



Special Issue: Armenians in the Catskills

Carli Gazoorian

A few years ago, MTHS board member Alexandra Prince mentioned to me that she was interested in the Armenian history on the mountaintop. She wanted to interview my mother about her personal memories of the time spent at the Hillside Resort in Tannersville. I thought that this was a wonderful idea and have since become a fellow MTHS board member. This issue of *The Hemlock* highlights the Armenian families who spent many summers at the resorts on the mountaintop. One would never know that this community existed if they did not have a family member who was there at that time. We hope that you find this as interesting as we do.

For several summers I would host an Armenian cookout in my backyard and invite all of the local Armenian people who I knew. I would also invite some family friends, along with all of my friends who have ever mentioned to me that they appreciate Armenian food. There were about twenty of us and maybe half of us were Armenian. We would spend an afternoon celebrating summer with our families, catching up, and sharing stories. Traditional Armenian music played in the background, moving through the mountain breeze. The sounds of the oud, duduk, and dumbeg filled the charcoal smokey air. The smell of shish kebab grilling over the coals, that we placed on the ground in between bricks, would always bring my mother back to her summer memories of the days when this was a common scene on the mountaintop. We would then fill up our plates with kebabs and rice pilaf, while making sure we had left some room for charcoal roasted peppers and eggplant. It is most delicious when you eat it with fresh pita and soak up all of the spicy juices. If you are finding yourself asking, "What does this have to do with the Armenians of the mountaintop?", I am here to share with you that this has everything to do with us. Food, music, and dance are customs that we hold close to our hearts. It is through these practices that we carry our traditional roots with us. Our culture is a reflection of where we came

from, the places we have moved through, and finally our present location. The mountaintop, referred to by many Armenian diaspora as the Catskills, upstate, or simply "the mountains," is part of our story.

Last summer, Alexandra and I met with local Armenian historian, Sonia Siranoush Hairabedian. Sonia invited us over for lunch and we spoke about all of the Armenian resorts, as well as businesses on the mountaintop. I could not believe that there were so many! I went to school at Hunter-Tannersville Central. I knew of maybe three other Armenians in the entire school district while I was there and that included my brother. Where were all of these Armenians? How did they get to the mountaintop? My family left New Jersey in 1982, where I was surrounded by many Armenian friends and family, to live in my mother's summer home in Tannersville. The house was across the street from the Hye-Land Motel, (Hye means Armenian). I spent every summer on the mountaintop and I was so happy to move up to the mountains, but I never felt part of any Armenian community because many of them had moved away by the time I had moved up here. How did so many Armenians find the mountaintop and where did they all go?



A traditional shish kebab grill spread with peppers, tomatoes, and eggplants at the Gazoorian home in Elka Park.

The largest wave of Armenian immigration to America was between 1890-1925. During this time the Armenians were being massacred in the Ottoman Empire as a result of the Armenian (Hamidian) Massacres (1894-1896) and the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923). The majority of the Armenian survivors who made it to America settled in New York, Massachusetts, and California. Beginning in the late 1930's, many Armenian immigrants began to explore the Catskills during the summer months. Many Armenian immigrants expressed that the mountaintop felt like home because of the natural landscape. It reminded them of the mountainous villages that they had come from. They continued to explore the area and many families settled around Tannersville for the summer. Below are some personal memories of the mountaintop during this time.

"The pockets of Armenians in Brooklyn have always been small at best. Michael Kehyaian (also known as Cane) grew up in the Brownsville neighborhood where his family moved in 1932 after he was born in the Bronx. While thousands of Armenians lived in the borough, most lived in the Flatbush section further south from the Kehyaians. His father owned a dry cleaning shop a few neighborhoods over but his family like other Brooklyn Armenians ventured into the city to participate in community functions. He says, "I ran with the Armenians and had a great time. My father was the only one to have a car and picked up all the cousins and drove to Van Cortland Park. In the summer, we traveled to the Catskill Mountains where there were roughly 15 hotels that were owned by or catered to Armenians, including the Washington Irving, Pera Palace, O'Hara House, Shady Hill and Hotel Armenia. We would spend the summer there and you heard Armenian spoken on the streets."

-Hrag Vartanian, "Tracking Armenians in New York." Armenian General Benevolent Union. agbu.org

"The strains of the Armenian music wafting along the creek from the Tannersville Hotel (later the Kismet Club) on Main Street were a constant during those Tannersville summers in the 1950s and early 1960's". To a white Anglo-Saxon boy, in the pre-rock'n'roll years when bland songs like "How Much is That Doggie in the Window?" by Patti Page dominated the airwaves, the emotional wailing, the semitone scales, and the distinctive instrumentation of Middle Eastern music represented an exciting and foreign musical world".

-R.W. Bacon, Just a Tot in Tannersville. 2011



The Michaelian-Poonarian family at the Hillside Lodge, Tannersville, NY. 1959

"My father's cousin (Frank Zotian) owned the Hillside Lodge, so my parents spent all of their summers there from before I was born through every year of my life until around 1965. In 1966 we purchased a summer home on Hill Street in Tannersville, (across from the High School and the Hye-Land Motel). Some years we spent the entire summer in Tannersville and some years we spent a few weeks at the Jersey Shore as well. The hotel was always full of guests, with the majority from NY, NJ, and Massachusetts. Many of them were immigrants from Armenia, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran. I loved coming to Tannersville. I loved the mountains, the woods, the weather (escaping the humid Jersey summers), the air, the mountain road, the people, and the diversity that encompassed a beautiful, small mountain town. I loved the family resort scene".

-Anitra Michaelian

"The Armenians loved the mountaintop so much that they joyfully wrote a song about the winding mountain road that climbs through the Kaaterskill Clove. It is called Catskill Jampan (The Mountain Road). It is a fun, playful song about inviting a girl to go for a drive up the mountain road in a "jalopy" and asking her for a bacheeg (kiss). I invite you to listen so that you can hear it sung in true Armenian style and spirit!"

-Carli Gazoorian

Scan each QR code to hear two different versions of Catskill Jampan.



Vosebikian Band



Armenian Melodies

The "Hye" Day of Mt. Top Armenians

Alexandra Prince

From the vantage point of 2025, when the Mountain Top is largely absent of Armenian hotels, it is perhaps quite surprising to learn that from the 1930s to the 1980s there were more than fifteen Armenian-owned and frequented establishments on the Mountain Top and nearby. Below is a list of the hotels as well as some images. Scan the QR code to the bottom right or visit tinyurl.com/mountaintoparmenians to view resources on Armenian American history on the Mountain Top that couldn't be included in this issue of *The Hemlock*, including film footage from the Shady Hill House, information about the hotels, personal recollections, Armenian recipes, photos, business advertisements, and more.

Haines Falls

Hotel Armenia



Hunter

Shady Hill House

Tannersville

American Hotel

The Belmont

Clinton Hotel

Fabian

Hotel

Hillside Lodge

Hotel Clinton

Hye Land

Mar-Mara Hotel

Mountain Summit House

Washington Irving Lodge

Waverly Hotel

Lexington

O'Hara House

Livingston Manor

Hotel Ararat

Palenville

Lorraine Lodge

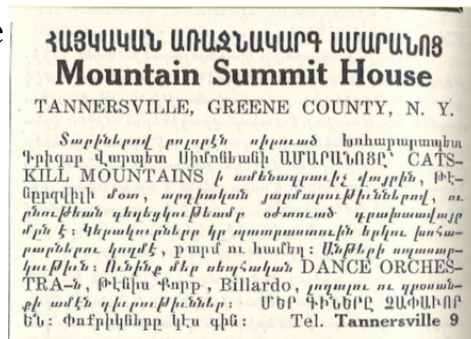


A postcard of Shady Hill House, a popular Armenian resort, in Tannersville. Proprietor M. Tutunjian.

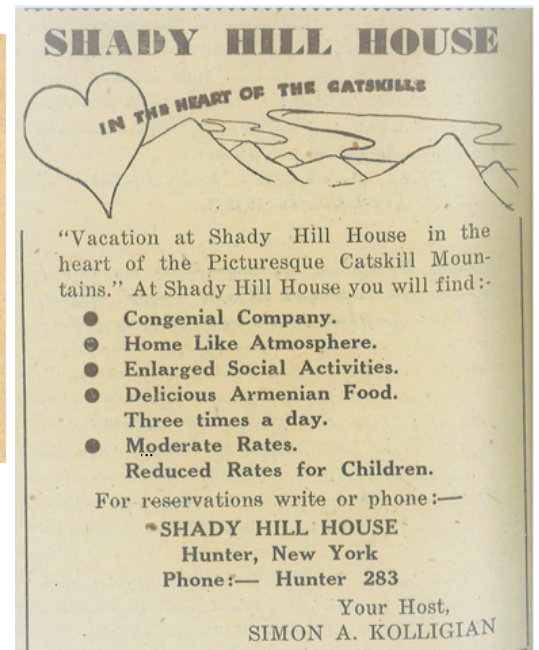


L to R: Stella Michaelian (Poonarian), Rose Koseyan (Kochian), and Unknown at the Hillside Lodge in Tannersville, 1959.

Photo courtesy of Anitra Michaelian.



Special thank you to Sonia Siranoush Hairabedian and the members of the Armenians of the Mountain Top/Catskills Facebook group for your assistance developing this issue of *The Hemlock*



If you have additional information to share about Armenian history on the Mountain Top, please contact mthsdirector@mths.org



The Hemlock

Mountain Top Historical Society

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Upcoming Programs at MTHS

Monday, August 25, 5 PM

History On Your Plate

Saturday, September 6, 9:30 AM

Mobile Book Group Hike at Elka Park

Saturday, September 6, 10 AM

Children's Geology Hike

Saturday, September 20, 10 AM-3 PM

13th Annual Postcard Show

Saturday, September 27, 9 AM

Rip's Rock Hike From Winter Clove Inn

Sunday, October 12, 2 PM

6th Annual Reading of Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*

Please visit MTHS.org/events for more info

You can find information on hikes, programs, jobs and volunteer opportunities, and other historical gems on our website, MTHS.org, and social media pages. Follow us on Instagram, like us on Facebook, and view on our YouTube channel.

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