

Why Philmont was Once Called Claverack Falls

ONE OF THE NATURAL WONDERS OF COLUMBIA COUNTY IS HIDDEN BEHIND THE VILLAGE OF PHILMONT.

Driving out of Philmont up Summit Street past the reservoir, I've occasionally stopped to peek over the bridge beside the magnificent old red brick mill there and marveled at the deep ravine through which such a torrent of water is released into the Agawamuck Creek. And, likewise, I'm always captivated by the tranquil course of the Agawamuck as it meanders parallel to Route 217 in Mellenville before it joins the Claverack Creek. But I had no idea what lay between these two features until I was taken deep into the woods there by Thomas Tommi, a Philmont resident and master cabinetmaker,

negotiated our way alongside the canal, whose channel grew deeper and deeper as we climbed steeper and steeper inclines.

Breaking out of the dense woodland into the blazing sunlight of a crisp May morning, the forest undergrowth gave way to complex configurations of massive hump-like rocks and boulders whose crannies nurse clumps of hemlock and black locust that we often grasped to maintain our foothold. Still, Thomas cautioned me to proceed carefully, since I – much too confident of my rock-climbing prowess – had come on this hike far from prepared with proper

Who knows?) of horizontally stacked slate tiles. Thomas told me it was possible to walk across the dam and get an even more impressive view

first dip of the season.

Recently, the Columbia County Land Conservancy purchased forty-seven acres surrounding High



Thomas Tommi



originally from Quebec, whose workshop (Vita Nova Woodworking) occupies another, smaller but equally splendid 19th century mill at the end of Canal Street.

Canal Street, Thomas explained as we set out, is so named because of the man-made canal that courses within a narrow cut through the slate bedrock of the nearby forest, to feed a pond that originally generated propulsion for the mill. By means of improvised plank bridges, we

footwear. I saw what Thomas meant when we reached the edge of the rocks, unprotected by guard rails, and peered over a sheer drop of several hundred feet, which finally revealed the entire panorama of the hidden course of the Agawamuck Creek known as High Falls.

To the left, the water originating at the reservoir temporarily collects in a tranquil pool created by a forty-foot high dam, a minor engineering wonder (18th century? 19th century?

of the ravine, but I declined. Still, I looked out across a vista that one would expect to witness only in, say, Washington State, or even the Dordogne Valley in France – a sublimely lush cluster of broad peaks and valleys, sliced by a pair of bare, almost vertical cliffs nestling an amazing succession of gullies and spectacular cascades terminating in a pristine lagoon far, far below to our right, where we could just spot a couple of children taking perhaps their

Falls, designated it a Public Conservation Area, and is planning to open a trail this fall to provide safe access to this gorgeous setting. That will be a boon. In the meantime, should you decide to explore it, be warned. Please don't go alone, and certainly not in the evening. Wear sturdy boots. Proceed with care. And by no means allow children to venture there except under close control, if at all. Better still, wait for the trail. — *John Isaacs*

