Recreation of All Kinds Mark "Gay 'Nineties"

FROM FRANK SPEER

THEY had no radio or television, no movies, no automobiles, when many Nutley citizens of today were teenagers, a half-century ago, but perish the thought that the "Gay 'Nineties" were not gay here!

They had the Kickapoo Indians, The Wheelmen and several outdoor dance floors for fun, and everybody in town took pride in his acting ability. The Floradora Sextette kicked its heels in the Old Military Hall where burlesque troupes tried out their shows before opening in New York.

The Kickapoo Indians not only amused Nutley on their annual visits, but they cured all kinds of ills with "snake root" herb medicines. The Kickapoos were "medicine men" and when they arrived in their horse-drawn covered wagons and pitched their stand on Centre Street, hung out their torch lights and struck up the band, all Nutley came to see the show.

Many a man and woman in Nutley are alive today who stood in awe as a Kickapoo Indian lay himself down with bared chest. Four or five other Indians rolled a great boulder up a plank and planted it on his chest.

He looked like he was never coming out of it when a husky quarry worker from Avondale was invited to come up, flex his muscles, grab a sledge hammer and split the boulder on the Kickapoo's chest. It was a good trick and although no man would seem able to support such a blow, the fellow under the rock really felt nothing at all.

Barkers then went through the crowd and peddled the "herb medicine" at 50 cents or $1 a bottle. It was made from the magic formula that the Kickapoos had handed down for years. Strangely enough, no matter what ailment you had-insomnia, indigestion, aching backs, spots before your eyes-it cured exactly that. Or for a quarter, in public for all to watch your squirming and your pain, a Kickapoo pulled your tooth. Nutley was healthy for months after the Kickapoos left.

There were two well-known open air dance floors which anticipated the open air movies of today by a half-century. One was located in an apple orchard on the hill back from Centre Street, up towards William Street and east of Prospect Street. The other was near where Walnut Street, then called Joralemon Lane, joins Park Avenue - then called Avondale Road.

A wooden floor, laid on piles driven into the ground, was surrounded with a 30-inch rail. Japanese lanterns were strung around it and three musicians with violin, mandolin and banjo played for waltzes, two-steps and lanciers. Square dances had already gone out of fashion - to come back into fashion today.

The Wheelmen served the same purpose the Automobile Clubs serve today. In

those days everyone rode a “bike.” The more venturesome went off on Sunday rides as far as the lakes. Tires were none too good and roads were unpaved, so punctures were frequent. For that reason, you could either carry all the patches and tools you needed in a leather sack under your seat or you could wind a spare tire around your chest.

The Wheelmen was an organization which encouraged tourism by bicycle. Knowing that there could be a dozen punctures in a day’s ride, it encouraged cyclists to go on club-sponsored trips, so it was not uncommon for 50 or more amateurs to leave on a Sunday morning ride of 50 miles or more.

Nutley youngsters were lucky when the Eaton Stone circus wintered here. Stone built an octagonal shaped building on his property directly across from the LaMonte paper factory in Kingsland Road. There, all winter long, his acrobats and equestrians kept in training, tried out new acts and broke in new horses.

Many New York amateur horsemen who had a hankering for circus life came here and rode their horses in the sawdust ring. Annie Oakley, Frank Butler and many other circus stars from Buffalo Bill’s and other circuses used the great shed for their winter training, too.

When the big traveling circuses came, they avoided little places like Nutley and pitched their tents inside a race track which stood where the Clifton High School is now built along S-6. There are still many in Nutley who remember going there to see Buffalo Bill’s circus and still thrill at the memory of the stately old colonel riding around in dignity, a basketful of colored glass balls on his arm and Annie Oakley at his side.

Every few steps of their horses, Buffalo Bill would toss a glass ball high in the air and Annie would pepper it. Then she would dismount and go into her act, shooting backwards by means of a mirror which she held in one hand. She could shoot backwards between her legs or under her arms and her accuracy was uncanny, living up to her billing as “Little Sure Shot.”

There was a vast amusement park located at Big Tree, just at the Nutley-Belleville line and it furnished a lot of fun, although Nutley boys found most of their fun in simple ways, right at hand. Tastes were bucolic in those days and Nutley was more rustic than metropolitan. Baseball was more fun than ballet and with a pair of skates, a crooked “shinny” stick and a block of wood a dozen boys could find a day’s fun.

Hillside Park is but a memory, but in those days a half-century ago it was quite a spot for the “Gay ‘Ninety” crowds with money to spend on a Sunday. Nutley saw its first balloon ascensions there and it always was a thrill on Sunday afternoons to watch “Hickey” Woodruff sail off into the wild blue yonder. “Hickey” never knew exactly where the winds would blow him and there was a standing offer of $10 for anyone who found his balloon and brought it back.

The preparations for the ascension were as much fun for town boys as were the short rides in the sky for “Hickey.” It took hours to fill the balloon as men held it by ropes over a bonfire. When it was nearly round, the intrepid “Hickey” would seat himself on a trapeze and with much shouting and hawing, the men would drop their ropes and the balloon would climb majestically.

It generally was easier to get up than it was to get down. Many men who were town boys then remember one Sunday which left “Hickey” stranded in a tough spot. High cables were strung a hundred feet above the gaping holes of the Avondale quarries and were used for traveling pulleys to haul huge blocks of stone out of the earth.

On a particularly short ride, “Hickey” cut away from the balloon with a parachute and the wind swung him right astraddle the high cable. There he hung, himself dangling on one side and his trapped parachute on the other-a hundred feet above a quarry filled with loose rock. It was quite a tough spot, for there was no way to reach “Hickey” or to help him, but finally he pulled himself up to the cable by his parachute and slowly inched himself along by his own muscles to the cable tower as the crowd roared its relief.

After braving all the dangers of free ballooning it was perhaps an anticlimax for “Hickey” to die by drowning when he fell off a picnic boat on a pleasure ride in the North River.

The balloon ascensions were but one attraction of Hillside Park; the cyclist who rode down a wooden incline was another. He climbed to a little platform at the top of a trestle where the trees were thickest at the peak of the hill and started down.

Near its base the incline swooped back up for a few feet. That tossed the bicycle in the air and threw the cyclist off at a tangent to try and land himself in what corresponded to about a bucket of water. He rarely missed and lived to a ripe old age.

Within the park was also a dirt track for the then-popular bicycle races and inside the track was a football field where Nutley and Belleville teams clashed with hundreds of fights along the sidelines marking every game. Mike Journey, who kept a garage at the corner of Harrison Street and Franklin Avenue, was by far the best of the dirt track riders.

When a town boy didn’t have the 10 cents that it took to get into Hillside Park, he had plenty of other diversions and if he couldn’t amuse himself at anything else he had swimming in summer and skating in winter on the Morris Canal or the cotton mill ponds. Winter sports could be thrilling.

Frank Speer remembers that the first time anyone ever traveled a mile a minute in Nutley was not by airplane or automobile; it was by sled, the huge 14-man bobsled which “Uncle Dick” Booth’s boys, Bronson, Dudley, Leonard, and Richard owned and raced down Povershon Hill.

In those days before the top of the hill was sliced down by 20 feet, PovershonHill really was steep. It was so bad that in winter when horses had a hard time pulling a load to the top, places were cut out along the side for teamsters to pull their tired horses aside for a breather and rest. The turnouts were called “Thankyou, Mams.”

It was down that hill that the Booth boys raced, to the menace of life and limb. They shot across Bloomfield Avenue, past Prospect Street, and raced up to Centre Street. On a measured mile the bobsled did it in 60 seconds, Speer remembering. He rode it himself and recalls that in one spill he turned 11 end-over-end somersaults before he came to grief against a tree.

Then there were a few daredevils with exhibitionist complexes who skated down Povershon Hill! Flying saucers had nothing on them. They were a flash on the landscape, as they braced themselves on their skates and tore down the hill.

Sleigh rides were current winter sport in the “Gay ‘Nineties” and it is recorded that the Ladies’ Social Society of Franklin Reformed Church staged one on Valentine’s Day, 1896, and the charge was a quarter each. Apparently the church did not frown on the tavern in those days because the goal of that particular sleigh ride was Kessey’s Hotel on the Morris Canal at the corner of Broad and Van Houten.

During the rest of the year when there was no snow, there was plenty of outdoor life. Nutley loved baseball and there were many “diamonds” including a particularly plush place, dating to 1895, along Passaic Avenue just north of Brookfield Avenue, and a midtown field just across New Street from Old Military Hall in what is now the High School campus.

The plush place belonged to the Nutley Athletic Association and had a 10-foot plank fence and bleachers. It stood along the east side of Passaic Avenue and ran north from Brookfield Avenue to Farmer Dunn’s stone house. The Lambert Realty Company bought it up, cut Whitford Avenue through and laid out some choice building lots.

For the less athletically inclined, there were the Camp Meeting Woods along the Third River, at Joralemon Street, just south of the Plenge farm. Tables and benches were scattered under the trees and even before Nutley had any churches, circuit riders used to come there and dispel religion.

If you had any music in your soul, in the “Gay ‘Nineties,” you more than likely practiced with the Nutley Mandolin Club in Paul Lauterhahn’s barbershop right next to Herman Thierfelder’s hotel in the building which right now is getting a new face across from Carnie Blum’s meat market in Passaic Avenue. Paul was a good barber and the best mandolin player in town and most of his companions were working boys, who practiced every evening.

There was bowling too at the Fortnightly Club which later lost its picturesque

Louisiana pillared porch in a flood, and at the Feuerbach and the Central hotels, both of which had alleys. The “Firebox” Hotel’s bowling was unlike any other because instead of maple alleys it had slate and since the slate was worn and grooved, you could get your ball into the groove.

The Sunday afternoon horse races on Washington Avenue, the mile straightaway, attracted thousands of spectators, but woe betide the speeder who tried to race his horses anywhere else in town. There were signs posted everywhere forbidding horsemen to drive over eight miles per hour, and there was a standing $10 fine. But it was hard to prevent any true sportsman with red blood from whipping up his horse whenever another daring driver pulled up alongside. There were frequent impromptu races up the middle of Franklin Avenue which sent pedestrians scurrying and scuttled the legal speed limit. The police were patient but often made arrests.

Winters in the “Gay ‘Nineties” were a continuous round of dances, card parties, bazaars, lectures and minstrel shows. It was easy to rent a hall. Rusby’s Hall, above the Rusby grocery store and the meeting place of Granite Chapter, the Order of the United Friends, was a popular place for parties.

Connolly’s Hall, in Highfield Lane at Passaic Avenue, was more of a political gathering place, chiefly because Connolly himself was a Democratic spellbinder and rallied his partisans there. It was in Connolly’s Hall that his friends tried to split Nutley from Franklin about 1894, in a rump convention. A bunch of Franklinites from across the Third River, along Vreeland Avenue, heard of the maneuver and marched across the river to the hall and spiked the secession.

“Franklin is and must stay one town” was the Republicans’ war cry.

Town Hall, once it was restored after the fire of 1904, could be rented for bazaars and dances. The third floor was used for that purpose, where the Town Commission now has its chambers. When it was new in 1894, the third floor auditorium of Park School was a town showplace. The school board frowned on dancing in its building, but did rent the auditorium for lectures and every year the town went there to vote.

Since the Revolutionary War, however, Old Military Hall was the town’s favorite meeting place. It had upstairs and downstairs meeting rooms; early classes were held there when it was the town’s only school. It was the setting for the town elections before Park School was built. Recruits drilled there for every war since the Revolution.

In turn its lower floor was a lodge room, a dance hall, a vaudeville theatre, a roller-skating rink and the setting of hundreds of bazaars before Ed Schneider took over, at the close of the “Gay ‘Nineties” and put a big bar in the huge room. There always had been a tavern in connection, but it was quietly secluded in a far wing and in those days, a half-century ago, the hall was a constant source of amusement for a town which was not hard to please and

had an easy smile.