

History Preserver – Elsie Winterberger

For Elsie Winterberger, the preservation of the history for her beloved town of Forestburgh was a labor of love. Her reverence for the past originated early in her life, heavily influenced by the era of rural schools and steam locomotives. Her memory and superb recollection of these earlier times were the conduit that bridged the experiences



Elsie Winterberger

from her youth to the historical crusades that made up her later years. “I grew up in an era that is now nearing its end, and my job as historian gives me all the excuse I need to record those years in photos and words for the town,” Elsie once exclaimed. “I always say what’s on my mind and I don’t mince words. I’ve lived here all my life, I know the history of this town inside out. I even know town history they hoped I didn’t know.” Known for being persistence and with unrelenting energy, Elsie’s spirited advocacy of history helped raise greater awareness for historic preservation throughout the town and county.

Elsie’s ancestors were amongst the earliest settlers of the northern portion of Sullivan County; Revolutionary War veterans carving out clearings into the upper Beaverkill Valley wilderness. Their survival depended on subsistence farming, lumber rafted down the river to urban markets along the Delaware River and hauling hemlock bark to the large tanneries that developed in the region. When, during the middle to latter part of the nineteenth century, the Beaverkill section became a popular destination for visiting sportsmen, many of the farmers expanded their houses to accommodate seasonal guests. The farms of Abram Butler and

Willis Butler, Elsie’s grandfather and father, located along the banks of the Beaverkill, became destinations for visiting outdoorsmen. Willis also worked as a sawyer and carpenter, but was perhaps best known as being a stone mason.

With the coming of the railroad during the latter part of the nineteenth century, making easier access to Sullivan County, portions of the county became popular with the more affluent. In the Beaverkill and Willowemoc sections, high-ranking railroad officials from the Ontario and Western Railway purchased farms and large tracts of land. Among these railroad dignitaries was Bradford Gilbert, the noted architect, who designed many of the stone and rustic railroad station houses along the O&W. His purchases along the Beaverkill included portions of the Butler place.

Perhaps even more popular, were the wild piney woods of Forestburgh. Here, wealthy bankers, lawyers and playwrights from New York and New Jersey purchased large tracts of land, forming a private game preserve for the exclusive clientele that became known as the Hartwood Club. In 1898, one of the club members commissioned Gilbert to design a stone cottage, who in turn persuaded his Beaverkill neighbor Willis Butler to be the builder. Leaving the Beaverkill Valley with his family, Willis then built his own residence in 1899, also of stone, and continued serving the Hartwood members as the club’s superintendent for nearly the next fifty years.

Elsie Winterberger was born at Hartwood in 1910. With her mother serving as railroad agent for the O&W at Hartwood Station, young Elsie assisted in the station’s daily chores. Elsie’s personal recollection of, and reverence for, local Forestburgh history seemed to have begun while being witness to the scenes being played out by the daily railroad traffic. Schooled during the era of one-room rural schools, she attended the small rural school of District Five, Hartwood, where Elsie developed a deep admiration for her teachers. Those years at the one-room school were a happy experience for Elsie and the impression made upon her by her teachers eventually led her to seek a career in primary education herself. Upon graduating the normal school at Cortland, New York, in 1932, she began her career as an educator teaching at rural

schools in the Delhi and Port Jervis areas . In 1946, she was welcomed to the faculty at Monticello schools where she remained until the end of her career. As a teacher, Elsie has been remembered for being an old-fashioned teacher who gave up much of her time, energy and talents to her students. During the years at the Monticello school, Elsie was noted for organizing many school stage productions, spending many long hours after the regular school day in making scenery, designing costumes and supervising rehearsals. As an educator, she was a union activist, representing the local and area chapters of the National Education Association. She continued with this energy well beyond her retirement from teaching, the driving force to her second career as historian for the Town of Forestburg, or rather Forestburgh.

Known as a strong-minded individual within the Forestburgh community, local citizens witnessed Elsie's persistence first hand with her crusade in correcting decades of misspelling the town's name. When the Forestburgh firehouse was erected in 1964, the huge, red plastic letters representing the town's name situated on top of the building was minus the letter "H." Organized as a separate town in 1837, the final letter "H" had always been prominently placed at the end of the town's name, depicting the Celtic heritage of the first settlers who pioneered the area. Somehow, through the years, carelessness led to the "H" being dropped from the town's name. Having studied early town records, Elsie discovered the spelling discrepancy. What happened next is best described by Elsie herself;

"I went to the town board and told them I wanted 10 minutes from every meeting which other historians praised as a real accomplishment. And I kept talking about it and talking about it. It got to be kind of a joke, you know. But between all my nagging and the support from all the Irish in the town, we got it officially put back."

During the town's celebration of the nation's bi-centennial in 1976, the Forestburgh Fire Department added the final "H" to the sign.

Later, when the big, red plastic lettering was replaced on the firehouse with new aluminum letters, the large "H" was presented to Elsie, which she proudly kept, a reminder of the role of activism in historic preservation.



Elsie Winterberger was appointed Forestburgh Town Historian in 1973, serving as Forestburgh's chief historian for the next eighteen years until her passing in early January of 1992. Throughout these years she spearheaded many projects, including the placement of historical roadside markers and restoring a post office in the township. Her campaigns to preserve Forestburgh's historical heritage often went to higher levels. With the proposed upgrade of the main thoroughfare through Forestburgh, New York State Route 42, Elsie battled with the state highway officials over the threatened destruction of stone walls along the new roadway.

"Everybody went to the public hearing. All the people who live along the highway were there bitching about the state taking away their land. I had done my research and found that the stone wall dated back to 1807, back when this area was still part of Ulster County. "When it got to be my turn I told them I was the town historian and explained all about the walls. I told them that if they insisted on coming after those walls, they'd fine me there sitting on them. And they did several times until they quit trying."

When an early nineteenth century log cabin was discovered imbedded within a residence during a renovation project, Elsie oversaw the project of dismantling and reconstructing the cabin at a new location near the town hall. Few obstacles would deter her. Only two weeks after she suffered a broken hip, Elsie led an historical tour along the old railroad line between Hartwood and Oakland Valley.

But perhaps most of all, Elsie may be best known for her weekly columns published in the Sullivan County Democrat. Her "Forestburgh Lore" articles chronicled all aspects of the history of her town, from railroads to roadways, from Gilman's to St. Joseph's,

from schools to churches, from pioneer families to business entrepreneurs and all topics in between. Her writing style often became intimate, with personal reminiscences and poetry reflecting her long life at Forestburgh. She used her column to help promote her many crusades. During the drive in restoring the Forestburgh log cabin, the "Forestburgh Lore" column helped locate vintage hardware and other supplies for the cabin. She also organized raffles, and a commemorative quilt - which she stitched herself in the New England pine tree pattern - raised about \$2,500 for the project.

The "Lore" stories sometimes revealed long forgotten old local place-names as well as little known episodes of Forestburgh history.

"A fun part of the railroad service was the transportation of the circus to perform in Monticello in early days. This must have been thrilling for Forestburgh "kids" fortunate enough to be at one of the local stations as the circus train passed! One such train suffered a disaster between Gillman's Station and Barnum's Crossing. A car containing elephants caught fire and burned. The huge animals had to be buried near where they met their fate. Their bones may be discovered someday and one may wonder when elephants existed in Forestburgh. The old discontinued railroad bed in that area is rapidly being taken over with forest growth. Generations to come may never realize a railroad once existed on that very spot where the bones may be discovered..."

The Town of Forestburgh, and truly all of Sullivan County, has been indeed fortunate with the gain of the historical contributions from Elsie Winterberger. Over the years, only a handful of Sullivan County historians who, during their era, have left such a long-lasting legacy in preserving Sullivan County history. Elsie unselfishly shared, through determined and unwavering efforts, her experiences and knowledge for all future generations to learn from, study and enjoy. The Sullivan County Historical Society proudly recognize Elsie's unsurpassed devotion and dedication in the preservation of Forestburgh's and Sullivan County's heritage.

