

'Return to the Catskills'

Sonia Fuentes remembers • Part 2/3

BY SONIA FUENTES

I first came to the Catskills in 1936. Three years earlier, my immediate family (my parents and brother, Hermann, who was fourteen years my senior) and I had fled the Nazi regime and left our home in Berlin, Germany, going first to Antwerp, Belgium, and then coming to the US.

For our first 1½ years in this country, we lived at 500 Southern Boulevard in the Bronx. Then, we moved to the village of Woodridge... [where] my parents rented a rooming house for five years and, in turn, rented out those rooms to Jews from New York City for the summer season, which ran from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

When our five-year rental was up in 1941, my parents bought fifty acres of land on the Port Jervis Road, Route 42, about 1¼ miles from downtown Monticello, from the two Gusar brothers, who owned and ran Gusar's Pharmacy on Monticello's main street, Broadway.

On the land they bought, my parents built a bungalow colony, the Pine Tree Bungalow Colony, consisting of twenty-five bungalows, a swimming pool, a handball court, a general store, and, sometimes, a casino. We rented out those bungalows for the summer season, as we had previously rented out rooms in Woodridge, and ran the grocery store, where I worked occasionally.

When we first moved to our bungalow colony, I was told by local authorities that I had to attend a one-room schoolhouse near where I lived. I refused to do so, and was allowed to attend the larger schools in town... in different buildings at a different location – St. John Street – at the other end of Monticello from where I lived....

Ironically, now there is a middle and high school complex on Breakey Avenue... the very road where my par-



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Sonia Fuentes with her parents, Zysia and Hinda Pressman and brother Hermann, before the family emigrated to the United States.

ents had their bungalow colony, perhaps a five-minute drive from my former home. Breakey Avenue was named for the doctor I had when I lived in Monticello, Dr. Ralph S. Breakey, who spent fifty-five of his eighty-two years as a doctor.

I generally traveled to school on a school bus but sometimes I got a ride with one of the teachers, Miss Gallagin. When I rode the bus, I had to endure the reeking smell of horse manure that accompanied the Rosenheck boys, whose family owned Rosenheck Farms on the Sackett Lake Road, which veered off Route 42 at a point beyond where I lived, and the taunts of those boys. One of them, Seymour, subsequently married my classmate, Jean Birnbaum, who lived in the nearby village of White Lake.

When I lived on the Port Jervis Road from 1941 to the fall of 1946, it was a very lonesome place for a young woman. There were a number of bungalow colonies on the road, but that was it. I was cut off from most of my classmates, who lived closer to downtown Monticello.

When I complained to my parents of my loneliness and boredom, my father would respond: "I don't understand what you're unhappy about. You've got a roof over your head and three good meals a day."

One summer when I was working in our general store, out of boredom, I started a fire using some sawdust I found in the store. When the flames spread, I ran across the street to the property there, told the woman owner I had started a fire, and asked her to hide me and not tell my father where I was when he came looking for me later, as he surely would. She put me to bed, and we both heard the sirens of the fire engines when they arrived later. Fortunately, only a small corner of the building burned.

When my father came looking for me later, the woman owner made him promise not to hit me, and, when he did, she revealed my whereabouts, and I returned home.

Next Tuesday: Sonia returns to Woodridge.

About the author

Sonia Pressman Fuentes was one of 10 inaugural inductees into the Hall of Distinction of the Monticello Central School District, from whose high school she had graduated as valedictorian in 1946.

Fuentes, who emigrated from Nazi Germany to New York with her parents and brother in 1934 was the first woman attorney in the Office of the General Counsel at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

She also gained fame as co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and Federally Employed Women (FEW).

She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Cornell University in 1950 and first in her class at the University of Miami School of Law in 1957. She had a 36-year career as an attorney and executive with the federal government and multinational corporations.