

## MANITOU, GHOST TOWN OF THE HIGHLAND

Manitou, in the southwestern corner of Putnam, is a ghost town. Here were once busy copper mines, a granite quarry, an ice business, a big chemical plant and docks. In its heyday in the seventies and eighties and on past the turn of the century, the chemical plant provided jobs for scores, perhaps hundreds of men, and the spread out little village of the Highland, with its post office and stores, its Mountain View Hotel and boarding houses, its dwellings up mountain roads and along the railroad tracks, from "the Rock" far south of the plant to "Irishtown" a mile or so north, its school of seventy-odd pupils, its two churches and its several bars, was a thriving self-contained community for almost fifty years. Work at the plant was hard and dangerous, fires and accidents were common, but life had its relaxations – the pool table at Denny's store, the most popular hangout the hotel bar, dances at the plant boarding house for single men, and in summer John Thompson's "bumboat" from Peekskill, which sold beer and ice cream right at the dock. Today only through old records and the vivid memories and traditions of a few of Manitou's inhabitants is it possible to resurrect that lively past.

The story begins in 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, when the Hudson River Copper Company, precursor of the chemical company, obtained a lease to 300 acres on Manitou Mountain from William H. Denning, an heir of the William Denning who had bought up as a speculation so much of the land confiscated in Revolutionary times from the Tory Beverly Robinson and his wife Sussannah. Five years later the company secured an additional lease, this time from Catherine and Pierre Van Cortlandt, giving the right to operate mines on Anthony's Nose, over the Putnam-Westchester border, for no one could accurately locate the county line, marked by an old cedar tree – in the early nineteen hundreds Frederick Gore King, owner of the mine property, was still looking for that tree.

Be that as it may, every one in Manitou today knows the Old Copper Mine Road – knows too how dangerous it is to explore the unprotected openings of the mine's twin shafts or the dark slimy pits terrifying with the memory of a geology instructor's accidental plunge to death in 1921 while his class of teenage boys looked on aghast. Every one knows of the unsightly old mine dumps and how they give their bitter flavour to Copper Mine Brook. But not every one knows, or at least I did not, that the ore from the mine was hauled out by team and wagon down along the then existing roads – South Mountain Pass Road, Beverly Lane, which is now 9D, and King's Dock Lane – all the way north to King's Dock (now owned by Col. Taylor Belcher), where it was loaded on scows. There was at first no direct road from the mine down to the river.

Copper was what the Hudson River Copper Company had hoped to find, but it was iron sulphide which was really mined in greatest abundance. And so the idea of a chemical company was born. In January, 1873, the newly organized highland Chemical & Mining Company secured "a piece of land, marsh and islands" near the railroad station-stop of the Highland, as Manitou was then called. Here docks were built, at which the ore-bearing scows could land, and also a big wooden shell of a plant enclosing vats and other equipment to process the ore. By 1877 "some 80 men were employed at the works and 180 more at the mines". Reid's county map of this period shows the mines very clearly and also an "Engine House" and "Mine Boarding House" up next to the mines. In August 1877, according to an old newspaper clipping, the plant was producing 200 carboys or 52,000 pounds of sulphuric acid every 24 hours – "oil of vitriol", they then called this "most useful

chemical ever made, "which could be utilized in the production of nitric, muriatic and many less important acids, superphosphates, gun-cotton, disinfectants, bleaches, purified kerosene, rust remover, acid drinks, shoe-blackening and medicinal appetizers. The plant sent its fumes far out on the river, but towers were being built to recover the gases, and as a safety measure a new platinum substitute for the breakable glass retort had been introduced at a cost of \$17,000.

"The buildings of this company," says William Pelletreau in his county history of 1886, "present a very conspicuous appearance on the banks of the river, and the works give employment to a large number of hands." But by 1886 the company had stopped using the local ores, which "had proved to be not so rich as had been supposed," and was instead importing sulphur from Italy. In 1889, fire destroyed the plant. Mr. Thomas Torpey of Manitou, then five years old, still remembers the horror of that Saturday night. He remembers too how quickly the plant was rebuilt by the Fort Montgomery contractor Aaron Clark. Tom Torpey went to work at odd jobs around the plant in 1900, for 83 cents a day, \$5 a week, or half what a man could earn. He was Number 71 on the payroll of 150 or so, which included, he says, not only Irish, English and Scotch but Swedes, Danes, Germans and even a Turk! He was to work at the plant until its final day – its last foreman.

The end was already foreshadowed, for in this same year of 1900 the company was merged into General Chemical (now a division of mammoth Allied Chemical & Dye.) Several other merged concerns moved into the plant. General Chemical was an enterprising company. At the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 it took first prize for its sulphuric acid. But high protective tariffs were by this time making imported sulphur far less economical to use than ores from western mines, processed in plants further west by newer methods than those of the increasingly obsolescent Highland works. In 1907 the company decided to test the ore from the old copper mine. The mine chambers were full of water and had to be pumped out. How I wish I could include here even a bit of the fascinating picture conveyed by young William T. Howell who, on five separate occasions between May 1906 and November, 1908, hiked up the mountain, explored the windy mine shafts, shouted into the echoing caverns, photographed everything he could, and even cooked and ate prodigious numbers of lamb chops, with horrible mine-water coffee, near a chunk of frozen dynamite in the dark watery interior. (It is all related in Ch. 4, Vol.II of *The Hudson Highlands*, together with much factual material about the mines.)

The mine ore was analyzed in 1908, and the verdict was in the negative. By 1913 the plant was closed for good. The Junk House Wrecking Company from Long Island City took it down. In 1914 the railroad withdrew its station agent. In 1917 an assessment upon General Chemical property in the sum of \$225,000 was stricken from the Philipstown tax roll. Only the old foundations, a chimney or two, some pieces of broken carboy, a bit of rotting dock and a big but neglected "For Rent or Sale" sign remained to mark the spot as the weeds and brush took over. Finally in December, 1942, the site was sold and soon afterward were erected the attractive water-front houses which have given it a new kind of life.

Copied from rather faded manuscript in Desmond-Fish Library.  
By Henrietta Garwig (Courtesy of Desmond Fish Library)