



Histories and Mysteries of Cragmoor

by Lucy Muller

Most of these stories are hearsay, but, in my 61 years in Cragmoor, I can tell you that I experienced many first hand.

Let me start way back at the turn of the of the 19th century into the 20th. In 1901, my grandparents, Christine and Anderson Polk, lived in New York City. They had one baby and wanted him to have cool, fresh air in the summer. My grandmother knew of the summer retreat and artist colony called Cragmoor. She had stayed at the *Inn* or the *Blakeley House* a few times. So my grandparents looked around and bought a farmhouse located at the corner of **Henry Rd. & Schulyer Ave.** at the north end of the mountain. They had the house put on wheels, not that uncommon, and moved to the edge of the mountain facing the Catskills. The house was the fourth to the left of the **Stone Church**, if you're looking at the view (*photo above*). They added a porch, but had an outhouse and a dug well in those days. The only heat was a fireplace, so the house was only open in the summer.

In 1906, my mother came along and by this time the family had to travel by train all the way from Baltimore. My grandmother would pack up in May, take the train to Ellenville and then wagon up the **Gully Road** to Cragmoor. It took two hours with two stops to water the horses. My mother told me that they would be black with soot at the end of the journey.

Cragmoor was ideal for children to explore and yet be safe. There was a swamp, which we would now call wetlands. At the end of the driveway one could hear the bullfrogs and catch tadpoles. There were huge pine trees to climb and **Diana's Bath** between Cragmoor and Mt. Monagha to swim in. There were blueberries to eat off the bush and patches of blackberry to chomp on.

Every Sunday, the family would attend services at the *Chapel of the Holy Name* and the priest lived in the rectory all summer. I bet the clergy scrambled for that cushy job every year.

After Labor Day, the family would close up Treetops (the name of the house then) and take the train back to the city. It makes me so happy to think that the house, now called Katzview, is on the National Historic Register.

My mother was a model for many of the famous Hudson River School of artists. She sat for Helen Turner, Charles Curran, Charles Gay, and E. L. Henry. She is the young girl in blue in a landscape by Charles Curran hanging in the *Cragmoor Library* and she is the *Young Woman with a Lantern* by Helen Turner. She took art lessons herself and attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. My mother's specialty was pastel portraits. It is quite amazing, as she is the great, great, great, great niece of the painter Charles Wilson Peale.

Now when my mother was born, her uncle married a young woman and they went on their honeymoon to New Orleans. The girl ate oysters, came down with typhoid fever

and died. My mother was to be named Alethea, but when Julia Neal died, my grandparents changed her name to Julia Neal. It was so sad and each summer my grandma would have a special church service in memory of her sister-in-law.

The summer my mother turned four, she and her brother were taking naps and my grandmother was lying down in her downstairs bedroom. That's when she heard the footsteps in the dining room. Nana called out, but no one answered. She heard the steps again and this time she got up and looked – no one. And then she realized the steps were those of someone in slippers. She had forgotten to have the service for Julia Neal and, since Julia was tall, she had worn slippers at her wedding. My grandmother ran over to the rectory and got the priest to have the memorial service right away.

Fast forward to the 1940s. My mother is grown up, married, with two daughters. My sister, Nina, born in 1939, and me, born the winter of 1943. We lived outside Philadelphia, but when I was six-months-old, they hauled me up to Cragmoor and my personal relationship with the place began.

We still had the outhouse and the dug well and the pitcher pump. What fun that was to pump and pump until the cold, delicious water would come pouring out. My bedroom was in a top left-hand side and every night before I fell asleep I could see the lights of Ellenville twinkling down in the valley.

We had such a great time. We went swimming at Haberman's pool by this time, but still went down the mountain to Diana's Bath when it was really hot. I had lots of cousins to play with and the same wetland and blueberry bushes of my mother's day. At that time we could walk or drive up to **Sam's Point** for picnics. That meant we could go up there at night; how I miss being able to do that now. No one damaged the pinelands then, but off-road vehicles weren't around either.

Lake Maratanza on top of **Sam's Point** was now a reservoir, and no one could swim in it. We also had **Bear Hill** to climb around and so much freedom. I especially remember walking barefoot everywhere. I liked to pop the tar bubbles on the road with my feet.

There was an old, old woman named Mrs. Wright up there when I was a kid. She walked with two canes and had a dagger in her sock. She looked just like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. One night we snuck around and looked in her windows and discovered she wasn't using her canes. To a bunch of kids this was scandalous. Everything was such a big deal then. There was nothing scarier than walking home in the dark and just at the driveway, getting that hair-raising feeling so that you had to run the last hundred yards to the safety of the house.

There is still one more mystery I have always wanted to solve, and that is the one of Julia West. Miss West was in a murder/suicide that took place at the **Stone Church** around 1945. She and a man were discovered there and her parents put up the arch and cross as a memorial for her (*photo below*). If anyone can find out anything about it for me it would be appreciated.

All in all, Cragmoor has been a safe and happy place. It can be treacherous in the fog and dead of winter, but there is nothing like it in the summer. ❄️

