

Life in Castanea

By DAVID KAGAN Sun-Gazette Correspondent

POSTED: March 2, 2008

CASTANEA — Just over Bald Eagle Creek, on its south side across from the city of Lock Haven, is a Clinton County village named after a tree. Castanea is Latin for chestnut, such trees growing "in abundance near the village" in the late 1800s, according to historian John Blair Linn. The village had its beginning in 1871, when it was laid out by Jacob Brown and Peter W. Keller, who had bought the farm of Joseph Hamberger, near Harvey's Gap. Brown and Keller soon began selling lots, and the community flourished. In 1877, the settlement became part of a new township, also given the name of Castanea, carved out of old Dunnstable Township. That division came about due to the vociferous complaints of a large number of Dunnstable Township's inhabitants, who had considered themselves greatly inconvenienced by the "great length and ill-shaped size" (Linn) of the old township.

Even before the residential dwellings sprouted up, the area had been the location of an industry. Since at least 1865, the American Tea Factory operated on the southern bank of Bald Eagle Creek. Reportedly, the tea plants grew naturally in large quantity in the area. Workers went out and gathered the leaves in baskets. Mysteriously, one year the plants "disappeared," and the tea factory closed. By the early 1880s another industry gave Castanea a second bit of fame. Charles P. Framble operated "an extensive brewery in a two-story frame building erected in 1868" (Linn). According to historian J. Milton Furey, by 1892 that brewery was in the hands of Ferdinand Lucas, and the beverage was now "the celebrated Castanea beer." Yet a third industry in the township, the L. H. Wood and Pulp Manufactory, provided more work for the village's residents. It was conducted by Dickson and Armstrong.

Rather a bustling community by the early 1890s, Castanea had about 30 dwellings, a large schoolhouse (in session six months a year), a post office (although it was later discontinued), a bakery and confectionary store combined, several groceries and various other small shops. A "costly and substantial iron bridge" (Furey) over Bald Eagle Creek, erected in 1892 by the King Bridge Co., connected Castanea to Lock Haven. Furey believed that, as a result of this link, "the town is likely to increase in size and population." The Beech Creek Railroad — with its line through Castanea and its freight station, ticket and telegraph office in the village — provided another assurance of the community's survival into the 20th century. Of the quality of life in the village, Furey wrote, "The place is pleasantly located, healthy and attractive." Linn supported this, stating, "Castanea offers pleasant and cheap homes for mechanics and others who prefer to live outside the city (Lock Haven) limits. The place presents quite a town-like appearance." Yet another industry of the past was the Castanea Brick Works. Clay mining on Bald Eagle Mountain supported that enterprise.

Of 20th-century life, the Clinton County Commissioners, in their 1942 WPA Pennsylvania Writers' project book, "A Picture of Clinton County," noted about Castanea Township, "The soil is fertile and the township prosperous and thickly settled, having a population greater than some townships several times its size."

An important 20th-century employer was the Crismund Brothers' slaughterhouse. One of the employees there was lifelong Castanea resident Carmen Masorti. After he retired, he started his own business, the Meat Grinder, and since 1985 his grocery store has served the community. Masorti spoke of the village: "I love it. It's just a nice little community. We all get along good. We have a nice firehouse. My family's here." Carmen's two brothers, also past employees at the slaughterhouse, run businesses today in Castanea, too. Richard owns Masorti's Garage, and Robert has a woodshop. Three other businesses exist in 21st-century Castanea. Jacobs Masonry has been around since 1923. WSP Chemicals and Technology has a plant on the west side. And the newest establishment, the Train Station Restaurant, at the southeast corner of Logan and Brown, has quickly become a favorite meeting place of locals.

Today's Castaneans are proud of their fire company and its history. Begun in 1923, Castanea Fire Co. No. 1 (station three) bought its first uniforms from Renovo's West Branch Hose Co. In 1949, it purchased its first fire truck. And the "new" concrete span over Bald Eagle Creek is named the Castanea Firemen's Memorial Bridge. Two houses of worship tend to the religious needs of residents. Big Woods Bible Church (Baptist) is located in the village's large, old, brick schoolhouse at the southwest corner of Logan and Brown streets. The village post office occupies space in that building also.

At the northwest corner of Brown Street and McElhattan Avenue is the Castanea United Methodist Church. A plaque inside notes that John Ingram was the organizer of the first Sunday School in Castanea in 1874. In his second year, Pastor Fred J. Fields is pleased to be ministering at such an active church in the twilight of his career. A congregation that was only 34 in 2000 has grown to more than 140 in 2008. An after-school program on Mondays, started by church member Dorothy Shaffer a few years ago, provides kids with homework assistance and snacks. It now is run by Kimberly Conway.

Castanea's old train depot, at the intersection of Caroline and Logan, houses the elaborate model train layout of the Clinton County Railroad Club, which was established in 1980. In front of the building is the old stone mile marker, "JS 11," which informed passengers that Jersey Shore only was 11 miles east.

Many of the homes in Castanea are on the hillsides east and west of the main road across the bridge into the village, these homes also south of Brown Street and reaching up to the base of Bald Eagle Mountain. A trailer park is at the east end of the community, off the road leading to the village of McElhattan.

The heydays of tea, beer and chestnuts in Castanea may be over, but life goes on in this "census-designated place" that is home to more than 1,000 souls. And, once a year of late, on a day in late September, nuts of a sort still do fill the village's main streets, as hundreds of participants in the 24-mile hike-race called the megatransect roar through on their way to their ascent of Bald Eagle Mountain, and then whimper back through near the end of that most grueling event.

The Williamsport Sun-Gazette

252 W. Fourth Street,
Williamsport, PA 17701
Phone 570-326-1551

© 2008 . All rights reserved.