

Alfred (Fred) Ackerman

1879-1966

Recollections of the Hopper-Ackerman House, 409 East Saddle River Road

As told to Reginald McMahon in 1965

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Claire Tholl's children donated Claire's files to the Upper Saddle River Historical Society. In them was a folder containing "The Recollections of Fred Ackerman" as told to his son-in-law Reginald McMahon in 1965. Like Claire, Mr. McMahon was a noted Bergen County historian. Fred Ackerman died in 1966 at the age of 86.

Fred Ackerman's grandfather was John A. Ackerman who first lived in Saddle River on Chestnut Ridge Road, south of the East Allendale Avenue intersection. John A. later bought 67 acres of land in Upper Saddle River on the East Road and had a house built (c. 1865). It was constructed close to the site of an old "straw-roofed" house [Garret Hopper's stone house].

The farm consisted of 25 acres on the west side of the road where the new house was built and extended to the Saddle River. The balance of the acreage was east of the road where all the outbuildings were situated. In this area was a peaceful setting that was called the "Glen" by Fred's grandfather [origin of Hidden Glen Road]. A clear, sparkling brook ran through the property, crossed the road and ended in the Saddle River. The stream formed a pond beside the house.

The property included a valuable wood lot of hickory and chestnut that John A. would not cut. For fuel, he used logs from his apple orchard.

The new house was built by one carpenter with the help of John A.'s three sons, Aaron Cooper (Fred's father), John Alfred, and Jacob. Fronted by a long picket fence, the dwelling was made to house two families, John A.'s and that of his son John Alfred, who later moved to Emerson. Fred's recollections begin about 1885. He was born in 1879 and he remembers that the family would live in the south side of the house in winter and occupy the north end during summer.

Fred recalled the attic always being stocked with drying meat. Hogs were kept to make sausage. After the slaughtered pigs were scalded, the bristles were scraped off the hide with clamshells. Grandmother often did the cooking outside in the "summer" kitchen. John A. brought up "George", who Fred believed was the retarded child of a poor Woodcliff Lake family. Fred remembers his grandfather teaching the child to dance and sing to a Jersey Dutch tune—"Hansamen, Klansamen, Peter Gatray ..."

Fred spoke of the slave cemetery at the rear of the property. It was overgrown even in his time. He said there were many markers of fieldstone, not inscribed. He recalled that the family found a red fox cub nearby which was raised as a pet. However, when fully grown the animal “went back to the woods.”

Fred Ackerman was acquainted with Alfred P. Smith, the Black editor and publisher of Saddle River’s newspaper, “The Landscape.” Fred often drove by Smith’s house where a lane connected Chestnut Ridge Road with East Saddle River Road (possibly the Sawmill Road). Smith visited the family in Oradell, where Fred’s father, Aaron Cooper Ackerman was the first and last Democratic Mayor of that Borough.

Fred frequently traveled between his Oradell home and his grandfather’s farm in Upper Saddle River. As a young boy he used his bicycle and it almost took him all day to reach the farm. The bike was made of wood and when the moving parts became heated, they jammed and Fred had to wait until they cooled before continuing. Later he had his own horse and carriage. The horse knew the way and Fred could doze off while traveling. He recalled crossing the old road and bridge over the Pascack Brook, now beneath the Woodcliff Lake Reservoir. Now a “phantom” Bergen County landmark, the road and bridge are sometimes visible during drought seasons.

The Hopper Mill was a wooden structure located on the Saddle River, southwest of the Ackerman house. The millpond was dammed with what Fred called an “eel weir” and had gates that could be opened to allow the river to flow through. The millpond was periodically drained and the neighbors would collect fish stranded on the bottom. Fred recalled how his grandfather gathered up a washtub full and how he himself caught six great eels that had become stranded. Fred hung them by their heads from a clothesline and their tails touched the ground.

Fred was an outdoorsman and loved to hunt. Once he and his faithful dog flushed a fox near the farm. The animal led them a merry chase across Chestnut Ridge and finally lost his pursuers in the wilds of the Bear’s Nest in Park Ridge.

John A. was evidently a storyteller and he remembered sledding down the steep hill of Lake Street in wintertime. Once he could not come to a stop at the intersection of East Saddle River Road and passed “directly” under a horse drawing a sleigh. The horse bolted and took off at a run but John A. was not hurt.

Once he told of a “witch” in Upper Saddle River. It seems John A. lost his plow and enlisted the aid of the witch to find it. She told him to dig in a certain place and he found the plow buried underground. Fred believed his grandfather made the story up for laughs. However, actually buried in the soil of the farm was an old coin, a 1786 New Jersey “horsehead” copper penny. It was discovered by one of the Ackermans while plowing the fields. It is still in excellent condition.

Fred was a storyteller himself. He related that once he and another youngster his age were walking up the East Saddle River Road on a bright, moonlit night. As they approached

the Old Stone Church they were attracted by weird cries coming from the graveyard. They looked – and ran all the way back to grandfather’s house. They told the family they saw an open grave and a white form bobbing in and out, as if a ghost was trying to escape its tomb. The adults investigated and even their hair stood on end until they solved the mystery. It seems a stray sheep had fallen into the newly dug, but as yet unoccupied, grave, and the white animal was bleating away as it constantly tried to leap out of the trap.

When Fred was in Upper Saddle River on Sunday he attended the Old Stone Church and the wooden Sunday school across the street. He remembers when the church pews had doors on them.

Upon John A.’s death, the entire Ackerman farm was sold for \$3000 to a Mrs. Curtin. The sons did not care for farming and went into business and education. Mrs. Curtin later sold the east side lands for \$2500. The new owner wanted the sons to relocate a well which once existed beside the old thatched-roof house. The well was somewhere in front of the Ackerman house and close to the road but had not been used by the family. The brothers asked \$25 to find the well but the new owner refused to pay. Many years later Fred wanted to buy the old house but the woman would not sell to him. Fred thought perhaps she remembered the Ackerman’s \$25 request for locating the well.

Brief History of 409 East Saddle River Road:

The property at 409 East Saddle River Road goes back to the Hoppers who were among the first settlers in what is now Upper Saddle River. According to Claire Tholl’s survey of historic sites, “Garret Hopper lived in a thatched-roofed house during the Revolutionary period that stood approximately in front of the present house.”

The property is connected to the last Indian occupation in Upper Saddle River. About 700 feet to the east of the road was an Indian site called Hidden Glen. The Indians were still here in the late 18th century. The house is also associated with the burial ground to the rear by the river, which is said to have been used by Indians and is known to have been the graveyard of Hopper slaves.

Claire says the Hopper-Ackerman house that was built circa 1865 has architectural interest as it is a typical mid-19th century farmhouse with Italianate styling and has a handsome c. 1900 Colonial Revival style wraparound veranda. Prior to John A. Ackerman, Stephen G. Hopper was listed as the owner of the house on a map in 1861. His father Garret’s will was settled in 1856. Stephen’s brother John lived just north of Hidden Glen and east of the East Road. Stephen lived in Rockland County, so it is unknown whether he ever lived here or immediately sold his share of the estate to John A. Ackerman, who then built the present house.

The foundation of the house is sandstone. The wraparound veranda has a central portecochere extending to the front supported by fluted Doric columns. The main entrance has glazed double doors with a transom light over them. There is a lovely bay window on the south side. Round-headed windows are in the gable peaks with drip caps. There are scroll brackets under the eaves and gable overhangs. The kitchen wing to the rear has been added onto by the Wojcik family.