

Trails and Traditions In Peru State Forest

Recreation Spot Made Accessible By Peru CCC Boys
Provides More Than Picnic Tables and Swimming
Pool—Half-Hour's Walk to Garnet Peak Leads to
Complete Panorama of Distant Ranges, Includ-
ing Mountains In Four States

By PHILIP MACK SMITH

WITH the steady improvement of roads and state forests in Western Massachusetts there should come an increased use of the recreation grounds which the commonwealth and the federal government have so generously provided, not only for motorists, but also for hikers and horseback riders. These facilities should be more generally known and used in order that the state forest authorities may be encouraged to keep them in good condition. The Chester-Blandford state forest on route 20 with its facilities for tourists is familiar to the traveling public, but how many of them know of the Peru state forest recently made accessible by the Peru CCC boys?

These recreation grounds are located halfway between Hinsdale and Middlefield, on the Skyline trail, so-called, a hard surfaced highway from Hinsdale to Middlefield on which improvements have been made, except for small distances, through to Route 20 at Huntington and Chester. No mere picnic ground is the Peru state forest, though the rustic tables and fireplaces scattered through the evergreen woods about the swimming pool are unusually inviting. Better inducements than the signboard to pause here these autumn days are the colorful hill-sides and the dazzling expanse of goldenrod in the foreground, streaked with bands of purple where the fall asters follow the mountain brooklets.

Garnet Peak

And Garnet peak! Nothing on the signboard informs the wayfarer that a half-hour's pilgrimage by any able-bodied person afoot or on horseback up the well made woodland trails will bring him to the crest of one of the highest hilltops east of the Housatonic valley. From this summit,

2230 feet above sea level, an almost complete panorama of distant ranges reveals on a clear day mountains in four adjoining states besides most of the familiar peaks of Massachusetts. Though the superb view of Greylock dominates the western horizon, the visitor should look for the Catskill mountains, 70 miles away beyond the Hudson river, rising above the Washington hills and the Taconic range. To the east, just peeping over the Huntington and Worthington hills, can be seen the Mt Holyoke and

Mt Tom ranges and Mt Sugarloaf in the Connecticut valley, standing out against the faint blue of loftier hills extending south into Connecticut. Directly east and at nearly twice their distance rises Mt Wachusett, 80 miles away, and further north the towering dome of Mt Monadnock in New Hampshire. To the north is Mt Haystack in Vermont. Scattered throughout this prospect are upland farms, airplane beacons, fire towers and church spires from Peru, highest hamlet in the state, to distant Pelham and Shutesbury.

If one is foot-loose, he can follow either of two trails leading east and southeast from the summit to the old Middlefield-Peru road anciently known as "Windsor street." Thanks to the state and the CCC boys, this abandoned road has been restored as a good country thoroughfare, meeting Route 143, about one mile east of Peru Center. No sign indicates the eastern end of the trails from Worthington or Peru. If one is encumbered with an automobile, he should have brought a friend who can drive the car around from the picnic grounds through Middlefield to end of the trail as indicated by signs on the restored highway, one at the old Robbins place and the other two miles further north.

Traces of Early Settlers

Hiking through these woodlands few traces of early settlers remain, but old maps indicate that many productive farms in this forest were owned by families named Cone, Robbins, Dickson, Stowell, Haskell and Crosier. Stone walls traversing even the hill-tops indicate that all available pasture was profitably used a century ago for the raising of cattle and sheep. Passing south down "Windsor street," nearly every cellar-hole, now difficult to locate has something of more than local interest connected with it. South of the Robbins place, burned a few years ago, lived John Dickson, Scotch Irish pioneer and a soldier in the Revolutionary war in Connecticut. One of his great-grandsons was the distinguished educator and diplomat, the late Andrew Dickson White, who made several visits to his ancestral home in Middlefield. In his autobiography he recalls that at the age of 10 he saw his great-grandfather, who was "62 years of age, sturdy and vig-

orous; he had mowed a broad field the day before, and walked four miles to church the day after."

Further south and some distance east of the road stood the house of Israel Bissell, a pioneer from East Windsor, Ct., known to fame as the post-rider who carried the official news of the battle of Lexington from Watertown through Connecticut to New York city and on to Philadelphia, traveling 350 miles in four days.

Opposite the Bissell place on the highway stood until a few years ago the Chamberlain house, an ornate structure built by Ithamar Pelton, a builder of, or worker on, 13 churches in Connecticut and Massachusetts, including the first Congregational church buildings in Middlefield and Hinsdale. His house was replete with hand-carved trimmings within and without, and the old doorway was a conspicuous feature of the sesquicentennial pageant held at Middlefield last year.

At the Pelton house also lived later a talented invalid, Marvin Robbins, who with little training painted portraits, made good daguerreotype pictures, and taught photography before the Civil war. He made his own text books and at least one pupil became a court stenographer. South of the Pelton place, the Matthew Smith and Timothy McElwain homesteads, more than a century and a quarter old, and still occupied by their descendants, bring the traveler back to civilization.

Panorama from Skyline Trail

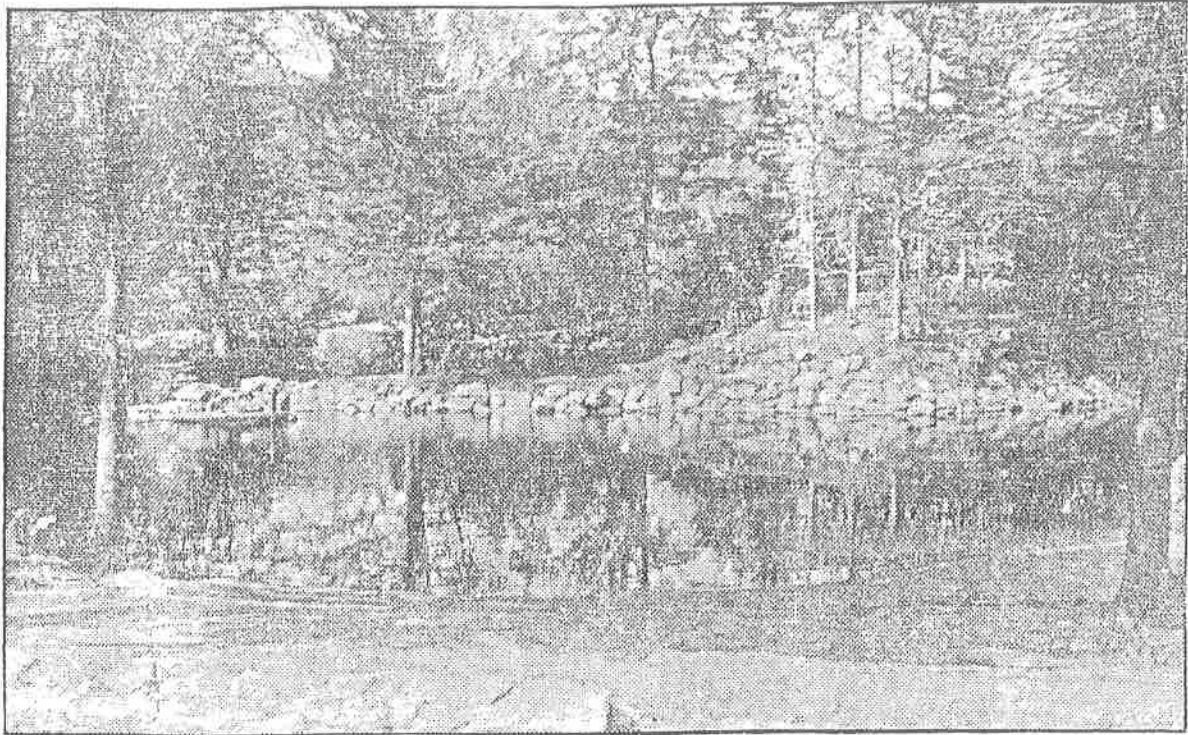
For the benefit of motorists who decline to walk, be it said that many of the mountain peaks already mentioned can be seen from various points on the Skyline trail itself. North of Chester Center where the road traverses the very ridge, wide views of the western and eastern ranges are

afforded, including Mts Tom, Wachusett and Monadnock in the east, but a wider prospect can be obtained a short distance further on from the fire tower on Holcomb hill. The western panorama grows ever larger as the trail passes through Middlefield. Continuing north past the state forest grounds the road reaches its summit, 1850 feet, at the top of Coles hill, a part of the watershed between the Housatonic and Connecticut rivers. Here a beautiful prospect of Greylock and the Taconic range above the Hinsdale valley comes suddenly into view.

If the motorist is now willing to leave the Hinsdale road and take the good country road to the right from Coles, climbing in a northerly direction toward Peru Center, he will soon find himself on an eminence, 2100 feet high where on a clear day, without getting out of the car, even the distant peaks of the Catskill mountains can be seen to the westward.

Through the use of private cars and chartered buses parties of city hikers can be readily transported for a day's ramble through the Peru state forest and the delightful back roads in the vicinity. A few points of interest worthy of a visit are shown on the accompanying map.—Glendale Falls, West Worthington Falls, Sternagle hill, and the view of Chester valley and Mt Goble from the Alderman farm. Horseback riders who desire to spend a longer time in this region will find facilities for boarding or hiring horses at Middlefield Center.

In the Forest Picnic Grounds



Swimming Pool One of Many Attractions to New Recreation Spot in the Berkshires Made Accessible by CCC Boys

