

The Draining and Refilling of the Swartekill Swamp Vivian Yess Wadlin

The Swartekill Swamp

Over my almost eight decades, I've witnessed the transformation of land once farmed by my grandparents. It has gone from farmed to fallow, to brambled meadows, to tightly-packed small-tree groves, to now, a few good-size 60+ year-old mature trees. Another transformation on that land was quicker.



Sandwiched between the mostly parallel roads of Plutarch and N. Eltings Corners Road Extension (which changes name to Swartekill Road in the Town of Esopus), the Swartekill Creek formed the western boundary of our land. It was a slowly-moving wetland waterway buffeted over time by man and beast. Flowing north from Old New Paltz Road, its vast swampland hugged the east side of Plutarch Road. From there, it oozed into the Town of Esopus, ending in the Wallkill River at Sturgeon Pool in Rifton.

However, the Swartekill Creek section of interest here is from Old New Paltz Road to the Auchmoody Bridge where its water flows under Plutarch Road. (See maps on last page) Until the 1940s, most of that section of swamp was known as "Crozier's Ditch." Its marshy shore was a constant constraint on our free-range childhood wanderings.

Deep Auchmoody Roots In The Swartekill

According to late New Paltz historian, William Heidgerd, in a March 14, 1976, article in the *New Paltz Independent*, titled "The Mystery of the Tombstone,"* farmer David Auchmoody was a member of the Ulster County Militia and fought in the Revolutionary War. His son, also David, built a house in the late 1700s on Swartekill Road. After a number of intervening owners, it became our home.

The extensive Auchmoody land was in what are now the towns of New Paltz, Esopus, and Lloyd. In war-veteran Auchmoody's time, it was all the Town of New Paltz—cleaving from it in 1811, was Esopus, and in 1845, Lloyd.

Auchmoody and his family owned a sizeable swarth of land stretching beyond the curve at the north end of Plutarch Road. Plutarch veers east before dead-ending into Swartekill Road. Just east of that intersection is Auchmoody Pond, actually, a sizeable lake. The Auchmoody family cemetery is on a knoll in the middle of what had been a farmed field and part of our family's land. The stonewall-enclosed cemetery containing fifteen members of the Auchmoody family and a few dozen others, is now perilously close to the swamp.

The land on either side of that section of the Swartekill Creek, but especially the western side, was swampy and unfit for farming as the constant slow-



moving water soaked its marshes. This wet soil, called humus, was exceptionally rich and would have made excellent farmland—except, you could not step on it without sinking. Draft animals were out of the question.

Draining the Swamp

Enter Irish immigrant William Crozier (1788-1862). Somewhere between 1820 and 1844 (as you will read, dates differ), he was paid by a consortium of local landowners to dig a canal-type ditch the length of most of the section of stream noted above. The ditch was to give the stream a defined faster-flowing waterway to the north providing relief to the muck-encumbered earth of its shores. That ditch eventually became the boundary separating the Town of Lloyd from New Paltz.

There has always been confusion as to whether the Swartekill Creek was the Black Creek. It is not. Black Creek flows from Chodikee Lake. Early maps sometimes tagged the Swartekill as Black Creek. Swartekill means black stream or creek, adding to the confusion. Also not helping is a short road between Plutarch and N. Eltings Corners Roads called Black Creek Road. It crosses over the Swartekill near Plutarch, but does not cross the Black Creek.

In the 200, or so, years since Crozier dug his channel, there has been repeated media interest in the ditch, sometimes just references to its history, and sometimes, in cleaning it out and using the rich Swartekill dirt again. A July 20, 1888, *New Paltz Independent* article noted the ditch's history. It explained that Crozier started digging in "about 1820." Landowners were required to pay for the work in proportion to their land's length along the proposed watercourse, and that many men were hired for the job.

And from a February 20, 1903, *New Paltz Independent* story we learn, "A movement is in progress to clean out Crozier's Ditch, ..." From this article, it seems the ditch was initiated much later.

In 1844 a special act was passed by the State Legislature, providing for the digging of this ditch, which was done by Wm. Crozier, and for the appointment of commissioners whose duty it should be to see that the ditch was kept open to its proper width and four feet deep.

Apparently, those commissioners bogged down in the job. In a front-page article concerning the same area, the *Kingston Daily Freeman*, June 14, 1935, proclaimed, "Two Methods Discussed to Reclaim Area In Southern Ulster County." The idea was to clean out the old Crozier's ditch which had been overwhelmed by changes to the course of the Black Creek



because its flow impacted the Swartekill. The Black Creek's waters had been in turn impacted by building the Central New England railbed section during the 1880s running between the Towns of Lloyd and New Paltz.

A good part of the interest in draining the Swartekill swamp in 1935 was again to gain access to, as the article noted, "A Valuable Agricultural Section." This time, the interest was as much mining the humus as in farming it. As always, expanding the arable land of the farming population was a potent consideration. The 1935 article points out that a group of local landowners along the Swartekill Creek asked that a Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) Unit be established there and devote its members' efforts to draining 1,648 acres by clearing out accumulated debris and removing boulders from the then almost 100 year old ditch.

Cited in the detailed article by the *Freeman* author was the summary of a 1912 Department of Agriculture report on the area. It discussed the location and geology of the land, and the original Crozier's Ditch work. It said the ditch had not been maintained in light of the water course changes of the Black Creek caused by building the railbeds. The report also contained a listing of the crops currently grown in the area (grapes, apples, corn, oats, wheat, buckwheat, and potatoes) and the many land-holdings of the small farms along the stream's course.

In this particular section, nearly every farm consists of a little piece of high land adjoining the country road (Plutarch) and a portion of the valley running back to the muck (humus), and is bounded on one side by Crozier's Ditch; there are a few farms which extend all the way across the swamp.

The 1912 report noted that "The majority of farmers own their own places and many Italians are buying small tracts."

The Swartekill's valuable muck, and sometimes peat, was said to be between two and 18 feet deep, but at the time of the article, most was too wet to be mined or farmed. Ideas for what came after the proposed re-draining included removing and selling the rich soil or developing truck farming (small farms growing a variety of fresh produce and trucking it to population centers).

But before any use could be made of the land or the muck, one had to deal with "Cat-tails, flax, and other weeds (that) frequently grow as high as 9 feet in the bogs, which are covered with hummocks." Only a small section near Plutarch was noted as well-drained.

The 1912 report outlined other work that could be done near the railbed alleviating the ongoing Black Creek threat to Swartekill's ditch, and making the new drainage more stable and long-lasting.

Some dredging and selling of humus in the 1920s–1950s, did take place in at least four places in Highland—the Swartekill swamp, Lily Lake on Lily Lake Road, the Sorbello farms on Martin Avenue, and in the un-named lake east of Lowe's on Route 299, Highland. Another, noted on the 1875 Beers Atlas maps of Lloyd, was the Hudson River Peat Company that appears to be near Chodikee Lake.

The CCC did not establish a base, nor did anyone else clear out Crozier's Ditch. The swamp returned to its natural state—more or less a

slim stream cosseted by swampy muck. That changed when another busy master-of-water-works was reintroduced into the area.

NYS' Mammal



Latin translation: Seal of the City of New York

The beaver was so important to the early traders of New York City, that it is pictured twice on the 1625 city emblem. In 1975 it was declared the NYS mammal.

According to the Adirondack Ecological Center's website (EFS.edu), by 1700, beaver had been extirpated throughout New York State except for a colony in the Adirondacks. The beaver had been trapped almost to extinction for their excellent fur, most of which was sent to Europe for use in fashionable top hats. A member of the rodent family, the beaver is a kissing-cousin of the groundhog, squirrel, porcupine and rat, among others of nature's delights. They all sport continuously growing incisors.

In 1921, there were no beaver problems in Ulster County. However, forest-landowners in the Adirondacks were petitioning the State of New York to allow them to kill the beaver which were ruining their trees. The State decided the beaver could be live-trapped and moved to lands in need of reclamation.

Enter the boys from The Raymond Riordon School ** (RRS) (1914-1940). Located on Chodikee Lake in Highland, this prep school enrolled boys from ages eight to 20. (Chodikee Lake is a couple of north-south running ridges east of the Swartekill, perhaps three-quarters of a mile as the crow flies).

Wilderness Camp of the Raymond Riordon School

On Horseshoe Lake, Horseshoe, St. Lawrence County, N. Y.
Where the muscles of youth are developed along with brains as applied to common sense.

<p>3,000 acre game preserve.</p> <hr/> <p>\$200 two months.</p> <hr/> <p>Write Highland, New York, for booklet.</p>		<p>Camp opens July first.</p> <hr/> <p>Sane men leaders.</p> <hr/> <p>Parents also are always welcome.</p>
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*These are the little boys—
you should see the big ones.*

As old in principle as the culture of Athens and the prowess of Sparta,
but entirely American withal, for it primes for today

The Raymond Riordon School Highland, Ulster County, N.Y.

June 8, 1922, advertisement for Camp Wilderness in the *New York Herald Tribune*. This or similar ads appeared in most major city papers. Often, the camp and the Raymond Riordon School at Chodikee appeared together in one ad.

In addition to the 300 acre campus at Chodikee, RRS boasted ownership of 3,000 acres of prime Adirondack land they called "Wilderness Camp." Many of the RRS students spent part of their school year, and part or all of their summer vacation at Wilderness Camp.

Hearing of the plight of the Adirondack timber barons, the Riordon boys, among others, volunteered to trap Adirondack beaver under permit and guidance of the New York State Conservation Commission.

"School Boys Trap Adirondack Beavers" was the headline of the *Standard Union* newspaper (January 16, 1921), Brooklyn, NY.

The (Riordon School) boys will trap the beaver and crate them for shipment, cut their dam into sections and prepare it for transportation, as well as the beaver house, a quantity of small softwoods and considerable 'beaver food,' small popular."

From the same article, "In the spring, they (the beaver) will colonize on the lakes and streams of the school property." Once the project took hold at Chodikee, the Riordon School students would use the beaver as teachers of "...industry and thrift." The boys were to be aided and supervised in the trapping and transport by the Adirondack Sportsmen's Association and Brown's Tract Guides.

Live-trapping beaver is not like live-trapping a woodchuck or a rat. According to the SUNY Environmental and Forestry website, (esf.edu.)

The beaver is the largest Adirondack (and North American) rodent and has a distinctive black, scaly tail that is broad, flat, and 30-51 cm (12-20 in) in length. Although the beaver continues to grow throughout its life and may reach 135 cm (53 in) in length and 52.3 kg (115 lb.) in weight, the average size of an adult Adirondack beaver is 102 cm (40 in) and 20.4 kg (45 lb.).

One online source claims the largest beaver on record, found in Wisconsin in 1921, was 110 pounds, but the average weight is between 40-60 pounds. Add to the sheer size and weight of a beaver, consider teeth that can cut through trees. Although peaceful, beaver can be dangerous if threatened or frightened. In 2013, one death from a beaver attack in Belarus was widely reported in the media. There are many news stories of US attacks, mostly happening to people or dogs swimming in beaver ponds. In 1921, it may have been that some of the beaver trapped by the RRS students weighed almost as much as the trappers.

After a successful trapping, the students shipped the beaver to Chodikee Lake. The boys then rebuilt the dam and lodge. Those transplanted beaver are likely the forbears of the ones that took over the Swartekill at the edge of our farm and many other streams in Ulster County. In my lifetime, the once large field surrounding the Auchmoody cemetery was invaded by swamp growth as the beaver-created

lake raised the water level, pushing the marsh further east and west.

The treeline of my childhood that once marked the end of the farm-field's western side died out. The expanding water drowned the tree roots or trees were felled for food, or lodge and dam material. The lake the beaver created with their dam had a couple of lodges visible from the cemetery's rise. Over the years, all the other standing trees along that stretch of the Swartekill fell to the beaver's needs. The trees were then dragged to just the right spot to shore up the dam that held back the water that made for great living, beaver-style.

After years of the expanded lakeshore growing weeds, iris, cat-tails, loostrife, and small trees, other debris started building about their roots. Every year little smaller, and ing marsh was ditional years, the more firm and Then trees started its perimeter started shrinking the beaver off-to greener



"Bob," the beaver, snacks in the pond behind the Auchmoody house. Photo by Steffen Thalman.

ing nearby on Weston Road and Loughran Lane. Both sites are entering the spongy-meadow stage.

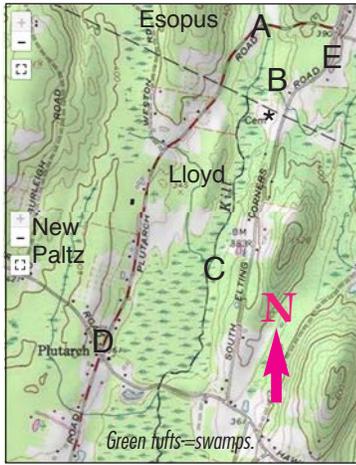
New Swartekill muck is forming as plant remains are pushed down under new growth. Bacteria and microscopic fungi break up plants' structure, once more recycling the nutrients.

Today, the area along the Swartekill Creek is a magnificent, verdant strip of flora that hosts a variety of mammals, amphibians, insects, fish and birds. Its value as a water-purifier is understood as more valuable than its black dirt bedding. There is no more talk of draining.

* "The Mystery of the Tombstone" questions the origin of the tallest monument in the Auchmoody cemetery. It size and cost are out of character with the rest of the stones in that small burial ground. More puzzling is that it seems to be older than stones in the older New Paltz cemetery. Historian William Heidert suggested the stone would have had to be imported from a rather large city. The stone in question, at left, is in memory of David Auchmoody (1776-1845) and his wife, Mary Van-Keuren (1783-1829). Other family members rest there as well. David and Mary were the most likely builders of the house shown below right. At an earlier time, the monument was visible from the house. Today, the forest and the swamp move ever closer to its protective stone walls.

**The Raymond Riordon School is the focus of a book based on twelve years of research and the collection of dozens of Riordon School items and ephemera. The evolution of Raymond Riordon's educational philosophy highlight decades of educational experimentation culminating on the shores of Chodikee Lake, Highland, NY. It was a most unusual school.

I plan to self-publish in 2023.



Both Maps

A: Auchmoody Bridge on Plutarch Road, Town of Esopus. Dotted line is town boundary.

B. Auchmoody House black dot, 112 Swartekill Rd below the B. * indicates cemetery.

C. Swartekill Creek between Plutarch & N. Eltings Corners Road Extension. (Until 1960, it was S. Eltings Corners Rd. as shown in upper map.)

D. Plutarch Rd. To west runs VanNostrand Rd, east runs Black Creek Rd. to Hawley Corners, and N. Eltings Corner Rd (Extension today).

E. Swartekill Road -starts at Lloyd/Esopus dotted line

Lower Map

F. Auchmoody Cemetery

G. Auchmoody Pond about 3/4 miles west of Chodikee Lake.



Auchmoody House, 112 Swartekill Rd, Highland (mailing), located in the Town of Esopus, and the New Paltz Central School district.