CHICHESTER

Reginald Bennett

In the winter of 1863 a man came west by easy stages from the Hudson river to the foothills of the Catskills. The traveler, Frank Chichester, was seeking a suitable site for a sawmill and chair factory. His father, Samuel, was the contractor who built the famous Catskill Mountain House in 1823, and later in 1835 had operated a chair factory in the mountains. In 1844 the family had moved to Poughkeepsie where a new factory was started, with warehouses in New York City.

From the foothills, Frank went on foot up the steep, winding, precarious trail that was called a road, and then descended into the valleys that hide the headwaters of the Schoharie Creek. From there he crossed over and entered the Stony Clove Notch, which even today is a wild, harsh place, holding silent dangers.

Frank waded and fought his way up the Notch. In the winter of 1863 the trail was covered with snow, deeply drifted, and he was nearly exausted by the time he hit the old tan bark road which he followed to a small village crowded between high hills. He spent the night at a friendly farmhouse and the next day came down into a valley he liked.

He had come into another county and into the Town of Shandaken where the business of tanning bark was brisk and extensive. There was only one house in the valley, a log cabin owned by a veteran bark peeler. Frank stayed with him, ate and slept there for several days while he cruised the scattered hardwood forests. He discovered that the land, minus its hemlocks, could be purchased for fifty cents an acre or less. There was enough hardwood for his purpose and the hurrying mountain stream was ideal for power.

Frank returned to Poughkeepsie and he, his brother Lemuel A. and their uncle, Henry L. Chichester, bought the valley, which they named Chichester. They built a chair factory, ran it by water power for a few years, then changed to steam. Employees were brought in from the city. An eight room house was built for the Chichesters and two houses for the plant foremen. The workmen slept in the factory and had meals at Mrs. Frank Chichester's.

In spite of transportation difficulties, the factory prospered. The proprietors invented a rocking cradle, patented it, and manufactured thousands which readily sold. They hired more men, built more houses, added to the factory, but

apparently over-reached themselves financially. In 1875 Frank sold his share of the business to Lemuel and went west. Soon after the departure of Frank, the Company failed. However, S. D. Coykendall, a high official of the Ulster and Delaware Railroad, gave financial aid and the making of chairs was resumed.

Caning chairs was a way of making money in spare time. The women and children did caning at every opportunity. If a neighbor stopped in for an afternoon's visit she was certain to bring two or three chair seats with her to cane. Often during the winter evenings the entire family would be busy at such piece work. Since the Company paid five to ten cents a chair, an expert caner could make ten or fifteen cents an hour.

When Lemuel Chichester's business was at its peak, he employed about 300 men, women and boys. The wage scale ranged from three to twelve and a half cents an hour, the work week being sixty hours. The employees were not often paid money, as a form of scrip was used giving them the entitled amount in credit at the company store.

The factory building had grown until it was nearly 500 feet long, and its output was as high as 3000 cane and wood seat chairs and 1000 rocking cradles a week.

In 1881 S. D. Coykendall was inspired to build ten miles of narrow gauge track from Phoenicia through Chichester and Stony Clove Notch. The railroads were of inestimable importance to the factory.

L. A. Chichester was a Spiritualist and believed without any wavering of mind whatever, that he was destined to successfully continue his woodworking plant until he chose to retire, and further, that he would most surely operate a chair factory in the life beyond. Probably he was mistaken in both respects, at least in the first, for he failed again in 1884.

The reason given for the Company's bankruptcy was the failure of the engine and serious trouble with some of the machines, but old timers in Chichester maintain that external factors were mainly the cause of both failures. They claim he was an intelligent and kind person, and an excellent business man, but a man with expensive personal habits.

When this second failure came, ending eight years of comparative prosperity, many of the 300 employees were stranded, with worthless scrip, and it was several years before the factory operated again under new management.

THOSE WERE THE DAYS

Bess Johnston

William O. Schwarzwaelder bought the bankrupt Chichester properties and began to manufacture fine office furniture.

We lived in one of the company houses which had few conveniences as we think of them today. But, if we were "deprived", we were not aware of it. In the early years, water was carried by pail from the fountain in the village square. The "privy" and woodshed were in the back yard and we had chickens and a garden.

In the parlor was an ornate iron stove which was put up in the fall and dismantled in the spring and kept black and shiny with stove polish. The cellar, where potatoes, apples, and canned things were stored, had a dirt floor. A washtub in the kitchen served for Saturday night baths as well as Monday's washing. Clothes were scrubbed with soap and water on a washboard, boiled in a copper boiler on the kitchen range, then put through a hand-wringer and hung outdoors to dry. If Mr. Schwarzwaelder happened to ride by late in the afternoon and wash was still on the line, he would stop and tell the housewife to take it in. He was particular about the appearance of the village.

Oil lamps furnished the light and I'll never forget the Christmas Eve when my mother was stricken with a ruptured appendix. Our family doctor was summoned from Saugerties. He

brought his brother from Kingston who was also a doctor. Mother was placed on the kitchen table and while father held the oil lamp, one doctor administered ether and the other performed the operation.

The Schwarzwaelders lived in the Big House. Their clothes were bought in New York and Mr. Schwarzwaelder sported a long cape in which he was a most impressive figure. He owned fast stepping horses, shiny carriages and a two seater sleigh with red plumes on each side of the dash. His polished fire engine was housed behind the factory in its own building, and his children went to private schools.

When I was sixteen, I worked as a maid in the Big House. There was fine wood paneling throughout and in one room the woodwork was of bird's-eye maple. Each bedroom had its own full length mirror and spacious wardrobe with dust-catching carved doors. There were parquet floors and oriental rugs which I had to sweep with a broom. There were two bathrooms with "hoppers" and tubs.

Being the maid, I served the meals, washed the dishes in the butler's pantry, made beds, dusted, washed windows and when the cook was engaged with the laundress doing the family wash in the basement, I was expected to wash the kitchen utensils. I still remember the awful job of scouring the double boiler in which the oatmeal for breakfast had been cooking all night on the wood stove.

Mr. Schwarzwaelder took great pride in the village. He developed a park for the enjoyment of the people and called it TISKILWA, an Indian name meaning "valley of peace and beauty". It was laid out in paths and flower beds, bridges and summer houses where one could sit and enjoy the view. The gardener furnished the plants from the greenhouse and TISKILWA was spelled out, at the entrance, in variegated coleus. Villagers were welcome to the extra plants just for the asking and prizes were awarded for the prettiest gardens.

For some years after their youngest child was born, Mrs. Schwarzwaelder was very ill. Her sister came to keep house and after his wife's death, Mr. Schwarzwaelder married his sister-in-law. Returning from a world cruise, they went west for his health, leaving the business to be run by his sons. In 1924 he planned to spend the summer in Chichester but before he could do so, he died and, though few suspected it at the time, the village died also.

As often happens, the sons' lack of interest, poor management plus the times, caused the factory to decline and go into bankruptcy. The houses and buildings were sold at auction for just a few hundred dollars each to the tenants who wanted to stay. Others left to seek their fortunes elsewhere.