

WINNISOOK, "THE BIG INJIN"

Travelers on the Onteora Trail, as was the case with passengers on the Ulster & Delaware in former times, often express curiosity about a hamlet named Big Indian, which also gives its name to a valley west of Panther Mountain. This area is surrounded by some of the highest Catskill peaks, including Slide Mountain. Similar curiosity is sometimes also expressed about the name of the Winnisook Club and Winnisook Lake at the foot of Slide Mountain.

There are several accounts of Winnisook, who was the "big Indian." This is the way the legend is told by Lionel De Lisser in his Picturesque Ulster, written between 1896 and 1905.

This little hamlet takes its name from the cognomen given a very large Indian who lived for some time in the locality. His proper name was "Winnisook," and he was said to have been a little over seven feet in height, well-formed and a Samson in strength. This muscular giant fell in love with Gertrude, a beautiful white girl, a daughter of one of the earlier settlers named Molyneaux. But the maiden although she loved the dusky warrior, married a young man of her own race, called Bundy, in deference to her parents' wishes. He proving of bad temper and habits, she lived an unhappy life with him for some time thereafter. Win-ni-sook seeing how matters stood, abated none of his love-making, but visited her in secret and finally gaining her consent to elope. He proved his gallantry and lack of morals by running off with her. In his wigwam and among his people they passed several years of happiness, undisturbed by the threats of revenge from the deserted husband that would reach the Indian village now and then. The Dutch settlers who had located in the fertile valleys and plains suffered much from the lawless raids and forays of their copper colored neighbors of the mountains who would steal their sheep and cattle and run them off up the different ravines that open into the Shandaken valley to their mountain fastnesses.

Winnisook and a band of his tribe were returning from one of these raids, which had been successful, a large number of fine cattle having been secured, when they were overtaken at the entrance to the Big Indian valley at a spot now occupied by the Ulster & Delaware Railroad's big curve. Winnisook and a few of his men attempted to hold the angry farmers in check while the plunder was being driven to a place of safety, but Joe Bundy, who was among the pursuers, catching sight of the tall figure of his hated rival, planted a bullet near his heart, the dying giant taking refuge in a hollow tree that stood near, and in which he was afterwards found standing upright and dead by his grief stricken Gertrude. Win-ni-sook was buried at the foot of the pine tree in which he had been found, Gertrude and her dusky children living near the grave until the time of her death.

Wallace Bruce, in his Hudson by Daylight of 1901, gives a somewhat different version:

It is said that about a century ago, a noble red man dwelt in these parts, who early in life, turned his attention to agriculture instead of scalping, and won thereby the respect of the community. Tradition has it that he was about seven feet in height, but was overpowered by wolves, and was buried by his brethren not far from the station, where a "Big Indian" was carved out of a tree nearby for his monument. An old and reliable inhabitant stated that he remembered the rude statue well and often thought that it ought to be saved for a relic, as the stream was washing away the roots; but it was finally carried down by a freshet, and probably found its way to some fireplace in the Esopus valley. "So man passes away, as with a flood." There is another tale, one of love but less romantic, wherein he was killed by his rival and placed upright in a hollow tree.