

Seeing Clinton County First - High Falls

It was one of those hazy September days when mountain outlines are obscure against a smokey blue sky, sunshine lies hot on fields golden and red with stubble of oats and buckwheat, maples wave scarlet banners here and there along winding dirt roads on the hillsides, bluebirds make splashes of color on nail fences, and calls of jays and crows are muted in the pines.

We were driving up the valley of the Saranac in mid afternoon, our objective High Falls, just above Moffittsville and 18 miles from Plattsburgh. One more "some day" trip had materialized and the gorge, of which we had heard so many tales, was near at hand. Here it was that in lumbering days, almost a century ago, river drivers fought those sudden terrible log jams, when immense sticks piled high in wild confusion between rock walls, and a single man must step out on the heaving mass to set the key log free. The other end of a rope tied around his waist was held, by a companion on shore, who watched with the utmost vigilance to snatch him into the air and back to the river bank, if he misjudged his step in leaping to safety. If he fell into that roaring inferno of water, boiling around grinding, tossing logs, he was lost, though he be the bravest riverman of all and perhaps well-loved in camp for his Irish blarney and his gusty songs.

It is said, too, that in times of low water, it is possible to walk close beside the towering walls at certain points, near the river's level, and even to step into cave-like hollows, dim and forbidding, under the cliffs, one of these, near the last falls, being about 100 feet deep.

We had been told we could drive near the falls on an old dirt road which turned to the left off Route 3 beyond the bridge at Moffittsville and curved back to the highway near Redford. We drove on to the latter junction about half mile below Redford and turned east to explore the narrow, little-used road until we located the falls.

The road was somewhat rough in spots, so we proceeded slowly, enjoying observation of the countryside - cows at pasture, farmhouses set back under spreading, maples, apple trees gone wild and heavily laden. Off in the field a dog barked and we stopped to call to the farmer he was assisting in haying operations. Friendly directions were shouted back, "Keep right on, you'll go through brush grown close to the road, but you can make it." So on we went to the brow of a hill, around a curve, and down again close to the woods. Opposite a weather-beaten barn, an opening appeared and we heard thundering water. So the car was deserted and our expeditionary force got under way toward the river.

High Falls consists of three separate falls with 90 foot, 60 foot, and 30 foot drops, respectively, the elevation at Redford being 1083 feet and 900 feet at Moffittsville. The chasm, the perpendicular walls of which are of sandstone formation extends for about one half mile, yet at Moffittsville only a short distance from this remarkable place, the river in its wide and comparatively shallow bed, gives no indication of the turmoil above.

Woods and a change of course keep the falls completely hidden. Russia Mountain (Moffittsville was formerly known as Russia) stands guard over the river to the south, while to the north lie the slopes down which True Brook finds its way to join the Saranac at Moffittsville.

At High Falls, both banks are heavily wooded and end abruptly in sheer rock walls between 60 and 70 feet in height, and only about 40 feet apart in the narrowest part of the gorge. Typical sandstone formation is plainly evident and as at places like Ausable Chasm and Bluff Point, the rock layers lie tilted at a sharp angle, frequently jutting out over the river.

Our initial exploration near the head of the falls revealed the remains of a wooden bridge that had been in years past a "whale" of a bridge. It was constructed in 1923 as a temporary structure, supported by wooden trusses. Square beams approximately 15 inches thick carried the heavy planking, each plank being about 12 by 3 inches and 12 or 13 feet long, and spiked to the beams.

Many of them, though weather-beaten, remain in good condition. Until this year, 1943, it was possible to walk across the bridge, but at present the planking extends only to the edge of the bank. Not the type of bridge on which any sleep-walker should travel!

From this point, we could catch only a glimpse that impelled us to look further for some approach that would permit us to see it all at close range. Consequently we drove some distance down the road, watching for paths toward the river. A gateway and byroad led us to an open picnic ground at the edge of which we found the beginning of a woods trail. It dipped down between dark evergreens and around grey boulders profusely decorated with ferns. The descent became precipitous and we emerged suddenly at the very edge of the chasm, where the roar of waters below was continuous, obliterating lesser sounds completely. The sight was deeply impressive - a natural phenomenon long to be remembered for its wild beauty, a woodland scene reminiscent of Indian life known here in past years.

Our impulse was to clamber down to a lower level via a fault in the rocks, that we might look up at the bare walls and into some of the caverns close to the foaming water. Discretion forbade, but another path invited us farther and farther up the gorge, winding in and out, up and down, dim, cool, and refreshingly odorous of plant life, good earth and river close by.

Each time we approached the precipice, a different view presented itself, so that we had opportunity to see each of the three falls and to observe the old Saranac in its full grandeur. Down the waters rumbled, rushing past huge boulders, tumbling over ledges, tossing high against rock walls, and plunging in shining sheets into mysteriously dark pools. Here and there on either bank, sentinel pines kept vigil, slender birches leaned over as if to catch their reflections or goldenrod and asters made bright patches carelessly nodding at the brink of the chasm. Overhead, across a blue sky, white clouds, like puffs of smoke, drifted lazily in the sunshine.

We retracted our steps slowly, lingering to enjoy the unusual scene, our pleasure enhanced perhaps, because we had so long anticipated seeing High Falls.

Marjorie Lansing Porter - Plattsburgh Press Republican - October 27, 1943