 acres, now the north end of Marist College Campus, north of Walkway Over The Hudson.

The Streak was designed by noted coaster engineer Vernon Keenan. Keenan had been the brains behind many noted rollercoasters, including the Cyclone at Coney Island. According to Wesley and Barbara Gottlock's *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley*, the Blue Streak held its 132' (estimates varied) height record until 1977 when overshadowed by the “Beast” in Cincinnati, Ohio at 141'.

The Streak was not the only attraction enjoyed at Woodcliff. The park had a “Galaxy of Amusements Unexcelled in the United States.” Rides and galleries, bumper cars, individual trolleys, scooters, and an “Ocean Wave Glide, a sensation.” It also had the world's largest swimming pool, 50 x 200 feet of filtered river water that could cool 3,000 city-baked bathers at one splash. One news article dove into the water's purity with this description:

Poughkeepsie can congratulate itself on having one of the largest, finest and most sanitary swimming pools in the country today. Everything known to science in the way

of modern scientific treatment and filtering of water has been introduced at Woodcliff Park Pool and Mr. Fred H. Ponty, the owner, invites the public at all

times to see with their own eyes just how the water you swim in is made as pure as the water you drink. In addition, the recirculating system gives a complete change of this filtered water every seven hours.

(*The Brewster Standard*, Brewster, NY, August 10, 1928).

The article also tells us, “Nothing has been overlooked for the every comfort and contentment of the bathing public.” Imagine, ladies, there were “Electric hair dryers, electric curlers, maid service, and ladies rest parlors...”

Woodcliff had gardens, picnic groves, a Ferris wheel, roller rink, and more. The moving spirit behind Woodcliff was Fred Ponty, a real estate developer from Rye, NY. He and a partner had previously developed Paradise Park there but it burned in 1926, and his financial interest was bought out. Ponty seemed to have learned from that experience and made Woodcliff a premiere destination, adding amusements over the years to keep his audience returning year after year.

Entertainment was an important element often using Woodcliff’s 110’ X 54’ ballroom. Initially open-air, it was eventually enclosed. From programs with orchestras of renown to special reservations for groups, the venue was appropriate for all manner of enjoyment or celebration. On one occasion, a thousand Sunday schoolers, parents, and chaperones embarked from Yonkers on the *Alexander Hamilton* for a day of delights in June of 1931. The massive ship docked at Woodcliff’s private facility on the Hudson and disgorged its excited little passengers. The group enjoyed special pricing on most of the park’s activities.

Wrestling and boxing also found a home



Above: Winslow estate purchased by Fred Ponty. Image courtesy of Wes and Barbara Gottlock from their book, *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley*.



Blue Streak construction workers and a few non-workers (black coats and hats). The image is courtesy of Wes and Barbara Gottlock from their book *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley*.



Kingston Point Park postcard showing the one of the steamships passing the park dock. Image from author’s collection.

at Woodcliff. A boxing night there in 1929 had plenty of contestants. An ad for that one evening of fisticuffs in the *Kingston Daily Freeman* of July 15, 1929, noted five bouts and offered 3,000 seats at \$1 each, reserved

and ringside seats were \$2 and \$3, respectively. In today’s dollars: \$15, \$30, and \$45. From the *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley*, one of the most popular punchers to appear at Woodcliff was Melio Bettina of Beacon, NY, just down the river. He was at one time Light Heavy Weight Champion of the World (1939). He fought three times at Woodcliff.

Sometimes, the things that do not happen are as interesting as many that did. The headline from the August 6, 1930 newspaper, the *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, Canandaigua, NY, read:

### Heartbroken At Thought of Leaving The Show, Bess Dies.

Poughkeepsie – She was still just a showgirl at heart. And that’s why, at the prospect of giving up trouping under the biggest top of them all to become a sort of freak attraction in an up-state amusement park, she just lay down and died. After all, to give up your career at 93—that’s a wrench.

The author noted that to circus goers, Bess was just another of the show’s many elephants. But to the hundreds of employees of the circus, she was special—Bess was the first elephant John Ringling had purchased when he started the show and “as such was entitled to all respect.”

Ringling’s extravaganza had arrived from a show in Stamford, Connecticut, and was to set up at Woodcliff. Bess was to be given to Ponty as a gift. The writer surmised that when Bess did not join the rest of the troupe, “What black thoughts she had at this procedure, what dire premonitions, probably never will be known.” She gave three “trum-

pet calls, sank to her knees and expired.”

At first, circus vet, Dr. Shields, pronounced she had died from senility, after all, she was 93. But then, reconsidering Bess’ history, “I’ll retract that diagnosis he announced. Bess passed out from a trouper’s broken heart.”

The loss of a new attraction was the least of the problems facing the park. Disposable income’s dive during the Great Depression ate into the number of people able to enjoy the park’s thrills and frills. The stock market crash had heralded in a new era of austerity bringing the roaring twenties to a screeching halt—and with that the slow deterioration of the many parks across the land.

Other things were brewing in the culture of the time. In 1937, the *Brewster Standard* reported a gambling raid at Woodcliff involving the Nimrod Gun Club’s clambake attended by approximately 350 members. In one more anti-gambling effort, three NY State Troopers descended on the park to break up a gambling “lay-out.” Five men were taken into custody as was the equipment.

In 1937, the *Brewster Standard* reported a gambling raid at Woodcliff involving the Nimrod Gun Club’s clambake attended by approximately 350 members. In one more anti-gambling effort, three NY State Troopers descended on the park to break up a gambling “lay-out.” Five men were taken into custody as was the equipment.

“A riot broke out: the five prisoners disappeared, the gambling equipment disappeared, one trooper was beaten, assaulted, knocked down, and kicked; eventually he was disarmed; another trooper was shoved around; a mob milled about and shouted offensive remarks at the troopers.”



Above: Kingston trolley serving the Kingston Point Park and conveying travelers to the trains to continue on to Catskill resorts. From author’s collection.

Before a preliminary hearing, the defense countered with the argument for the most serious charge, that the trooper had voluntarily given up his firearm when one defendant said to him, “You’d better let me have your gun, you’re shaking so somebody might get killed.” What passed for justice was more like the funhouse mirror at Woodcliff. No grand jury was called, and according to the *Standard*, probably nothing would come from the affair.

After a few damaging fires, a change of ownership, and Woodcliff’s sale at a public auction, its most debilitating blow came in 1941. An altercation ensued between two large charter groups (3,000 Odd Fellows and 1,000 members of a local Polish Club), each believing they had made arrangements for use of certain facilities. The State Police were unable to restore peace. While the site damage was significant enough to close the

whole park for repairs, it was the damage to the Woodcliff reputation that was ultimately insurmountable. It never reopened.

Woodcliff Park’s end may have earned it a second speed record in the history of amusement parks to follow its Blue Streak—the shortest lifespan and fastest ending of an American park. Fred Ponty died in June of 1941, never witnessing the evaporation of his dream.

As the Second World War was heating up, the rails from Woodcliff’s Streak went to the war effort.

Into storage went its iconic pink entry ticket booth. Unfortunately, fire claimed it several years later.

The site today gives no hint of its fun-filled past. Now, college buildings and sports fields dominate the shoreline. South of the Blue Streak’s former site is a water treatment facility.

Designer Raptor Alex’s two-minute video ride is a recreation of the Blue Streak at Woodcliff on youtube. It doesn’t show the actual coaster but it is amusing to consider... love the comments, too.

[youtube.com/watch?v=H6ThmIgb6yA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6ThmIgb6yA)

Enjoy the ride.

\*\*\*\*

*First page images of the park are courtesy of the Marist College Archives and Special Collections. Thanks also to Barbara and Wesley Gottlock who provided additional images for this story.*