

CHICHESTER

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In the winter of 1863 a man came west by easy stages from the Hudson river to the foothills of the Catskills. The traveler, Frank Chichester, was seeking a suitable site for a sawmill and chair factory. His father, Samuel, was the contractor who built the famous Catskill Mountain House in 1823, and later in 1835 had operated a chair factory in the mountains. In 1844 the family had moved to Poughkeepsie where a new factory was started, with warehouses in New York City.

From the foothills, Frank went on foot up the steep, winding, precarious trail that was called a road, and then descended into the valleys that hide the headwaters of the Schoharie Creek. From there he crossed over and entered the Stony Clove Notch, which even today is a wild, harsh place, holding silent dangers.

Frank waded and fought his way up the Notch. In the winter of 1863 the trail was covered with snow, deeply drifted, and he was nearly exhausted by the time he hit the old tan bark road which he followed to a small village crowded between high hills. He spent the night at a friendly farmhouse and the next day came down into a valley he liked.

He had come into another county and into the Town of Shandaken where the business of tanning bark was brisk and extensive. There was only one house in the valley, a log cabin owned by a veteran bark peeler. Frank stayed with him, ate and slept there for several days while he cruised the scattered hardwood forests. He discovered that the land, minus its hemlocks, could be purchased for fifty cents an acre or less. There was enough hardwood for his purpose and the hurrying mountain stream was ideal for power.

Frank returned to Poughkeepsie and he, his brother Lemuel A. and their uncle, Henry L. Chichester, bought the valley, which they named Chichester. They built a chair factory, ran it by water power for a few years, then changed to steam. Employees were brought in from the city. An eight room house was built for the Chichesters and two houses for the plant foremen. The workmen slept in the factory and had meals at Mrs. Frank Chichester's.

In spite of transportation difficulties, the factory prospered. The proprietors invented a rocking cradle, patented it, and manufactured thousands which readily sold. They hired more men, built more houses, added to the factory, but

apparently over-reached themselves financially. In 1875 Frank sold his share of the business to Lemuel and went west. Soon after the departure of Frank, the Company failed. However, S. D. Coykendall, a high official of the Ulster and Delaware Railroad, gave financial aid and the making of chairs was resumed.

Caning chairs was a way of making money in spare time. The women and children did caning at every opportunity. If a neighbor stopped in for an afternoon's visit she was certain to bring two or three chair seats with her to cane. Often during the winter evenings the entire family would be busy at such piece work. Since the Company paid five to ten cents a chair, an expert caner could make ten or fifteen cents an hour.

When Lemuel Chichester's business was at its peak, he employed about 300 men, women and boys. The wage scale ranged from three to twelve and a half cents an hour, the work week being sixty hours. The employees were not often paid money, as a form of scrip was used giving them the entitled amount in credit at the company store.

The factory building had grown until it was nearly 500 feet long, and its output was as high as 3000 cane and wood seat chairs and 1000 rocking cradles a week.

In 1881 S. D. Coykendall was inspired to build ten miles of narrow gauge track from Phoenicia through Chichester and Stony Clove Notch. The railroads were of inestimable importance to the factory.

