SPRAIN ROAD AND THE LOWER SPRAIN BROOK VALLEY

Recently, I asked Edith DeCecca, who lives on Sprain Road in Greenburgh, less than a mile south of its intersection with Ashford Avenue and Ardsley Road, if she and her neighbors get their mail delivered by the Scarsdale Post Office. She said that she has for many years, but added that she can remember that back in the 1940’s, their address was “R.F.D.# 1, White Plains”, which stood for “Rural Free Delivery”. The American Heritage College Dictionary defines “rural” as “Of, relating to, or characteristic of the country” and also “Of or relating to farming; agricultural”.

That fits in with my memories of the countryside along Sprain Road both north and south of the easterly end of Ashford Avenue during the 1940’s. I was a kid growing up in the Village of Ardsley then and didn’t reach my teens until later in the 1940’s when Milton Berle made many people stay home on Tuesday evenings to watch his antics on television on the Texico Star Theater. Of course, we didn’t have a television set yet, but once in a while Ralph Arone’s family would invite us over to watch the new invention and Ralph enjoyed showing it off to visitors.

In those days, my family lived in an apartment building close to Ardsley’s business section, which didn’t spread too far from the intersection of Ashford Avenue and Saw Mill River Road. At that age, the Village was the center of my universe and, to me, the Sprain Brook Valley was the farm country with the Holscher and the Spano farms to the south of Ashford Avenue and the Frischmann farm extending up to Underhill Road to the north.

I didn’t think much about municipal boundaries then, and probably didn’t even know that most of that farmland was in unincorporated Greenburgh. The Ardsley School District extended east of Sprain Road, just as it does today, and children from that area attended our Ardsley school on Ashford Avenue near the Municipal Building.

Edith DeCecca was a member of the Holscher family and grew up on the chicken farm of her parents, John and Minnie, and delivered eggs and spring chickens as far away as Scarsdale and Bronxville. Two of her uncles, George and Charlie, worked the original Holscher farm which adjoined her parents’. Her grandmother, Margaret, as a widow with ten children, had relocated the family from Yonkers in 1910, and started the farm in the Sprain Brook Valley. The Ardsley Middle School with access off Ashford Avenue presently occupies much of what was originally the Holscher farm. Even though it wasn’t an easy life, Edith seems to have fond memories of the farm, considered herself an Ardsley resident, and still remembers how good those spring chickens tasted. She also remembers the large number of Indian arrowheads that were found when the land in the valley was cultivated.

That may account for the name, “Thirty Deer Ridge”, that old maps give to the high ridge that runs north and south, bordering the east side of Sprain Road from Jackson Avenue northerly beyond Underhill Road. The farmhouse near the intersection of Underhill and Old Sprain Road that later became the Frischmann farmhouse belonged to James McChain around the time of the American Revolution. From the 18th Century record of the Philipsburg Manor, McChain began his leasehold in the 1760’s and the land which he eventually bought in 1785 contained 325 acres, including much of Thirty Deer Ridge. Maps of the Philipsburg Encampment created by French General Rochambeau’s officers in 1781, indicate an outpost on top of the ridge at the southerly end of McChain’s property. The maps also show Sprain Road leading towards New York, which was controlled by the British. There is evidence that Washington’s orders instructed Rochambeau in July of 1781 to use Sprain Road during a joint reconnaissance by the allied forces of the British positions in New York.

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