

At the Ellenville Public Library

Huckleberry Picker Oral History Project

by Heidi Wagner, *Preserve Manager, Sam's Point*



Photograph from "Shawangunk: Adventure, Exploration, History and Epiphany from a Mountain Wilderness" by Marc B. Fried

A project sponsored by The Nature Conservancy to collect and interpret stories about the lives and experiences of huckleberry pickers and their families on the **Shawangunk Ridge** during the nineteenth and early twentieth century is being launched at a get-together in the **Community Room** of the *Ellenville Public Library*, **40 Center Street**, Ellenville, New York on **Saturday, April 3rd at 1:00 PM**. One-time huckleberry pickers, their families and descendants or anyone who would like to share information regarding the huckleberry pickers is welcome to attend.

(We want to learn all we can about the **Shawangunk Ridge** huckleberry pickers. Any information regarding the berry pickers is welcome. Let's hear your story! Bring along photos and memorabilia if you have them.)

Information that will be gathered will be used to develop an interpretive oral history exhibit. The exhibit will be installed in the new **Sam's Point Preserve Conservation Center**, which is now under construction at the entrance to the Preserve, located in Cragmoor. The Nature Conservancy staff, assisted by students from Marist College and other volunteers, will document stories and reminiscences on video tape, which will be used to inform people about the cultural history of the **Preserve**. The Nature Conservancy has received \$10,000 in funding from the office of New York State Senator John Bonacic in support of the project. "We are excited about this project and know it will add a very important dimension to our exhibits at the new **Conservation Center** at **Sam's Point**," said Cara Lee, Director of the Conservancy's *Shawangunk Ridge Program*.

In addition to **Sam's Point's** extraordinary ecological significance, the Preserve has a rich and varied cultural history. Beginning in the mid-1800s and aided by the expansion of the railroads, a market developed for the huckleberries that still grow in great quantities along the ridge. Initially a family activity, gathering huckleberries soon developed into a thriving business. Semi-permanent encampments and lively summer communities developed in the vicinity of **Sam's Point**. The ruins of these encampments still remain, containing a handful of standing structures, structural remains such as foundations and building materials and refuse middens. Several photographs of the workers and their families also remain, providing valuable information about a vanished regional agricultural and the culture associated with it.

As part of the interpretive plan for the **Conservation Center**, The Nature Conservancy, working with the *Cragmoor Historical Society*, plans to collect and archive

the oral histories of the huckleberry pickers and their families and combine these histories with photographs and artifacts to fabricate a museum quality exhibit that will tell the history of the Shawangunk huckleberry pickers.

Sam's Point Preserve, comprised of nearly 5,000 acres, is owned by the Open Space Institute and managed by the Nature Conservancy. The preserve is located in the southwestern portion of the Northern **Shawangunks**, which is recognized as one of the most important sites for biodiversity conservation in the northeastern United States and is considered by The Nature Conservancy as one of the earth's "Last Great Places."

For more information about this event or the oral history project contact Heidi Wagner, Preserve Manager, at 647-3123 or hwagner@tnc.org or **Sam's Point Preserve, PO Box 86, Cragmoor NY 12420**. The *Ellenville Public Library & Museum* is located at **40 Center Street**, Ellenville, New York. Tel: **647-5530** ☆

Libraries: Left Out In the Cold

The New York Library Association, the Ramapo Catskill Library System (RCLS) and its 47 member libraries (which includes the *Ellenville Public Library*) are asking the Legislature to add \$13.7 million to the 2004-05 state budget in order to prevent libraries and the 14 million people they serve from entering yet another "deep freeze" of insufficient funding. Currently, the library community receives less than 0.1% of the state budget, or approximately \$89 million. That money is shared by the libraries and library systems in the state.

"All libraries - public, school, academic, and special - work together to offer their patrons a wealth of programs and materials. A delivery service provided by RCLS, one of many services provided, connects all of the libraries, making it possible for library users to borrow materials from any library within the RCLS service area and have that item delivered to the library in their community," said Robert Hubsher, Director of the Ramapo Catskill Library System (845-343-1131, ext. 242, Middletown).

Everywhere in New York State, libraries enhance lives as librarians go about the business of helping people find the information they need. For students, their school libraries are doorways to a limitless world of information and a means to equalize opportunities for an excellent education. For senior citizens with health issues, parents with young children, business people, and many others, public libraries offer free access to books and learning, both print and electronic. For university students, information and ideas flow through their academic libraries and permit them to pursue advanced study and research.

"Without sustained and increased state funding, library services for people in Rockland, Orange, Sullivan and southern Ulster counties and in all of New York State will erode. For the millions of library users in New York State, access through libraries to print and electronic resources will be reduced," explained Hubsher. ☆

