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The Last Resort

BY JOHN THORN

Fleischmanns, New York, is an appealingly forlorn spot thirty minutes from Woodstock and fifty, if not one hundred years, from the rest of America. Its old-fashioned Catskills summers—fresh air, cool mountain nights, porch sitting, ball playing, swimming, and dozing off in lawn chairs—have been swallowed up in this country's black hole of visceral diversion, cheap transport, and festive bio-domes in steamy locales uninhabitable before the advent of contrived cold air. Here the eerie remains of grand hotels and the burnt offerings of desperate arsons form the spur to memory. These attest to a once vibrant Fleischmanns, whose permanent population circa 1940 reached 500 (in the last census it was 351); but by the Fourth of July back then, it was said there would be 10,000 folks in town. While recent summers have brought no trainloads of tourists, there is something romantic about this remote village—the echo of the way we once played and relaxed and were.

I loved Fleischmanns when I was five, vacationing at a local bungalow colony with my extended family, and I loved it two decades later, when it was time for me to leave New York City with my wife and four-month-old son and look for a new home in the old Catskills. The swarms of tourists were gone, but I figured the mountains were still there, so was the air, and one could make out pretty well on a small purse. While I live there no longer, the place still tugs at me whenever I visit. For years the onset of spring—which in our household meant the chance to play, watch, and chatter about baseball—was not assured until my sons and I drove up to Fleischmanns (gloves, bat, and ball in the trunk) to cavort on the baseball field along Wagner Avenue, where we knew Honus Wagner, Ty Cobb, and other major leaguers had once played, either as autumn hunting guests of the Fleischmann brothers or as ringers brought in for the semipro team they sponsored.

Julius and Max Fleischmann came to this community to escape the heat of Cincinnati

summers around 1883, when it was called Griffin Corners. The village was renamed Fleischmanns in 1913, following their donation of the ball field. Their father, Charles, who had founded the Fleischmanns distilling and yeast companies, had just bought land west of the village near the Ulster and Delaware railroad station. The Fleischmanns and their friends soon built summer homes that were the stuff of fantasy, with porches, turrets, terraces, and costly interior trappings; the Fleischmanns' grounds included a deer park, a riding stable, a heated pool filled with spring water, and a trout pond. Jewish families—not welcome in many respectable hotels of the region, despite their wealth and stature in New York City—flocked to the new hotels that also sprang up in the region. Entertainment was provided by Broadway and operatic stars of the first rank, furloughed for part of the summer because of the city's heat. Some, like Julia Marlowe and Amelita Galli-Curci, built fine summer homes in the hills.

Julius joined his father's firm out of prep school and by age twenty-eight, in 1900, he was elected mayor of Cincinnati; his popularity won him a second term as well. He and older brother Max became principal owners of the Cincinnati Reds in 1902. But the Fleischmann brothers, for all their success back in Cincinnati, were active sportsmen first and foremost—polo players, yachtsmen, hunters, auto racers, and would-be baseball players. In the summer, away from their home town, they had no way to see or play their beloved game. So, anticipating the movie *Field of Dreams*, they built a fine ball grounds that could accommodate 5,000 spectators, and started up a team. As if it were just another trout pond, they stocked the Mountain Athletic Club—also known as the Mountain Tourists—with the best players they could buy, generally professionals or high-caliber collegians willing to play under pseudonyms that would safeguard their amateur eligibility. The big names played alongside Max Fleischmann, who did the best he could in the outfield.

On August 10, 1903, the Mountain Tourists played at home against the famous Cuban Giants, who featured Bill Galloway at second base. He was the last African American to play in an integrated organized baseball league until Jackie Robinson. The Cubans were held to one run by the Fleischmanns' pitcher, Goldberg. Jews summered in Fleischmanns because they were excluded from other, tonier resorts; blacks had to play on teams of their own because they were excluded from both the major and minor leagues. This was an oddly emblematic contest.

Although the Catskills region may have exhibited more tolerance than other locales, its appetite for diversity was no greater. There were the Jewish Catskills (and among these, pockets devoted to specific national clientele: Romanian Jews, Hungarian, Austrian, German, and so on). There were Irish Catskills. There were Italian Catskills. Oh, there still are such informally designated areas, but the national pursuit of homogenization and standardization has seeped in even here, robbing them of their distinctive flavor.

A pilgrimage to the site of the Takanassee Hotel in Fleischmanns and its Olympic-sized swimming pool, scorched or torched in 1971, reveals a fantastic remnant. Two massive stone pillars along the roadside invite the pilgrim to a broad vista of parched earth, bulldozed up the hill to where the hotel once stood. Where the clearing efforts appear to have ceased, nature has begun to reclaim her ancient right of way. Walk a little into the overgrowth, past the incongruous concrete slab and there!—in the sacred wood—lies a vast reservoir, filled to the rim, with fat fish swimming lazily amid the wrecked lumber tossed in long ago. ▼

John Thorn is the author and editor of many books, including *New York 400* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2009). He lives in Saugerties, New York. Copyright © John Thorn.



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