

WESTERN NEW YORK

HERITAGE

Volume 18 Number 2

Western New York's Illustrated History Magazine

\$7.00 Summer 2015

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Natural Jewel of the Southtowns: A Brief History of Chestnut Ridge Park

By William C. Even

The year 1925 was an eventful one in the heart of the “Roaring Twenties”: Calvin Coolidge became the first U.S. President to have his inaugural address broadcast on the radio; Scotch tape was invented; F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*; and mobster Johnny Torrio turned over his Chicago gangland empire to an up-and-coming gangster named Al Capone. Closer to home, 1925 saw the establishment of the four original Erie County parks. Thus, this summer marks the 90th anniversary of the dedication of these beautiful lands to the citizens of Erie County.

Ninety years have passed but the view remains almost identical. These photos show the breathtaking view of Buffalo and Lake Erie from the Chestnut Ridge Park Casino, ca. 1925 and in 2013.
COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN AND PHIL OLSEN PHOTOGRAPH, 2013



The Erie County Park Commission was established in 1924 through an act passed by the New York State Legislature and approved by Governor Al Smith. The original bi-partisan commission consisted of six individuals: Edwin Lang Miller, Hamilton Ward, Franklin E. Bard, John J. Lenahan, Richard S. Persons and Frank M. Spitzmiller. These men were all volunteers, receiving compensation only for expenses incurred while carrying out their duties. By law, the Commission was required to present an annual report each April to the Erie County Board of Supervisors, the first of which was published in 1925. These reports contain a wealth of information, and are a valuable resource for piecing together the history and activities of the Commission over time.

The organization having been established, one of the first duties of the commissioners was to visit properties throughout the county in order to identify those sites best suited for the establishment and development of a series of county parks. To assist in the decision-making process, they considered suggestions from organizations and interested citizens. The commissioners also solicited and obtained information from other counties, both inside and outside of the State of New York. Working on the Commission during this formative period was a labor-intensive process. The second annual report clearly outlines the volume of responsibility: "The great mass of detail incident to the formation of its organization, the making of investigations, plans and surveys, and the establishment of its policies and the contingencies arising in all new undertakings required regular business meetings of the Commission on an average of once a week."

As a result of their investigation, the commissioners obtained options on 35 parcels of land in the Towns of Lancaster, Aurora, Tonawanda and East Hamburg. These towns had been selected to ensure that all Erie County residents would have a county park located within a "convenient distance." On May 5, 1925, the Commission presented recommendations to the Board of Supervisors for the purchase of these properties. That same month, the board authorized the proposed purchases and the development of the parks was underway.

From these initial recommendations would come the development of Como Lake Park, Emery Park, Ellicott Creek Park and Chestnut Ridge Park. Though each is an interesting story in and of itself, this article will focus on the creation and development of the last of these county parks.

Southeasterly from Buffalo [approximately fifteen miles south of downtown] there is a gradual rise towards the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains in Pennsylvania. The first sharp rise in this direction from the gently sloping basin which surrounds Buffalo at the foot of Lake Erie has an elevation of about 1,200 feet. It is about seven miles inland from Lake Erie. One of these ridges swings westerly to merge in the uplands on the eastern side of the Eighteen Mile Creek valley, which extends southward. Along the crest of this ridge, Erie County pioneers found many enormous chestnut trees and ever since that time this section has been known as Chestnut Ridge.

Such was the geographic description of the site chosen for the southwesternmost of these initial county parks, as it appeared in the Commission's 1939 Annual Report. The great chestnut trees that had given this locality its distinctive name were decimated by blight – a parasitic fungus introduced into North America from Asia around the turn of the 20th century, and which traveled westward from the Atlantic coast. All of the trees in the park were infected and died. Ironically, while the chestnut trees could not resist the effect of the fungus, their lumber was coveted for its resistance to rot. The standing dead chestnut trees were logged for decades afterwards and converted into rough lumber.

As originally laid out, Chestnut Ridge Park encompassed 320 acres, purchased from the Grace, Graves, Zell and Benning families. The total cost of these plots was \$24,050 – roughly \$75 per acre.

Today, Chestnut Ridge Park comprises 1,231 acres of land at the south end of the Town of Orchard Park. It is the largest of the Erie County parks, and arguably one of the largest county parks in the United States.

Among the numerous improvements to the area described in the 1926 Annual Report, the most interesting included the drilling of wells for drinking water and the building of two dams in Neuman Creek to impound water to be used “for sanitary purposes over the entire park area.” Furthermore, three and one-half miles of road were constructed to “open up the beautiful parts of the entire park.” Numerous paths were also cleared and rustic bridges built across the ravines through the woods. Some 700 trees were transplanted along the drives, and the open areas of the park were ploughed, limed and seeded. Lastly, a plot of about 12 acres was set aside for development as a general playground.



This ca. 1925 aerial view shows the area being developed for Chestnut Ridge Park. The original wooden casino is visible at upper left center. COURTESY ERIE COUNTY

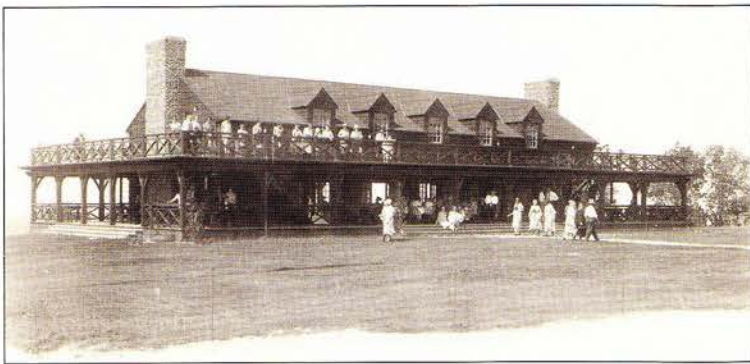
Ovens, shelters and drinking fountains were also conveniently placed throughout the park.

While Chestnut Ridge Park contains many remarkable natural features, the most impressive man-made structure is the Chestnut Ridge Park Casino. The original timber casino was built in 1925, but was destroyed by fire in 1932. It was then replaced by the current stone structure, construction of which began on June 9, 1936 and was completed in 1938. Building materials for this “new” casino included the park’s aforementioned chestnut trees, along with repurposed stones from the newly renovated streets and curbs of Buffalo, supplemented by Erie Barge Canal rip-rap. An article in *The Buffalo Times*, published on September 2, 1936, described the building of the casino by 47 employees of the Works Progress Administration, and observed that the new structure “will be five times as large as the old one.” Created as part of Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal,” the Works Progress Administration provided jobs for unemployed laborers. The federal government worked with state and local governments to complete projects, such as the Chestnut Ridge Casino, by covering the vast majority of the costs, with the balance being the responsibility of the sponsoring state or municipality.

The original Park Commission’s interest in environmental conservation was evidenced by the building of a pheasant house in 1927. This house was used to raise pheasants in cooperation with the New York State Department of Conservation, Division of Fish and Game. Newly hatched chicks were raised starting in April and then released throughout the



The original members of the Erie County Park Commission, ca. 1924. Back row (l to r): Edwin Lang Miller, Hamilton Ward and Franklin E. Bard. Front row (l to r): John J. Lenahan, Richard S. Persons and Frank M. Spitzmiller. COURTESY ERIE COUNTY HISTORIAN



The original park casino was constructed of timber in 1925, but was destroyed by fire in 1932. COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN

county about six weeks prior to the opening of pheasant hunting season in October. The pheasant house was active into the 1960s and possibly later, but has since been razed.

Winter sports have been a major draw for Chestnut Ridge since the park was created. Toboggan runs were constructed during the very early years, and have been a popular feature of the park ever since, though they were not always open for use. In 2005, safety concerns with the existing structures resulted in the county closing the runs, but the Erie County Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry reopened them five years later, after they were refurbished and declared ready for use.

In addition to the toboggan runs, for the first several years of existence the park offered a ski jump. This structure was razed in the early 1930s, however, due to numerous injuries suffered by inexperienced jumpers. It is interesting to note that the county actually employed a nurse that worked at the park. The northeast wing of the casino that housed the nurse's station in previous years has since been converted to an office for the Chestnut Ridge Conservancy.

No list of the impressive features of Chestnut Ridge Park would be complete without mention of the Eternal Flame Falls. Originally known as the "Burning Spring," this unique natural feature is located at the southernmost end of the park and is the result of natural gas seeping up from the ground below. While "eternal flames" are not uncommon, the one found in Chestnut Ridge Park is unique. Most of these burning springs remain lit due to the presence of extremely hot, ancient rocks beneath the seeping natural gas. However, the flame in Chestnut Ridge is located above rocks that are not nearly as hot, nor nearly as old. Consequently, no one is quite sure how the flame stays lit. Regardless, the Chestnut Ridge Eternal Flame is undeniably one of the most beautiful, given its idyllic location behind a waterfall in the Shale Creek Preserve.

Even after 90 years, Chestnut Ridge is still generally considered to be the jewel of the Erie County park system. But in 2003, Erie County developed a Parks Master Plan to "serve as a basis for our Parks System for the next 20 years," which enumerated what were felt to be the most pressing issues and problems within the parks at that time. Those issues cited in the section devoted to Chestnut Ridge Park fell into one or both of two major categories – deterioration due to age and lack of adequate maintenance and repair funding.

Many of the historic stone structures were in need of repair. The park was littered with old, dilapidated wooden picnic tables, and there were numerous outdated play structures that did not meet current safety or accessibility codes. In addition, the main entrances did

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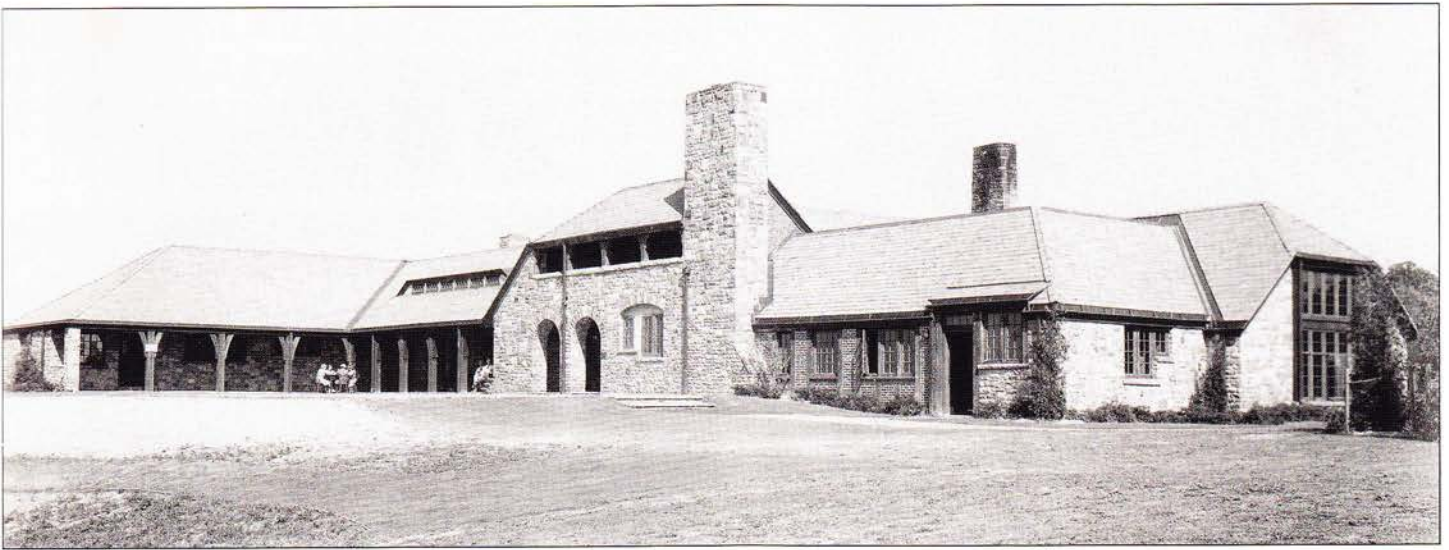
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The current casino was built by the WPA between 1936 and 1938. Building materials included dead chestnut timber harvested from the park, as well as repurposed stone from the streets of Buffalo and the New York State Barge Canal. COURTESY ERIE COUNTY HISTORIAN

not make a first impression worthy of the park as a whole, while adequate directional and interpretive signage was lacking. In the face of this general deterioration, funding to the parks system had not kept up with the rising costs of labor and maintenance. This forced cut-backs to park staffing. Consequently, general maintenance, such as lawn mowing and repairs to structures, playgrounds, etc., was frequently delayed or not performed at all. The Master Plan also referenced an "apparent underutilization of some of the park facilities," including the main casino building, concession stand, Martin Lodge and other shelters. Ultimately, it can be argued that most, if not all of the problems were the result of declining funds and resources.

Fortunately, the tide has reversed since the report was published 12 years ago. Erie County has been placing more funding emphasis on all of its parks, and significant improvements to Chestnut Ridge are noticeable. Major renovations have occurred at the casino, including a new roof, new interior lighting, new concrete sidewalks and a new patio. A beautiful flower garden, surrounded by a circular stone wall, now protects the flag pole next to the casino. The Commissioners cabin has been reopened to the public, the access road has been paved and public use of the secluded lake has been reinstituted. The lower 12 tennis courts have been resurfaced and painted, and new hardware has been installed. The casino is now used for voting, which made the area

eligible for a HAVA (Help America Vote Act) grant. This federal matching grant contributed 26% of the \$587,000 spent on redesigning and improving lighting in the parking lot. It also improved traffic flow and access to the casino. In addition, a number of the dilapidated structures within the park have been removed or restored. Recent county budgets have also included requests for additional park staff.

Not all assistance came from governmental agencies, however. In 2011, the Boy Scouts' Legacy 11 initiative helped to build a spectacular fishing pier on the lake, which includes access for the disabled. The scouts also undertook numerous painting and repair projects throughout the park.



Original winter amenities in the park included this ski jump. The jump was closed in the 1930s, however, due to numerous injuries suffered by inexperienced jumpers. COURTESY ERIE COUNTY HISTORIAN



Eternal Flame Falls is one of the most spectacular attractions within Chestnut Ridge Park.
WILLIAM C. EVEN PHOTOGRAPH, 2012

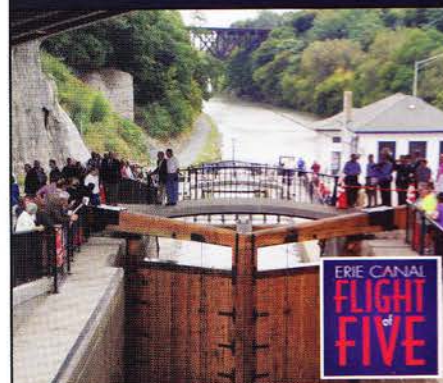
The Chestnut Ridge Conservancy

In 2010, the Chestnut Ridge Conservancy (CRC) was formed to support the restoration and preservation of the rich natural, recreational and historic resources that comprise Chestnut Ridge Park. The founders established a not-for-profit organization that works closely with Erie County and is dedicated to:

- Identifying projects that will help restore the park to its original beauty.
- Raising awareness for these projects in the Western New York community.
- Raising funds to supplement those provided by the county budget and allow the Conservancy to maintain a minimal operating budget.

The CRC enjoys a cordial and mutually beneficial relationship with the Erie County Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry, working closely with the Commissioner of Parks (who holds a voting seat on the Conservancy board) and the rest of the department's staff. The Conservancy's 501(c)(3) status makes it possible for individuals, corporations and foundations to make tax-deductible contributions that can be used for improvements within the park. This status also makes the CRC eligible to apply for various grants that would not otherwise be available to assist a government agency like the parks department. Revenue generated by the Conservancy through memberships,

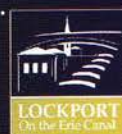
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CONI MINNICI, Chestnut Trompe, 8" x 10", acrylic

THE RIDGE

Group exhibition to benefit the Chestnut Ridge Conservancy

ARTISTS' OPENING RECEPTION:

Saturday, May 30, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

EXHIBITION: May 30 - July 18, 2015

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The refurbished interior of the historic casino illustrates some of the significant improvements that have been made to the park's facilities in recent years.

COURTESY WESTERN NEW YORK SOUTHTOWNS SCENIC BYWAY

donations, sponsorships, grants and fundraisers remains under its control. While the Master Plan provides direction and the parks department has final approval, the CRC suggests projects and determines which of those it will undertake.

Since its inception, the Conservancy has installed pet waste collection stations throughout the park, donated benches and multi-purpose bicycle/sled racks, provided financial support for the Boy Scouts' Legacy 11 project, planted chestnut trees,

purchased wind screens for the tennis courts and installed mailboxes that hold park maps for public use. The largest and most ambitious project tackled to date is the restoration of the five iconic murals inside of the casino. After nearly two years and \$40,000, the murals painted in 1948 by local artist, Bernard C. Feldman, have been cleaned and restored by Eileen Sullivan, of Aurora Art Restoration in East Aurora. Sixty-five years' worth of grease, dirt and fireplace smoke had accumulated on the paintings. Before and after pictures reveal an amazing transformation as the cleaning process progressed.

In addition to restoration and improvement projects, the Conservancy holds various events throughout the year that serve to raise money to fund projects, as well as increase public awareness of the park. Past events have included a casino Halloween costume party, a casino beach party and three very successful annual gala events held at the Orchard Park Country Club. In 2011, the CRC began offering free outdoor



Restoration of the casino's historic murals has been one of the most ambitious projects of the Chestnut Ridge Conservancy to date. These images show one of the murals before cleaning and (inset) during the restoration process, showing the difference made by the process.

WILLIAM C. EVEN PHOTOGRAPHS, 2013





A "paint out" was sponsored by the CRC in September 2014. Among the works of art created as a part of this unique event was "Withdrawn Oak" by Fran Noonan. Works created during the event were part of an exhibit at Meibohm Fine Arts from May-July 2015.

FRAN NOONAN "WITHDRAWN OAK" 2014, OIL ON BOARD 9X15". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

movies on the sledding hill near the casino. As families wait for nightfall on their blankets and lawn chairs, they are treated to beautiful vistas and stunning sunsets on Lake Erie.

More recently, a unique and generous fundraising proposal was made by Meibohm Fine Arts in East Aurora, which offered to sponsor an art exhibit featuring paintings and photos from various local artists that used Chestnut Ridge as their inspiration. In September 2014, the Conservancy sponsored a "paint out" at the park, where the artists could select their settings and subjects and begin work. The public exhibit of their efforts began on May 30, 2015 and runs until July 18. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of the works will be donated back to the Conservancy to continue their efforts at Chestnut Ridge. The Conservancy hopes that this will be the first of many such joint efforts with local businesses and other park benefactors. The benefits from cooperative programs like this one are enjoyed by the entire community.

Much has changed at Chestnut Ridge since its opening in 1925. The park has quadrupled in size, various structures and features have come and gone, while usage of the park has fluctuated. Looking back over the past 90 years, however, one thing is clear: great strides have been made in bringing this park back from general disrepair and a lack of adequate funding. A parks-friendly administration, partnering with active and concerned citizens, can only mean great things for the future of Chestnut Ridge Park and the other parks in the county park system. With such a partnership, Western New Yorkers can look forward to sharing the beauty and majesty of Chestnut Ridge with our children, their children and many generations to come. 🌳

William C. Even is the Marketing Consultant for the Chestnut Ridge Conservancys and editor of *Ridge Times*, the Conservancy's official newsletter. He would like to express his sincere thanks to: Rob Goller, Aurora Town Historian; Doug Kohler, Erie County Historian; Cynthia Van Ness and Steve McCarville from the Buffalo History Museum; Erie County Parks Commissioner Troy Schinzel; Erie County Legislator John Mills; Grace Meibohm of Meibohm Fine Arts and Mary Simpson of the CRC for their assistance in providing research, information and direction in the completion of this article.

For more information on Chestnut Ridge Park, visit the Erie County Department of Parks Recreation and Forestry web site at www2.erie.gov/parks/. For more about the Chestnut Ridge Conservancy, including membership, projects, volunteer opportunities and a schedule of upcoming events, visit ChestnutRidgeConservancy.org.



The Chestnut Ridge Conservancy was formed to support the restoration and preservation of the rich natural, recreational, and historic resources that comprise Chestnut Ridge Park.



2015 Calendar of Events

Free Outdoor Movie — *Big Hero 6*

July 19, 8:50 pm - 11:00 pm

Chestnut Ridge Park Casino Sledding Hill, or inside the Casino if it rains

Blue Star Memorial Marker Dedication

July 29, 10:00 am

Chestnut Ridge Park Casino Flag Pole Honor Garden

Free Outdoor Movie — *Despicable Me 2*

August 21, 8:15 pm - 10:45 pm

Chestnut Ridge Park Casino Sledding Hill, or inside the Casino if it rains

Santa Land

December 12 - 13, 11:00 am - 3:00 pm

Chestnut Ridge Park Casino

*Schedule subject to change —
always check our website for details.*



Save the Date!

The 4th Annual

Chestnut Ridge Conservancy Gala

November 7, 2015

Orchard Park Country Club

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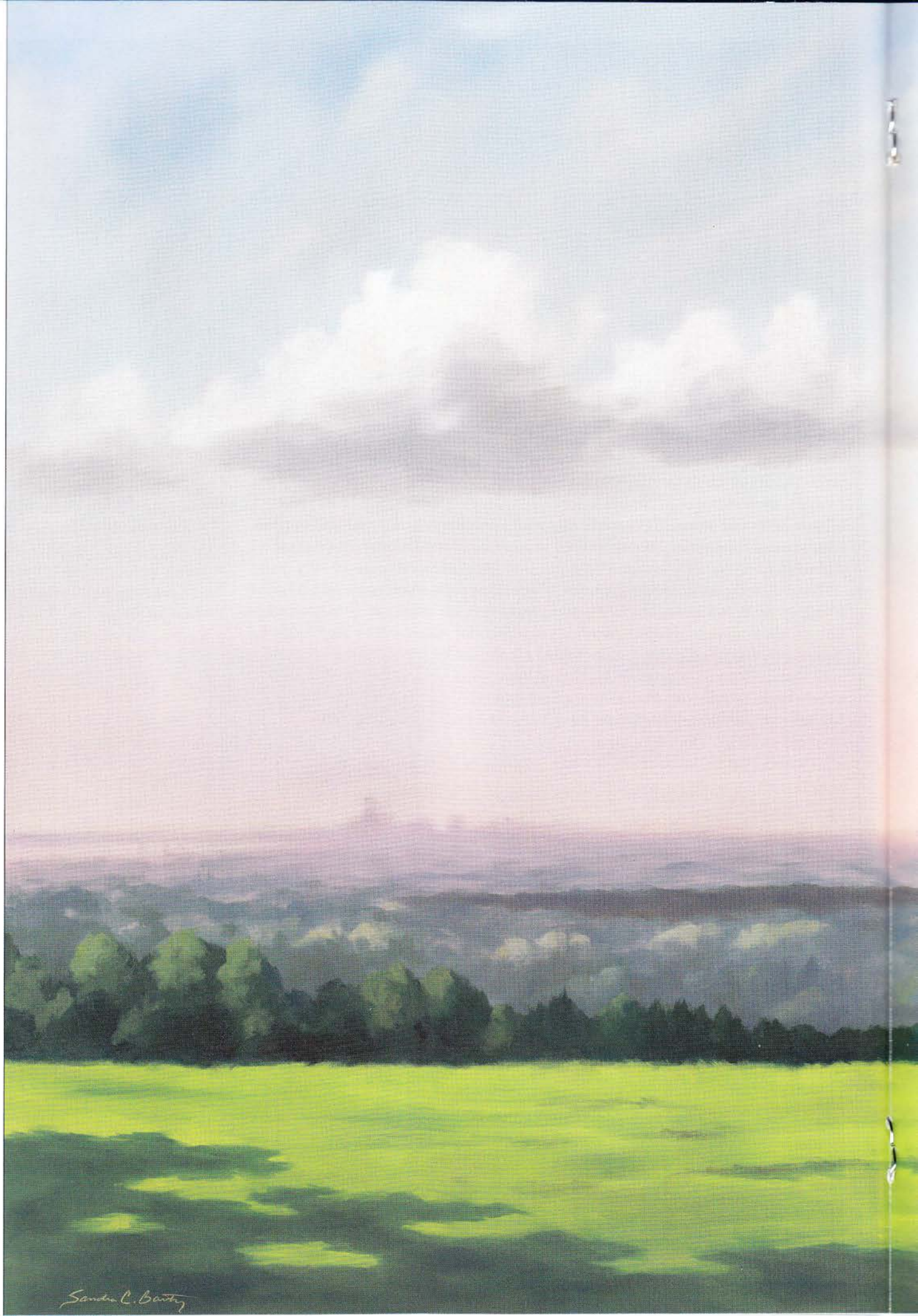
ChestnutRidgeConservancy.org



The Conservancy is indebted to the Erie County Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry for their continued support and cooperation.

The Chestnut Ridge Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) Corporation.





Sandra C. Barty



Sandra Bartz's painting, "Chestnut Ridge Swing," another product of the September 2014 "paint out," captures the spectacular view of Buffalo from the casino at Chestnut Ridge Park.
SANDRA C. BARTZ "CHESTNUT RIDGE SWING" 2014, OIL ON CANVAS 30X46. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Old Photo Album

The Early Days of Chestnut Ridge Park

As a bonus to the previous story on its development and history, we have compiled a series of additional images of Chestnut Ridge Park from the 1920s and 1930s, courtesy of the Aurora Town and Erie County Historians' offices. We hope you enjoy these scenes from nearly a century ago. Perhaps they will inspire you to visit the park this summer – and why not take your copy of *Western New York Heritage* along? See if you can find any of the spots shown in the following pages!



Visitors enjoy an afternoon in Chestnut Ridge Park.

COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



Cars park among the trees along one of the forest drives in the park.

COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



An early log lean-to provides an ideal wooded location for a picnic.

COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



A rustic bridge crosses a woodland trail.

COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



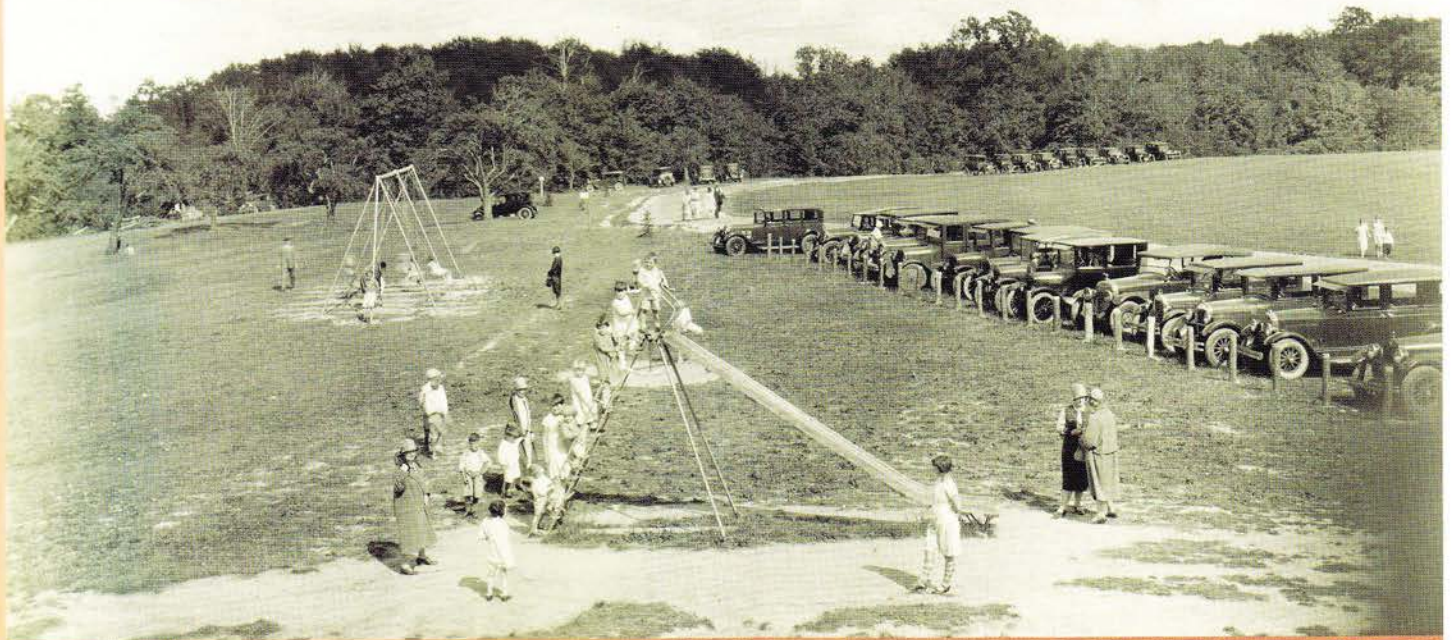
Visitors explore a portion of Shale Creek. It is interesting to note the gentleman at left center, hiking through the park in a suit. Times have changed!

COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



(above) Park visitors enjoy one of the playground areas, and (below) climb aboard some of the park's playground equipment for a humorous group photo.
COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN





Children enjoy the slide and swing set on the casino playground.

COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



Summer spectators watch a baseball game, as other players warm up around the parked cars.
COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



These buildings were used to house laborers from the Works Progress Administration, during their work at the park during the mid-1930s. COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



In addition to the second casino, the Works Progress Administration was responsible for other structures in the park, including this stone "guardrail" along one of the park roads. COURTESY ERIE COUNTY HISTORIAN



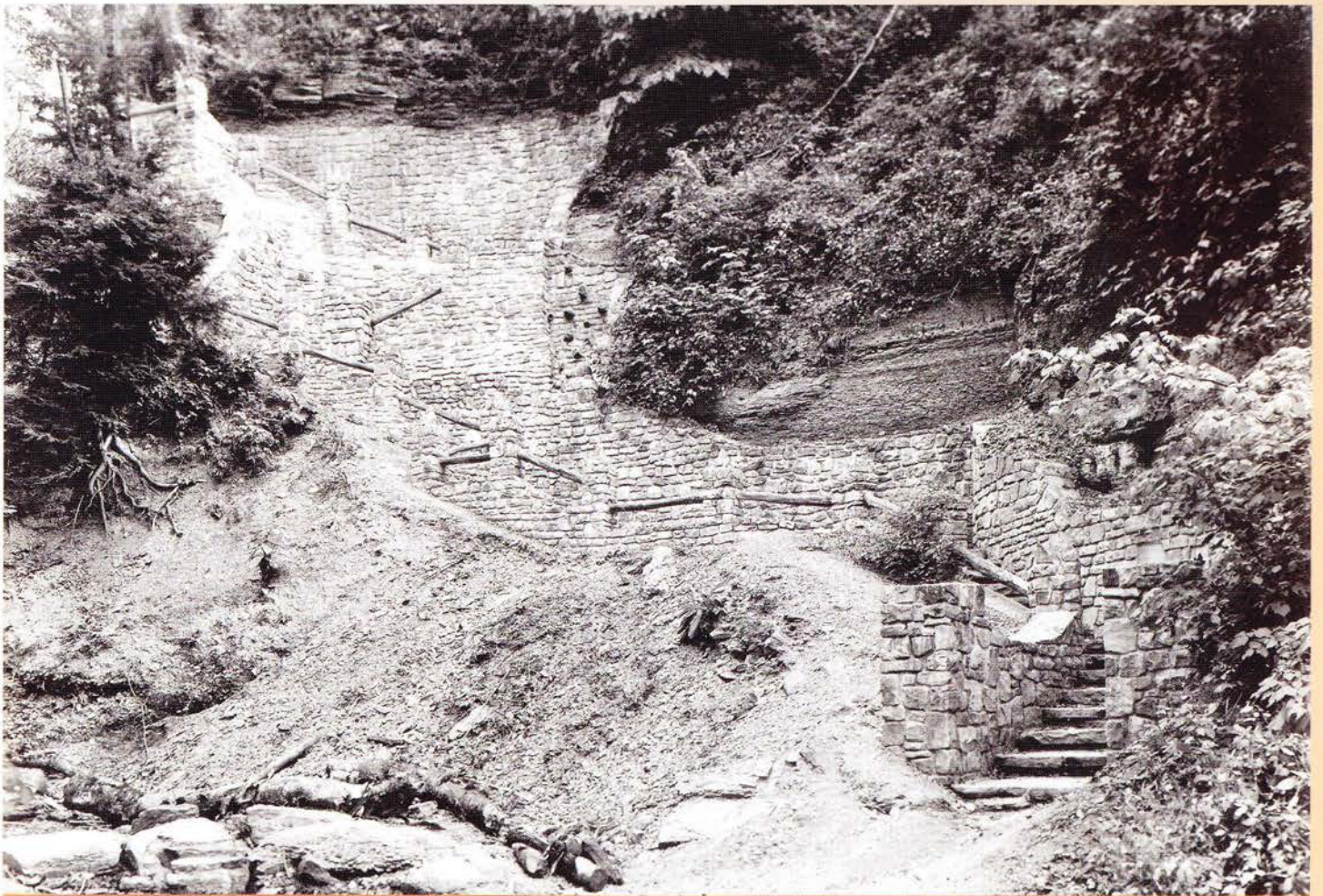
One of several rustic bridges in the park.

COURTESY ERIE COUNTY HISTORIAN



A study in summer relaxation: here a lone visitor poses on one of the park's footbridges.

COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



An impressive view of the park's "100 steps" that take visitors from the top of a gorge down to Shale Creek.
COURTESY ERIE COUNTY HISTORIAN



Cloche hats and plus fours. Adult visitors brew coffee on one of the park's many stone cooking stoves, while others young and old pause on a nearby footbridge.
COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



Unlike modern picnic areas, some of Chestnut Ridge's early shelters included cooking grills *under* the shelter roof!
COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN



A great "slice of life" image, showing park visitors gathering around one of the stone cooking stoves, attired in a variety of 1920s fashions.
COURTESY ERIE COUNTY HISTORIAN



A bucolic scene as visitors enjoy a summer picnic.

COURTESY ERIE COUNTY HISTORIAN



Toboggan runs have long been a popular winter attraction at the park.

COURTESY AURORA TOWN HISTORIAN