

August 21, 1994

If You're Thinking of Living In/Tarrytown; Rich History, Picturesque River Setting

By TESSA MELVIN

THE cross-country team at Sleepy Hollow High School represents a student body from 14 countries. It trains on the paths of the Rockefeller family estate and it competes under the banner of the headless horseman, the school mascot.

Welcome to Tarrytown, a village with rich and varied historical and cultural roots and a splendid setting overlooking the three-mile width of the Hudson River. The Dutch called this point, the river's widest, the Tappan Zee -- Tappan probably for a group of Indians and Zee meaning "sea" in Dutch. Wealthy industrialists built estates in its hills and its shores have drawn industries that have employed hundreds of newly arrived immigrants.

The past is present in this eclectic village, home to corporate executives as well as to blue-collar workers. Among the remaining mansions is Lyndhurst, the Gothic Revival jewel of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, designed by Alexander Jackson Davis for New York City Mayor William Paulding and completed in 1838. It was later owned by Jay Gould, the railroad financier.

On the waterfront next to and south of the 104-year-old recently restored Victorian railroad station, the county asphalt plant and a recycling plant, among other small industries, still hum. And teen-agers knock balls around in the waterfront Loosee and Pierson Parks. Nearby are the Washington Irving and Tarrytown Boating Clubs with a total of 320 slips.

"Tarrytown is a wonderful, very mixed community with an even more mixed school system," said Kathleen DeFemia, an administrative assistant at Village Hall. "My kids have had friends of all different skin colors, and I think it has made them better people -- it's what the world is all about."

The world has known about Tarrytown for a century and a half, thanks to its legendary equestrian ghost. Who does not know of Brom Bones, Ichabod Crane and the lovely Katrina, made famous by Washington Irving, a noted resident? And Tarrytown also has a place in real history: Major John Andre, the British spy, was captured there as he tried to help Benedict Arnold betray West Point.

After a century as an active river port and a regional industrial center, Tarrytown entered its golden age in this century as a mecca for the wealthy. Home to industrial tycoons including William E. Dodge, a merchant and philanthropist; J.D. Maxwell, an automobile pioneer, and several members of the Lehman banking family. It also attracted Albert Bierstadt, the landscape painter, and Samuel L. Clemens.

With the Rockefellers and other prominent families in North Tarrytown, the area was dubbed "the millionaire's colony." Tarrytown incorporated as a village in 1870, adjacent North Tarrytown in 1874.

Modern Tarrytown is a transportation hub connecting Westchester and Rockland Counties with New York City via excellent train connections and the Tappan Zee Bridge, which connects to I-287, Westchester's major east-west highway. Traffic has also been the village's biggest nightmare.

When it was built in 1955, the bridge was considered a boon to development. Office parks sprang up and hotels as well, among them the Tarrytown Hilton and the Westchester Marriott. But few were prepared for the traffic that threatened to choke off the village as frustrated rush-hour commuters tried to get onto the Tappan Zee by seeking alternative routes through the village.

"It used to be a disaster," Ms. DeFemia recalled, "especially on Friday nights. You couldn't even go out for a quart of milk."

Peace returned after last year's agreement by the state to install a removable barrier on the bridge, freeing an extra lane for Westchester-bound traffic in the morning and an extra lane westbound in the evenings.

A COMMUTER bus service bringing Rockland County residents to the train has also helped, said Eileen Pilla, Mayor of Tarrytown for the last decade. She presides over a village board that six years ago approved a revised a master plan, in the process rezoning the village near the bridge to reduce density.

"Development was overtaking events," said Mayor Pilla. "We wanted more open space and we wanted to prevent such dense development it would take away from the attractiveness of the community."

In 1980 village officials rejected a proposal for a shopping center on the site of what is now the Talleyrand Office Park, opting to revitalize the downtown shopping district instead. This has gone slowly, but momentum is building with technical assistance from the New York Main Street Alliance, a nonprofit group based in Mount Kisco that is dedicated to preserving the state's downtowns.

Residents hope their historic past and a spruced-up downtown will be keys to their economic future as the region's industrial tax base declines. Taxpayers in the two villages are concerned about the announced departure of the General Motors assembly plant in North Tarrytown, planned for 1996. Although the plant pays no village taxes in Tarrytown, it contributes almost 10 percent of the consolidated school budget.

Mayor Sean Treacy of North Tarrytown said his village was actively seeking developers for the 98-acre site as the Sleepy Hollow Seaport, with a marina, a mix of shops and housing and an automobile museum.

The region has become an increasingly popular tourist destination because of Sunnyside, Washington Irving's home; Kykuit, the Rockefeller family home, and Philipsburg Manor Upper Mills in North Tarrytown. .

Today, Main Street looks remarkably as it does in photos taken 50 years ago, with three- and four-story Victorian storefronts dominating the street. After the designation of the street as a local historic landmark in 1980, shopkeepers had to get permission to make architectural changes.

Antiques shops abound, mixed with delis, clothing stores and restaurants featuring Italian, Mexican and Portuguese specialities.

The most prominent building on Main Street is the Queen Anne style Music Hall, built in 1885 to bring grand opera and vaudeville to the village and be the site of an annual flower show. It is now a thriving performing arts center where this summer Arlo Guthrie and the New Orleans Preservation Hall band, among others, performed.

The clearest sign of diversity is Tarrytown's housing stock, from the tiny rowhouses in the inner village to the elegant free-standing brownstones on North Washington Street to the rambling Victorians in Wilson Park. About 40 percent of the 4,311 housing units in Tarrytown are one-families, including several Hudson River Victorians with fine river views.