

An Unplanned View

Robert Titus

The Independent, Aug. 2003

I have been invited to do an event at Olana on the morning of August 11th. Olana is the grand old Persian Revival mansion built by Frederic Church in the 1860's. Church was the finest and most successful painter of the Hudson River School of art. He began building his home soon after reaching the pinnacle of his success but just before rheumatoid arthritis began crippling his talented hands. Church would eventually have to quit painting, but he went on to make Olana the art of the last third of his life. Today Olana towers above the eastern end of the Rip Van Winkle Bridge as a monument to the great painter.

Church employed a strategy that was popular with landscape architects of the Hudson Valley at that time. He incorporated "planned views" into his landscape designs. This reflected a growing appreciation for nature, a philosophy that has blossomed into the environmentalism of our time.

The grandest of his planned views is seen from the south porch of the house. Look one way and you see the expanse of the Hudson Valley, look another way and there before you are all the Catskills.

Nearly every part of his 250 acres was landscaped with views in mind. Every bend in the driveway, every trail and every knoll seems to present the visitor with another fine vista. Many of the best views have now been blocked by growing trees. But much remains as Church had intended. My event will be a group walk. We will take in some of scenery as Frederic Church designed it, but I mostly aim to look into the past in order to see the great unplanned views of Olana. Anyone can see the view from the porch as it is today. Here is what I see:



Olana, September 23rd, 135,892 years B.C. late afternoon- It is a typical September afternoon of the Illinoian phase of the Ice Age. An enormous high pressure system chills the land all the way to the pole and beyond to Scandinavia.

Relentless winds are driving out of the northeast. Earlier in the day, no views could be seen through the blowing snow. But now the winds are at last abating. A blue sky is beginning to break through and, as the winds settle down, more of the landscape appears. In the dry Arctic air, the view is perfectly clear; to the southwest are the peaks of the Catskills and snow banks rise up the mountains like aprons of white. The winds generate wispy currents of snow that rise and fall like foamy waves breaking upon the rock "shores" of the Catskill Front.

Despite the snow, quite a bit of bedrock can be seen. Above, the mountains are bare with no hint of brown soil or green foliage. The brick red lower horizons of rock grade upward into strata of light buff color. These are not the green Catskill Mountains we know today.

The aprons of snow grade downwards onto a great valley glacier. The entire Hudson Valley is filled with ice. The northern half of that glacier is white, deeply blanketed in last winter's accumulation of snow.

Farther south, where the recent summer has taken its toll, the fresh snow thins and old ice is exposed. Its rough, dirty surface displays crevasses, great fissures that are mostly curved to the south. They are closely spaced and parallel to each

other. The crevasses are dark blue-black, while the ice in between them is brilliant white with a thin, recent snow cover.

The ice has fractured this way because the mid-valley portions of the glacier have been advancing more quickly than the ice near the valley walls. The crevasses betray the motions of the glacier, but its movement is much too slow to be perceived with unaided eyes. To the south, the crevasses widen and deepen. Here a lot of melting has occurred during the brief "summer," and the crevasses are more shadowed and darker shade of blue.

More to the west the glacier abuts upon the steep Catskill Front. Here, the grinding ice is steepening the wall of rock. This is an icy machine of erosion that is carving and sculpting the finishing touches of the great escarpment. Southward from this, just below the Wall of Manitou, the ice flows are pigmented with wide stripes of reddish brown.

One familiar feature is missing. While there is a break between High Point and South Mountain, there is no Kaaterskill Clove. The great chasm has not yet been cut into the Wall. That will have to wait until after the Illinoian glaciers are gone from the Valley.

As the sun sets over the Catskills, the shadow of the mountains lengthen across the ice. There is no moon, and the scene quickly darkens. Gradually a green and red drapery of northern lights appears. The aurora takes the form of a great arch, which soon stretches from about the southern Wall of Manitou to the far northern end of the Northeastern Escarpment. The lights shimmer very brightly in the darkening, still night.