

The Old Newgate Coon Club

On October 28, 1897, five men from the Turkey Hills section of Granby started out for the Hubbard River (the old name for the East Branch of the Farmington River) in Hartland Hollow to hunt coons. Why they didn't hunt the several good hunting areas in and around Granby nobody will ever know, but they never the less made the decision to hunt in Hartland. They hired a local Hartland Hollow resident, Lowell Humphrey, to accompany them with his dog. They then followed the Hubbard River several miles north, well into West Granville, Mass. It was during their return trip that Humphrey walked too close to the top of some ledges and fell to his death. This tragedy served to establish the first exact hunting date for the men who were to become the charter members of the club that was to be known as the Old Newgate Coon Club.

It is doubtful that the original group continued annual hunts in Hartland Hollow for a few years following 1897; however they continued to hunt closer to the Granby area.

There are no written records until the purchase of the Barnes place in Hartland Hollow in 1910. The original group had been joined by several others who joined in on the annual week-long coon hunts. These were truly horse and buggy days. It was an annual sight to see these fellows start out with horses and wagons, blankets, horse feed, roast chicken, ham, potatoes, salt pork, gun and shells and any other supplies which they could not readily buy "over in the Hollow". [Incidentally, the local dialectal pronunciation was "Holla"]

After making camp in barns and houses for ten years, the group organized and bought a vacant property at Hartland Hollow, which had been built in 1796 as the original Red Lion Inn on the old Hartford to Albany stage coach route, at the cross roads of the Granville – Winsted route. Time was when this area was quite a business district with a post office, school, inn, spoon mill, four corners and several farms all within a stone's throw, but this was destined not to last for long.

Before the Civil War, the inn had moved to Stockbridge, Mass., the spoon mill had been absorbed by a more thriving mill at Spoonville, down river and the remaining families struggled to retain their school and post office.

What a beautiful location that Hartland Hollow property was – the Hubbard River tumbling along about seventy-five feet in front of the door, which in normal flow gave the music of gentle rain, hemmed in by the Hartland Mountains rising 600 feet high on each side of the valley, made for short days and long nights so much the better for coon hunters; and then, the mammoth elm tree at the corner of the house, twenty-two feet six inches in circumference, with a one hundred seventy-two foot limb spread in 1930. Also the schoolhouse meadow with its acres of white and yellow daisies and fringes of red raspberries, and the swimming holes, one just above the bridge and "old black water" up at the gorge.

Here it was that the pioneers of this club, and those who were to follow, inspired by the grandeur of nature and the power of Nature's God, laid the foundation of a fraternity of good fellows which, after more than a century, goes forward in the principals of brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of the Almighty.

The certificate of incorporation was drawn up on February 15, 1910. The name of the corporation is to be “The Old Newgate Coon Club, Inc.” The nature of the business to be transacted, and the purposes to be promoted or carried out by said corporation are as follows: For the promotion of social intercourse, recreation and mental improvement by such means as shall be expedient and proper for that purpose; and also to purchase, hold or lease any real or personal property to carry out the purposes of the corporation.

On June 13, 1910 a committee formed for the purpose, reviewed three pieces of real estate as a potential home for the young organization and the Barnes property in Hartland was eventually chosen. This consisted of the old inn, 100 acres of land and several tumbled-down out buildings. The purchase price was \$800.00.

The annual game suppers were started about 1908 and were mostly held at member’s homes until 1915, when for three successive years they were held at Old Newgate Prison. Starting in 1918 the game suppers climaxed the week-long annual hunt, a strictly stag affair, which has continued uninterrupted.

In January, 1937 the original property, with its homey improvements was sold to the Water Bureau of the Metropolitan District of Hartford for \$24,500 and immediately factions arose among the members with some leaning strongly toward an offer from the Water Bureau to build a clubhouse up Valley Brook, which they could use for ten years and then vacate. This offer was in lieu of any payment for the Hartland real estate.

Three potential sites were considered, two in Hartland, the other in Norfolk; it was this last property which was agreed upon, the purchase price was \$11,500.00. After essential remodeling, a beautiful clubhouse was completed, but the corporation found itself \$5,000 in debt, and instead of being almost 100% a hunter’s club, they were immediately forced to find sources of additional revenue to maintain a \$30,000 piece of real estate, including 560 acres of land. Various avenues were considered, and in 1940 it was decided to have a licensed bar and a vigorous membership drive, which sought to add ladies to the membership. No longer could the club be maintained strictly as a man’s club. It was obvious that there must be regular, frequent meetings of the officers and directors; an active house committee, a similar bar committee and other special committees. The result of the membership drive was to increase membership from 64 to 135; the annual dues were increased to \$40.00.

Perhaps the high point of the club’s illustrious existence occurred in the aftermath of the 1955 flood. The facilities were made available to the American Red Cross, and for two months non-residents were sheltered and fed during the period of emergency.

As The Old Newgate Coon Club embarks on its second century, its members can look to the future with pride and satisfaction, recognizing that there is still a close adherence to those principals set forth in their certificate of incorporation – for the promotion of social intercourse, recreation and mental improvement by such means as shell be expedient and proper for that purpose, and that the duration of this corporation is unlimited.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg