

Shawangunk Mountain Treasures and Pleasures

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Climbers call them the “Gunks,” public relations types for area hotels mistakenly refer to them as part of the **Catskill Mountains**, visitors and area residents mispronounce their name more often than not, but the **Shawangunk Mountains** (pronounced “Shon-gum”, an Indian word believed to mean “white rocks”) are reputed to have stood for 450 million years. They are part of a ridge system 100 million years older than the **Catskills**.

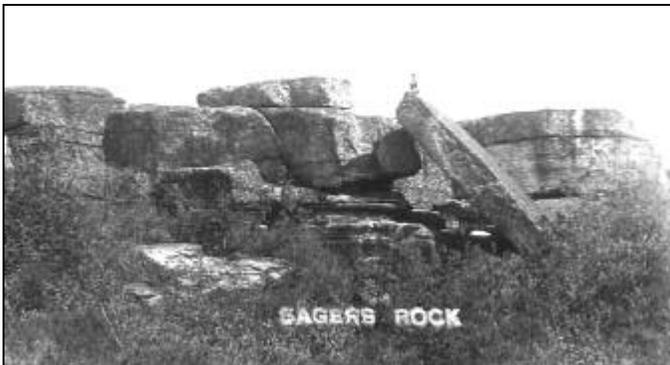
According to The Nature Conservancy, the **Ridge** is characterized by shallow, acidic soils, hospitable to only the hardiest of plants. The distinctive cliffs and boulders are formed of white conglomerate – sedimentary rock consisting of rounded fragments (often quartz) cemented together. Shale underlies the entire **Ridge**, noticeable in quarries and roadways. It is a good source of fossils.

Translated into very simple terms for the non-geologist, the ice caves (*photo, right, from approx. 100 years ago*) were formed after layers of shale and quartz were molded from mud and sand pebbles millions of years ago. The soft shale underlay gave way for the heavy weight of brittle quartz, which eventually caused the cracks and crevices of the ice caves. Local geologists will find copies of far more scientific studies in the files of the *Ellenville Public Library & Museum*.

Geologist David Howell of the U.S. Geological Survey, who grew up in Cragmoor, described the caves as being formed of Shawangunk conglomerate, millions of years old, a kind of quartz that is very acidic and low in calcium. The lack of nutrients, thin soil over bedrock and harsh climate contribute to the dwarfing of pine trees, creating another unique feature of the **Shawangunks**. The *Sam's Point Preserve* contains some 2,000 acres of dwarf pine barrens, part of the rare ecosystem that includes the ice caves. “The dwarf pines grow nowhere else in the world at this elevation,” said Cara Lee, **Shawangunk Ridge** Program Director of The Nature Conservancy.

For centuries, Native Americans farmed the fertile valleys and hunted the **Ridge**. In the seventeenth century, European settlers developed the area along the **Ridge**, building stone houses and clearing valley fields for agriculture.

The combination of farming and intensive tree harvesting by charcoal burners, hoop makers, and tanners cleared much of the **Ridge** forest by the 19th century. In



that century, the beauty of the powerful landscape drew artists like Edward Lamson Henry, Charles C. Curran, and George Inness, Jr., to make the artist colony in Cragmoor their summer home.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, huckleberry picking was an important summer occupation. (*See Wawarsing.Net #21, August 2004, pages 20-21*)

Today, over 600,000 rock climbers, naturalists, hikers, cross-country skiers, and other visitors travel to the **Ridge** each year to enjoy the spectacular landscape and history of the region.



Ellenville has its own unique part of the **Shawangunks**, called the **Ellenville Fault-Ice Caves**, which was designated a National Landmark in 1967 (*photo, above, Mayor Eugene Glusker, right, introduces Robert Rose*). Although owned by the Village of Ellenville for almost 100 years, the **Ice Caves** are actually in Cragmoor. National Park Service Chief Geologist Robert H. Rose, speaking at official ceremonies designating **Ice Caves Mountain** a Registered National Natural Landmark on September 28, 1968, said, “This very narrow belt of