

RACIAL TENSIONS IN AND AROUND WOODCLIFF PLEASURE PARK  
AND ITS  
HISTORY IN THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY

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Walking around the Marist College Campus today, one would hardly know that at one time, a large and popular amusement park blanketed the hills and brought thousands of tourists to the City of Poughkeepsie. More than seventy years ago, Woodcliff Pleasure Park stood where the Gartland Housing complex stands today. The grounds of the pleasure park stretched throughout the northern section of Marist College's current campus. Woodcliff Pleasure Park had an interesting past which occupies a unique aspect of Hudson River Valley history. Woodcliff's rise was a depiction of the United States' boom during the growth of the middle class. Yet, its fall was an unfortunate depiction of the inequality and discrimination that seems to pervade American society even today.

### **A Brief History of Woodcliff Pleasure Park**

Between 1927 and 1941 Woodcliff Pleasure Park occupied the northern section of the Marist College Campus in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. It covered a total of 27 acres sprawled out across an estate.<sup>1</sup> At the time of its operation, Woodcliff Pleasure Park hosted one of the largest outdoor public pools, and the fastest roller coaster in the United States. It was a large and well-functioning amusement park that held attendance of many thousands of people each weekend during its years of operation.<sup>2</sup>

John Winslow, the original owner of the Wood Cliff estate was heavily involved in the iron industry during the mid to late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> He was a principle partner of the Rensselaer and Albany Iron Works.<sup>4</sup> During the 1860s, Winslow worked closely with John Griswold and, "Captain John Ericsson on the production of the ironclad warship *Monitor*."<sup>5</sup> Due

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley Gottlock and Barbara Gottlock, *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley* (S.L: Blurb, 2011), 54

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

to the slow action of the federal government, Winslow “financed the cost of building the ship largely by himself.”<sup>6</sup> After his retirement in 1868, Winslow purchased and moved to the Wood Cliff estate located in Poughkeepsie, New York.<sup>7</sup> This estate would later become home to the Woodcliff Pleasure Park.

After Winslow’s death in 1893, the estate was sold several times until it was eventually bought in 1927 by Fred Ponty — an entrepreneur who hoped to convert the estate into an amusement park.<sup>8</sup> The location of the Winslow estate bordered the Hudson River and thus was perfectly situated to accommodate the thousands of weekend day trippers from New York City who visited the Hudson River Valley region via the system of cruise day liners.<sup>9</sup> “The liners transported as many as 18,000 weekend day trippers up the Hudson stopping at various locations during the park’s prime.”<sup>10</sup> On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1927 the Woodcliff Pleasure Park was officially announced as open.<sup>11</sup>

Many things made Woodcliff Pleasure Park unique. Woodcliff was highly developed for its time, and hosted many of the largest amusement park attractions on the East Coast.<sup>12</sup> It held the largest outdoor ballroom in New York State, an outdoor public pool that could host three thousand bathers at a time, the famous Blue Streak roller coaster, the Winslow mansion, beautifully landscaped gardens and paths, and an inn that could house the parks guests overnight.<sup>13</sup> It had all the standard amusement park attractions including, “bumper cars, pony rides, carousels, Ferris wheels, arcades, a giant airplane wing, and shooting galleries” as well as

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<sup>6</sup> Gottlock and Gottlock, *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 57-60.

periodic “wrestling and boxing matches,” travelling circus exhibitions, “fireworks displays,” dancing in a large dance hall, and a restaurant.<sup>14</sup> The Blue Streak roller coaster was particularly famous because of its height and speed.

The Blue Streak at Woodcliff was designed by the engineer Vernon Keenan who also designed Coney Island’s famous Cyclone.<sup>15</sup> During its operation at Woodcliff, the Blue Streak was the highest and faster roller coaster in the world.<sup>16</sup> It held both of these distinctions for decades, even after the park was closed, and the roller coaster dismantled.<sup>17</sup> During the late 1920’s, Woodcliff reached its prime, entertaining guests with its innovative and grand attractions.

However, Woodcliff faced many struggles over the coming years. The Stock Market Crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the looming threat of World War II had serious effects on the attendance at Woodcliff.<sup>18</sup> As Americans entered the 1940s, the spectacle and awe of amusement parks lost their edge. Yet, the true demise of Woodcliff came not from the lack of popularity for amusement parks, but instead from an internal societal tension that was brewing beneath the surface.

### **Woodcliff’s Troubles and the Riot**

The day liners from New York City brought great diversity to the Hudson River Valley during weekend excursions. Yet, not all excursionists were welcomed in the many amusement parks that functioned along the banks of the Hudson River. At Woodcliff, tensions slowly

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<sup>14</sup>Gottlock and Gottlock, *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley*, 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

became apparent when African-American excursionists from New York City were denied access to Woodcliff's outdoor pool in July, 1941.<sup>19</sup> The excursionists were extremely upset, and the incident led to the hurling of rocks, "in and around the pool area."<sup>20</sup> Yet, this incident was the precursor to a much larger problem that was soon to boil over.

On August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941, a day liner named, "State of Delaware," containing 3,000 excursionists from the Negro lodge in New York City arrived at Woodcliff Pleasure Park around 2:00 P.M.<sup>21</sup> At the time, there were about 1,000 guests already occupying the park. According to the reporting of *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*, the members of the Negro lodge attempted to enter the park's main inn, but were denied access by a police officer on duty at the park.<sup>22</sup> The African-American excursionists refused to be denied access to the inn's facilities and entered the building.<sup>23</sup> A few of the excursionists attempted to order a beer, but were again refused.<sup>24</sup> The innkeeper ordered the "beer taps locked" which escalated the situation even further.<sup>25</sup> Soon a large fight broke out within the inn.

The fight spread and grew further, intensifying into a large riot by the excursionists. According to the *Poughkeepsie Eagle*, "women and children fled from the park, seeking shelter from the virtual shower of rocks and bottles" that were being hurled by the excursionists participating in the riot.<sup>26</sup> Several rioters brandished knives as they overturned benches, broke windows, smashed windshields, and caused extensive damage to the parks attractions.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gottlock and Gottlock, *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley*, 61.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "New York Excursionists Riot At Woodcliff," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*, Aug. 11, 1941: 1-4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1,4.

The police response to the riot was fairly immediate. Approximately fifty officers responded to the scene including twenty-two Poughkeepsie city policeman, twenty-four deputy sheriffs, and a few New York State policeman.<sup>28</sup> It took the officers “more than half an hour” to subdue the enraged crowd.<sup>29</sup> According to newspapers, one officer reported that he “was knifed in the leg as he sought to place one of the rioters in custody.”<sup>30</sup> Heavy damage to police vehicles was incurred as the police tried to control the riot. According to *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*, “bricks were thrown through windows of the sheriff’s ‘ghost’ car, a city police car...deputy sheriff Bloomer’s automobile was badly damaged and attempts were made to overturn the car.”<sup>31</sup> Officers responding to the incident had to use night clubs to subdue the rioters.<sup>32</sup> Several individuals were taken into custody as police were able to corral the excursionists back to the day liner.<sup>33</sup>

According to the newspaper reports the incident was described as, “the worst outbreak of trouble in Dutchess County in many years.”<sup>34</sup> According to local Poughkeepsie newspapers the, “members of the New York Negro lodge...had left an estimated \$500 in damages to sheriff’s cars, city police prowl cars, privately owned automobiles and park property.”<sup>35</sup>

Some may think the riot was an isolated incident or a freak occurrence. But how does such a large riot occur simply from the individual denial of a beer? Trying to understand why the riot occurred begs to question the underlying tensions that may have existed between the

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<sup>28</sup> “New York Excursionists Riot At Woodcliff,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*, Aug. 11, 1941: 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> “What Happened In the Hudson Valley.” *Hudson Valley Sunday Courier* (Poughkeepsie) Aug. 17, 1941.

African-American and White communities in the Hudson River Valley and in the United States during the 1940s. There is a clear indication that at Woodcliff, the members of the Negro lodge were denied access to certain facilities because of their race. The other possible reasons for why they were prevented from entering one of the largest outdoor pools on the East Coast are unknown. Especially considering that the pool could accommodate 3,000 people at a time. The main question that arises is why were they barred from Woodcliff's inn, or from ordering a beer?

1941 was a different era, and systemic discrimination continued to exist throughout the United States. The simple act of denying a beer to an African-American at Woodcliff's inn was a spark that ignited a growing powder keg that was building within the African-American community. What is most troubling is that the riot at Woodcliff was not an isolated incident.

### **The Second Riot**

Exactly one week after the events at Woodcliff, a second riot broke out on the same day liner, "State of Delaware" in New York City before it was to depart up the Hudson River. On August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1941 three African-American women were killed and forty-two people were injured when 5,000 African-Americans tried to board the day liner that could house only 3,200 people.<sup>36</sup> According to the August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1941 edition of *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*:

The panic started when someone discovered that many of the Negroes were arriving with apparently [counterfeit] tickets. All but one of the entrance gates slammed shut in the passenger shanty near the pierhead. Behind the closed gates the excursionists whirled in a turbulent flood. Hundreds tried to crowd through the single gate where each ticket was being turned over and inspected a dozen times by members of the excursion committee. As sailing time neared, a sudden surge of Negroes crushed hundreds of lunch baskets in the arms of the women nearest the gates. Women and children went down in a screaming heap and two patrolmen, trapped against the shanty wall, watched helplessly as the crowd swept over them. Appeals were futile and finally Patrolman Frank A. Malerba drew his

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<sup>36</sup> "City Police, Troopers And Deputies Mobilize to Meet Excursionists," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*, Aug. 18, 1941: 1-2.

service revolver and fired three shots into the air. It was only then that the jostling Negroes in the rear of the crowd relaxed their pressure.<sup>37</sup>

Once the crowd was dispersed, the day liner was able to board proper passengers. Many of the excursionist had decided not to take the trip up the Hudson River and returned home.<sup>38</sup> Approximately 2,100 passengers boarded and departed towards the Hudson River Valley.<sup>39</sup>

News of this incident travelled quickly up the Hudson River to local communities. Many residents of the Hudson River Valley did not want another riot to occur like that at Woodcliff. Thus, city and town officials took action. City police, State police, and county sheriffs were mobilized “to a strength of almost 100” in order to cut off landing docks along the banks of the Hudson River.<sup>40</sup> According to newspaper accounts, Sheriff Close of Poughkeepsie along with State police sent approximately sixty police officers to Woodcliff Pleasure Park to ensure that the dock would be closed off to any boat landings.<sup>41</sup> On April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1941, “at about 4:30, the local authorities were informed that the ship had turned around at a point between Cold Spring and Beacon and was heading south.”<sup>42</sup> The ship, with all 2,100 paid passengers on board never unloaded anywhere along the Hudson River.

### **Reaction in the Hudson River Valley**

Health officials inspected Woodcliff Pleasure Park after an investigation was opened by the District Attorney following the first riot on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941.<sup>43</sup> The initial riot had a drastic

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "City Police, Troopers And Deputies Mobilize to Meet Excursionists," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*, Aug. 18, 1941: 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> "Pool Is 'Okay' At Woodcliff," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*, Aug. 16, 1941: 8.



impact on the City of Poughkeepsie's and Dutchess County's view of Woodcliff Pleasure Park.

According to an August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1941 publication of *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*:

Dr. Mackenzie made the inspection with John E. Kiker, Jr., district sanitary engineer for the state, at the request of Sheriff Close and District Attorney Schwartz, who moved to close the park to the public as the result of a riot last Sunday afternoon. Speaking about the other conditions in the park, Dr. Mackenzie reported, 'there is no question about the remainder of the park being a public nuisance.'<sup>44</sup>

The second incident further jeopardized Woodcliff's ability to ever reopen as an amusement park. The public's view of Woodcliff is most strikingly seen in an August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1941 edition of *The Poughkeepsie Eagle* where the editor writes:

The demand for prosecution is to eliminate from the picture for all time the mob violence of these excursions, which have made it necessary for police officers, State troopers and other officials to lay elaborate plans as they did yesterday to prevent excursionists from landing at Poughkeepsie... just where the blame belongs in this particular instance, it is difficult to say, at this time. The fact that the events did occur makes clear that blame should be laid at the door of the person or persons responsible for the affair. In a county where freedom is the most precious possession of all citizens, it is too bad that there are those who are determined to create disturbances, cause rioting and as in yesterday's, even the deaths of some of their own number, because of the disregard for the free rights of others... The City of Poughkeepsie does not want excursions of a type that requires scores of policemen to keep the visitors from doing harm to others not in their own group or party. The city has always welcomed guest at all kinds of gatherings, where there has been a spirit of fun and wholesomeness. It does not want the type of people that make it necessary to mobilize police protection... In the view of the events of the past two Sundays, it would seem to the best interest of Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County, if the excursion boats did not stop here anymore. This attitude, on the face of it may seem inhospitable. Actually, it is for the best interest of the city, that such events as transpired at Woodcliff Park last week, and at New York yesterday, be kept from Poughkeepsie in the future. So long as the groups who go on excursions are of such nature that they disregard the safety of even the members of their own company, they are not the kind of guests Poughkeepsie wants to entertain.<sup>45</sup>

Public opinion in the City of Poughkeepsie may have been too strong for Woodcliff Pleasure Park to continue its operation. The park was shut down to repair the damage that was

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> "Response to Rioting Excursionists," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle*, Aug. 18, 1941.

done during the Sunday riot, yet the park would never reopen to the public.<sup>46</sup> “Shortly after its closure, the rides were dismantled. The historic Blue Streak was taken down in 1942. The coaster’s steel rails were donated to the war effort.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Understanding the undertones of the Woodcliff riot**

Several decades before Woodcliff Pleasure Park opened, the Supreme Court decided a major civil rights case in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. The court, “ruled that separate, but equal, facilities for blacks and whites were permitted under the Fourteenth Amendment. This decision made separate schools for blacks constitutional even though, in reality, equality did not exist.”<sup>48</sup> This decision pervaded the notion that African-Americans were second class citizens, and it enabled facilities to be segregated to “white-only” or “colored only.” In the South, Jim Crow laws began to appear in state and local governments that set up the segregation of buses, bathrooms, public schools, drinking fountains, etc. As the years progressed, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was formed and brought together new civil rights cases which were sent to the high courts.

In 1933, *Hocutt v. Wilson* was heard at the North Carolina State Superior Court. Thomas Hocutt applied to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill School of Pharmacy in 1933 but was rejected because he was an African-American.<sup>49</sup> Hocutt sued the school because they rejected him solely based on the color of his skin, but he ultimately lost.<sup>50</sup> However, the case laid

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<sup>46</sup> Gottlock and Gottlock, *Lost Amusement Parks of the Hudson Valley*, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "Brown v. Board at Fifty: With an Even Hand: A Century of Racial Segregation, 1849-1950." *A Century of Racial Segregation 1849-1950*. Accessed April 17, 2015. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-segregation.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Jerry Gershenhorn, “Hocutt v. Wilson and Race Relations in Durham, North Carolina, during the 1930s” *North Carolina Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (2001): 275.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

the foundation for the desegregation of schools and later Supreme Court decisions.<sup>51</sup> In 1936, *Murray v. Maryland* was argued at the Circuit Court level.<sup>52</sup> Donald Murray argued that he had unfairly been denied admission to the University Of Maryland School Of Law to which he was denied solely due to his race.<sup>53</sup> The Judge found in favor of the plaintiff, and Donald Murray became the first African-American to attend and graduate from the University Of Maryland School Of Law.<sup>54</sup>

Woodcliff Pleasure Park operated during the time in which these cases were heard. It is important to view each in context in order to understand the possible racial discrimination and segregation that existed in the United States during the 1930-1940 time period. Segregation pervaded society and that discriminatory undertone was felt by the members of the Negro Lodge when they were denied access to certain facilities at Woodcliff Pleasure Park in 1941.

These cases among others led to the eventual transformational case of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the desegregation of public schools in the United States in 1954. However, it took nearly twenty years after the *Murray v Maryland* for segregation in public schools to end.

### **From Ferguson to Baltimore**

The history of the Woodcliff riot seems to have some connection to today's incidences of racial discrimination. It is strange to imagine how the denial of a single beer can spark a massive riot. Yet, it is not simply the one action that causes such a violent event to take place. What fuels rioter's actions are the underlying issues that are buried deep beneath the surface which have a

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "Brown v. Board at Fifty." *A Century of Racial Segregation 1849-1950*.  
<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-segregation.html>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

tendency to boil over. Pervasive inequality and the belief that the system is out to maintain a constant pressure upon minority citizens causes pessimistic sentiments that brew within a group of people for many years. It simply takes one spark, such as the denial to facilities because of the color of one's skin, or the mistreatment of an individual by the police, to allow people to stand up and say that enough is enough. It's what ultimately caused the African-Americans at Woodcliff to lash out.

It is hard to imagine that they would have reacted in such a way if they were given equal treatment and fair access to the facilities that were present. Understanding the events surrounding Ferguson, Missouri and the recent riots in Baltimore, Maryland can be seen in a similar light to what occurred at Woodcliff. There are complex underlying issues that are at the heart of why African-Americans feel the way they do and why so many are reacting with such passion.

### **A Goodbye to Woodcliff**

Little if anything remains from what was once a sprawling and uplifting amusement park. Woodcliff will continue to hold a special place in the history of Poughkeepsie, Marist College, and the Hudson River Valley. However, as time goes on, many will forget its once sprawling gardens, powerful rollercoasters, and tranquil trails winding their way through the banks of the Hudson River. Few remain who have any memory of the park's once grand existence. But the history of Woodcliff echoes on, reverberating in the minds of those who remember, and those who learn of its deep and significant past.

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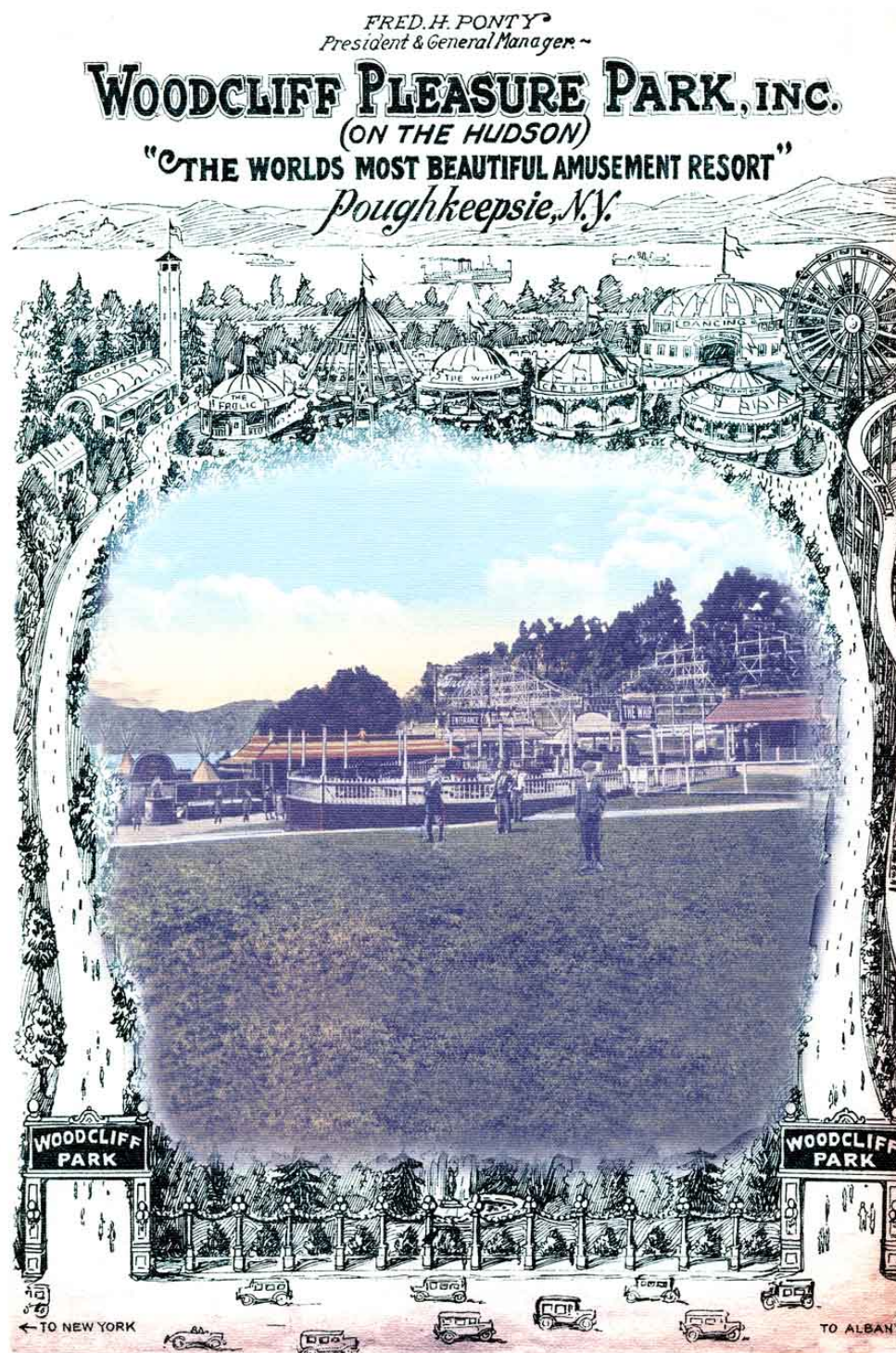
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John Ansley, Marist College archivist, Marist College Special Collections

# New York Excursionists Riot At Woodcliff Park

## \$15,000 Fire Sweeps Eighmie Storehouse

### LIMIT ON TAX BOOST IS SEEN

Large Says, Senate Finance Committee May Approve \$500,000,000 Increase

WASHINGTON, Aug. 10.—Urban George (D-Or.) predicts today that the Senate Finance Committee would approve an increase not exceeding \$500,000,000 in \$1,200,000,000 of new taxes voted the House.

### Furniture, Two Large Moving Vans Damaged By Blaze; Two Alarms Sounded

Damages estimated at more than \$15,000 was caused to the storehouse owned by the Eighmie-Geisler-Phillips-Weaver company today, as firemen battled a two-alarm blaze in the frame structure.

### DEMANDS MADE BY BUS DRIVERS

Employees of Railway Co. To Meet Niles Today, 'Last,' Says Leader

Demand of the 38 employees of the Poughkeepsie and Westport Railway company for the setting of a four percent pay raise for the year and a closed shop, in addition to two week's vacation with pay will be formally discussed this afternoon at the office of John A. Niles, secretary and manager of the company.



### CAMERON FREE, FACES CHARGE

Will Be Returned Here From Springfield, Mass., Accused Of Forgery

Richard Cameron, 34, who had been in the charge of the frames, said that the fire started in the rear of the building. He said the possibility of the blaze would not be determined until an examination of the structure is made later today.

### Army Measure Support Seen

Vicky Situation May Help Bill, Says House Leader

## Shatter Inn, Auto Windows; Wield Knives

### Mob Battles Deputy Sheriffs, State Troopers, City Police More Than Half Hour

Hiring riots and battles and looting broke out at Shatter Inn, a building at Woodcliff Park, yesterday afternoon. State police in Dutchess county, 22 city policemen rushed to the scene to quell the mob.

### FIVE ARE SHOT IN MOB RIOT

Five persons were shot and wounded in a mob riot at Shatter Inn, a building at Woodcliff Park, yesterday afternoon. The riot broke out after the building was looted and the windows of the building were shattered.

Front Page, The Poughkeepsie Eagle, August 11, 1941.