

2.2 Early History of the East Kill Valley

When settlers first arrived in the East Kill Valley, they came upon a rough and wild wilderness. Bears, wolves, and other dangerous wildlife roamed the thickly forested region. It is noted in historical records that many of the first settlers only remained there for a short time before moving away. Therefore, little is known about many of these pioneers. A local account of one of these men from East Jewett further exemplifies some of the difficulties of inhabiting this land. The tale is of Timothy Lockwood who came from Dutchess County to live in the East Kill Valley in 1797. He is said to have retreated almost immediately upon arriving, after being intimidated by the howling wolves (Beach, 1871).

Another man by the name of John Godsell also holds some renown with regards to wolves, but in a different respect. Known as “Uncle John” by the locals, he was an expert trapper. In his time, wolves were a big nuisance to sheep herders who were losing many of their livestock to the carnivores. As a result, New York State encouraged the killing of these wolves by passing laws which allowed towns to offer bounties for them. John Godsell is reported to have killed between 40 and 50 wolves while residing in the East Kill Valley. A story is told of one particular wolf which he tied up and tried to bring to the nearby town of Cairo. His goal was to cross the Cairo line with this captured wolf since the bounty for killing a wolf differed from town to town, and in Cairo it was much higher. However, as a result of Godsell’s cruel treatment, the wolf died before Godsell was able to reach Cairo (Beach, 1871).



The East Jewett Valley, looking east c.1914; from the Tom Hitchcock Collection.

The East Kill is located in the present day town of Jewett. It begins at Colgate Lake in East Jewett and flows west. It roughly follows Rt. 23C, and then turns south to follow Rt. 17. It eventually spills into the Schoharie Creek near Jewett Center where Rt. 17 meets Rt. 23A. The East Kill Valley was

originally part of the town of Windham. It has a history of name changes before it finally became known as Jewett. In 1813 a section of old Windham, encompassing current East Jewett, was broken off. In 1814, the name Hunter was given to this region. The town of Hunter currently borders Jewett, but at the time the two towns were one. It wasn't until 1849 that part of Hunter as well as part of Lexington was sectioned off to form the town of Jewett. The towns name comes from a man named Freeborn G. Jewett. Freeborn was a politician born in Connecticut who held office as U.S. Representative from New York from 1831-1833 and Supreme Court Judge from 1847-1848 (Beach, 1871); (Kestenbaum, 2005).

Industry

In the late 1700's-to-early 1800's, the region thrived from the sale of hemlock bark. Hemlock bark was used for its tannins to tan leather. The tanning industry was becoming quite popular in the Catskill Mountains at that time and the demand for hemlock bark was rising. The local industry later shifted to logging as lumber demands rose. Both these industries proved prosperous for the East Kill Valley. Inevitably the logging and hemlock businesses had negative effects on the environment and sentiment for this subject was not very high as it is today. Eventually, when the land was cleared from all the logging and hemlock harvesting, dairy farms emerged as the dominant economic engine and remained the East Kill Valleys most prosperous industry.

(Beach, 1871).



Slater Farm House (which burned) west of current Farber Farm; from the Alvena Hitchcock Collection.

In 1880 there were 151 farms scattered throughout the area. So many farms in one area can have negative impacts on local streams. For example, many farmers cut their grass fields right up to the streams' edge which creates unstable banks and worsens flood damage. The problem spreads via the stream, which carries these eroded materials creating turbidity and irregular sediment

deposition. Another problem, specifically associated with dairy farms near streams, is the runoff of high levels of fecal matter from cow manure. The presence of fecal coliform bacteria in the water is an indicator of this problem. Fecal coliform bacteria is found in both human and animal waste and makes for unhealthy drinking water. Better understanding and recent technologies have allowed farmers to employ more environmentally friendly ways of managing their farms than practiced in the past.

Due to economic pressures many of the local farms have gone out of business. J.J. Farber Farm is one of the only remaining farms in the East Kill Valley. Located at the site of former Slater Farm, they have approximately fifty beef cows. The East Kill Bridge (Farber Farm Bridge) stretches across the East Kill Creek here, connecting the farmhouse to more of the farms' cattle fields. This bridge was built in 1932 and used to be known as Slater Bridge, when Slater Farm was running (Historic Bridges of the United States, 2006). GCSWCD, in collaboration with NYCDEP, has been involved in an ongoing project to stabilize the creek at this location and alleviate localized flooding.



Bridge at Slater Farm, current Farber Farm; from the Alvena Hitchcock Collection.

Today

The East Kill Valley never experienced quite as big of a boom in tourism as has been characteristic of surrounding areas in the Catskills, such as Windham and Hunter. It has remained in many ways as it began, a peaceful area offering a simple lifestyle, known for its wild forests and the East Kill Creek. It is currently one of the least populated towns in Greene County. The undeveloped nature of the area is largely due to the fact that New York State owns much of the forests and mountain peaks. The state maintains these areas as protected wilderness, preserving the natural landscape and maintaining hiking trails. Many of its residents still thrive off agriculture and agroforestry. The number of farms has decreased dramatically since its early days, with current farming practices and techniques becoming much more environmentally stable. The area offers a vacation spot

for tourists who are looking for serenity, peace, and quiet in a less commercialized location of the Catskills (Greene County Planning and Economic Development, 2004). Three popular hiking destinations, Blackhead, Blackdome, and Thomas Cole Mountain, are all located in the northeastern part of the valley.



From left: Blackhead, Blackdome, and Thomas Cole mountains; from www.catskillguide.com

References

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