

Celebrate the Berrypickers!

by Marc Fried, author/historian/naturalist

Across the street from the *Chamber of Commerce's* Berme Road office, some distance behind the *Kimble Hose* firehouse hall and *Wawarsing Highway Dept.* building, an old road appears unexpectedly at the foot of the **Shawangunk Mountain** and commences a seven-mile ascent to **Lake Awosting** in **Minnewaska State Park**. I say "old road," but it was actually called by some the "New Road" when built over 100 years ago by the Minnewaska resort to shuttle hotel guests to and from Ellenville's *O&W* rail station. Today it is designated as **Smiley Carriageway** on state park maps, but it was known through most of its life, and is still known today by the older, and more history-minded residents of the valley, as the **Smiley Road**.

Were the state park folks worried that the word road might encourage unauthorized vehicular traffic? The road-bed, long abandoned, is in deplorable condition, and any attempt at motor access would probably prove perilous, not to say expensive. But until the great floods of 1955, and especially during the decades preceding World War II, the Smiley Road was in fact bustling with vehicular and pedestrian traffic, and was the lifeline of a thriving homegrown industry. We are talking, of course, about...

HUCKLEBERRIES.

Now before we get into an argument about whether they were *huckleberries* or *blueberries*, let me say that the term in nearly universal use by those who picked, measured, bought, and sold them was the *h*-word, not the *b*-word, the latter generally being reserved for the horticulturally-hybridized and propagated varieties, quite inferior in all respects except size. Ours were wild berries: unsprayed, uncultivated, and helped along by human intervention only in the form of (very wild) mountain fires that raced up the slope and spread explosively across the pine barrens, the "tangled thickets and hell of broken gorges that form the crest of the Shawangunks --a devil's own playground for a fire," in the words of one mid-century forest ranger. It was the periodic fires that helped maintain the famed Shawangunk Mountain berries that found their way into produce markets, bakeries, dining rooms, and palates from New York City to Albany.

The fires no longer occur. The Shawangunk huckleberries today are just as tasty, but far fewer. The many hundreds of pickers who summered in tents or tarpaper shanties along the **Smiley Road** and at **Sam's Point** are long gone. But their history, their stories, their folkways and lore are preserved in prose, poetry, song, and human memory, and we celebrate them today in our annual late summer Festival.

As we prepare for the celebration, let us be sure to retain the core of history and authenticity that attracts former berrypickers and their descendents to Ellenville for this festival. It is their special day, a day that should be dedicated, above all, to honoring and remembering those who actually lived the rustic, independent, hardworking (sometimes hard-drinking), and often adventurous life of the Shawangunk Mountain berrypicker.

IN CASE OF RAIN: Please remember that all history- and mountain-related exhibits, events, and performances, as well as bake sales, pie judging, etc., scheduled for the **Market Square** behind the Town of Wawarsing offices, will move indoors to **1 Bogardus Place** (near the post office); all other festival exhibits and activities will be postponed to the rain date, Sunday, August 24th.

For more info, contact: Marc B. Fried, 766 Sand Hill Rd, Gardiner, NY 12525-5633.



This early 20th Century picture, which is in Marc Fried's book *The Huckleberry Pickers*, is from a glass plate negative in the collection of Phil Aaron, formerly of Ellenville, and reproduced here courtesy of Mr. Aaron. Note the berry box worn by the fellow on the left.

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