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Heritage

The Magazine of the New York State Historical Association

Say Cheese!

Justice's Court in the Backwoods

Watering Places: Where New York Tourism Was Born

How Barnum Got His Elephants to New York

Sky Sentinels

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The Magazine of the New York State Historical Association and The Farmers' Museum Inc.

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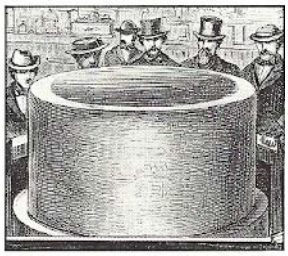
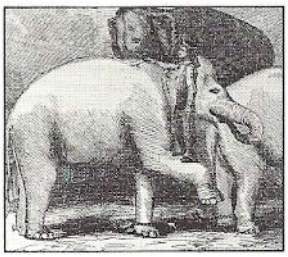
In this issue . . .





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Front Cover:
Hudson River Looking Toward the Catskills, Asher B. Durand, 1847
oil on canvas, NYSHA collections
Lion's Head Fountain, Sharon Springs, 1984

Back Cover:
The Hotel Earlington, James E. Ware and George Welch, 1894
watercolor on paper, courtesy of Joseph S. Caldwell, III

In the next issue:

Making Hay . . . Only When the Sun Shines

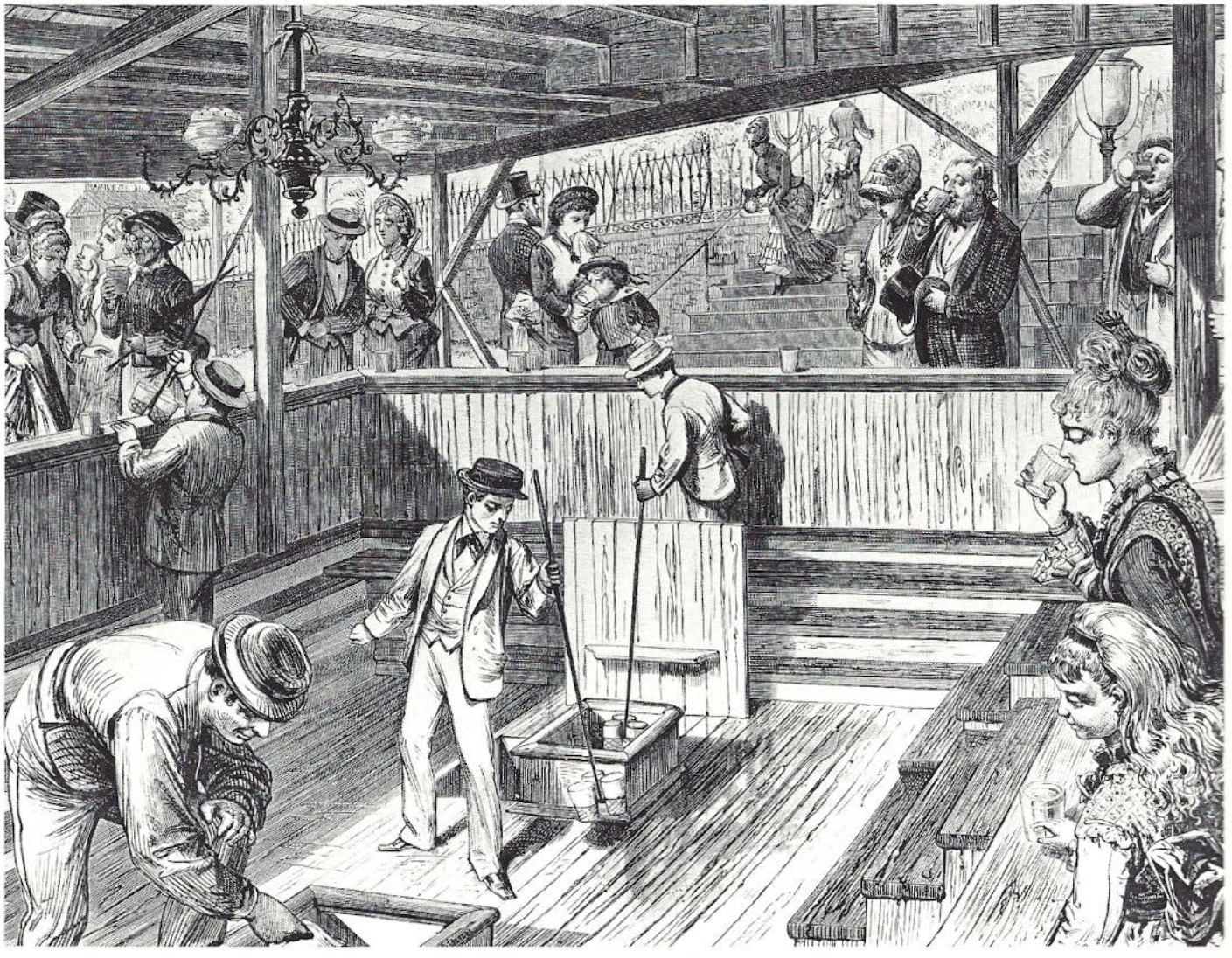
New York's Natural Wonders: A Centennial

Watering Places:

Where New York Tourism Was Born

"The American watering-place can be one of the most inconvenient, disagreeable, vulgar, and objectionable places in the world; on the other hand, it can be somewhat healthful, very amusing, and quite unobjectionable."

Grace Harkaway, *The Aldine*, 1871.



Taking the waters at Saratoga Springs.

Three principal ingredients have always combined to create a successful travel industry: a public with leisure and the means to travel, comfortable and economical modes of transport, and attractions where it is chic to be seen, where merely being there causes envy among your neighbors who weren't. The development of a vigorous tourist industry in upstate New York began in earnest east of Niagara Falls early in the nineteenth century in response to a theory of medicine, the construction of railroads, and the need to escape the ovens that cities became in summer before air conditioning.

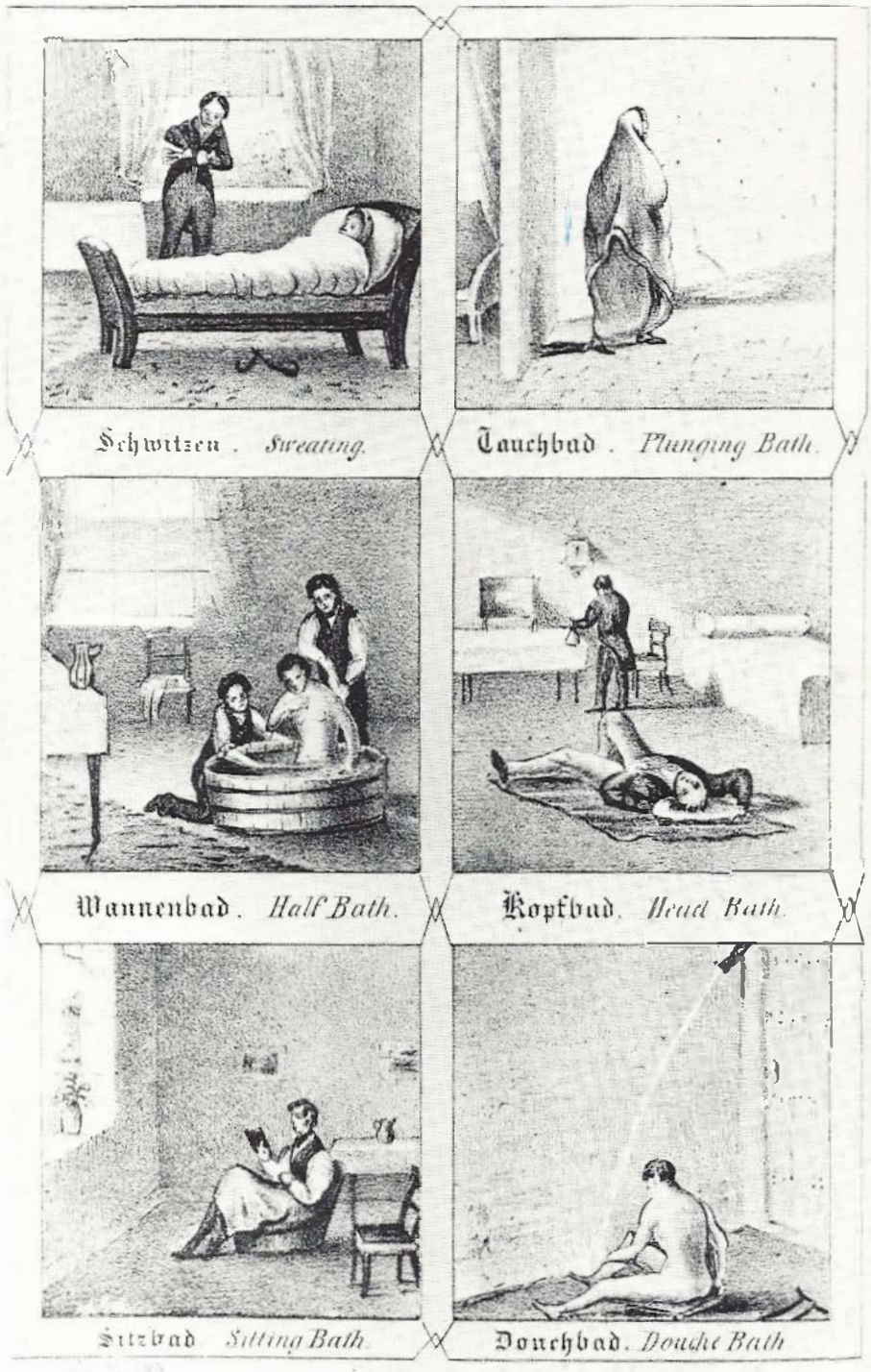
Hydropathy was a branch of medicine developed in Europe that exploded on the American health scene after 1825. It held that water could cure all diseases. Many doctors, frustrated at that early date in failing to find cures for their patients, accepted readily any new idea that might have a chance of success. Two branches of hydropathy evolved. The first, spa therapy, was based on the requirement of patients both to drink and bathe in mineral waters. The second, hydrotherapy, held that external application of water was useful for specific therapeutic purposes, a mode of treatment still in use with whirlpool and other forms of baths.

Ever since the end of the American Revolution, speculators and developers had purchased mineral springs in New York State presumably on the theory that anything so foul smelling and tasting had to be good for one. Many springs had been subjects of Indian and pioneer folk medicine lore. Capitalization on the curative powers of the waters was thought to be a certain bet. And gradually, in the early 1800s, increasing numbers of invalids made pilgrimages to nearby springs hoping to find a cure for their maladies. This trickle grew to a flood of travelers by the 1830s when doctors began prescribing spa therapy and developers had constructed hotels and other facilities to accommodate both the sick and the well.

New York State has over twenty important mineral spring sites stretching from Oak Orchard not far from Buffalo to New Lebanon Springs near the Massachusetts border; and from Massena near the St. Lawrence River to Hudson, south of Albany. The waters of these springs have a wide variety of chemical and mineral properties each believed in the last century to be useful in effecting cures for a wide variety of ailments.

Iron or chalybeate springs tasted like ink unless carbonated. These waters were said to increase appetite, promote digestion, redden the blood, and cure ills ranging from hysteria to sterility and the indigestion brought about by both. Iron springs were found at Oak Orchard in Orleans County and springs near the Shaker village in Columbia County.

Saline or salt springs of varying concentrations were said to promote bowel action; increase urine, mucous and bile flows; improve appetites; and help gout and rheumatism if used for baths. Many of the more than twenty-two springs in the Saratoga Springs area, at Ballston Spa, and Excelsior Springs near Syracuse were saline. Prescriptions included two or three glasses before breakfast, a brisk walk, two more glasses, and breakfast; or, a



Taking the water cure

Stew, Hydropathy, or The Water Cure, 1845

glass three or four times a day. No wonder certain flows were increased!

Sulfur spring water, when drunk in large quantities, was claimed to cure all human ills. Sharon Springs in Schoharie County had white, red, and magnesia sulfur springs, light enough to be consumed without extensive vomiting. Massena Springs in St. Lawrence County had saline-sulfur waters as did Dryden Springs in Tompkins County, as strong, it was said, as Epsom salts. Chittenango Springs in Madison County, Richfield Springs in Otsego County, White Sulphur Spring in Cairo, Greene County, and several others were also sulfur in content. Wide variations in chemical analyses of these springs in the last century caused some confusion among doctors prescribing the various waters, although none were certain that any particular water would produce a desired effect.

The only warm spring in New York and New England was at New Lebanon in Columbia County where the water was a uniformly tepid 73 degrees and flowed at 500 gallons a minute.

Most American tourists, while at times naive, are not, in general, stupid. They know in their hearts, a French traveler wrote after an 1847 visit to Saratoga Springs, that the real curative powers of the springs were due "to a change of air, healthful exercise, cessation from ordinary activities, variety of scenes, amusements, and the excitement of company." Nevertheless, "taking" mineral waters became an almost instant fad that would survive over a century, as if the water and its potential powers was a requirement of conscience to justify a vacation.

Ballston Spa was the first to be developed as a resort. An English traveler in 1818 called Ballston "one of the most noted places of public resort in the United States," with its three large boarding houses and 2,500 visitors a year. The Sans Souci Hotel, built at a cost of $60,000, was the center of attraction. Here, he wrote, "the rich, gay, and fashionable resort in crowds, during the months of July and August."

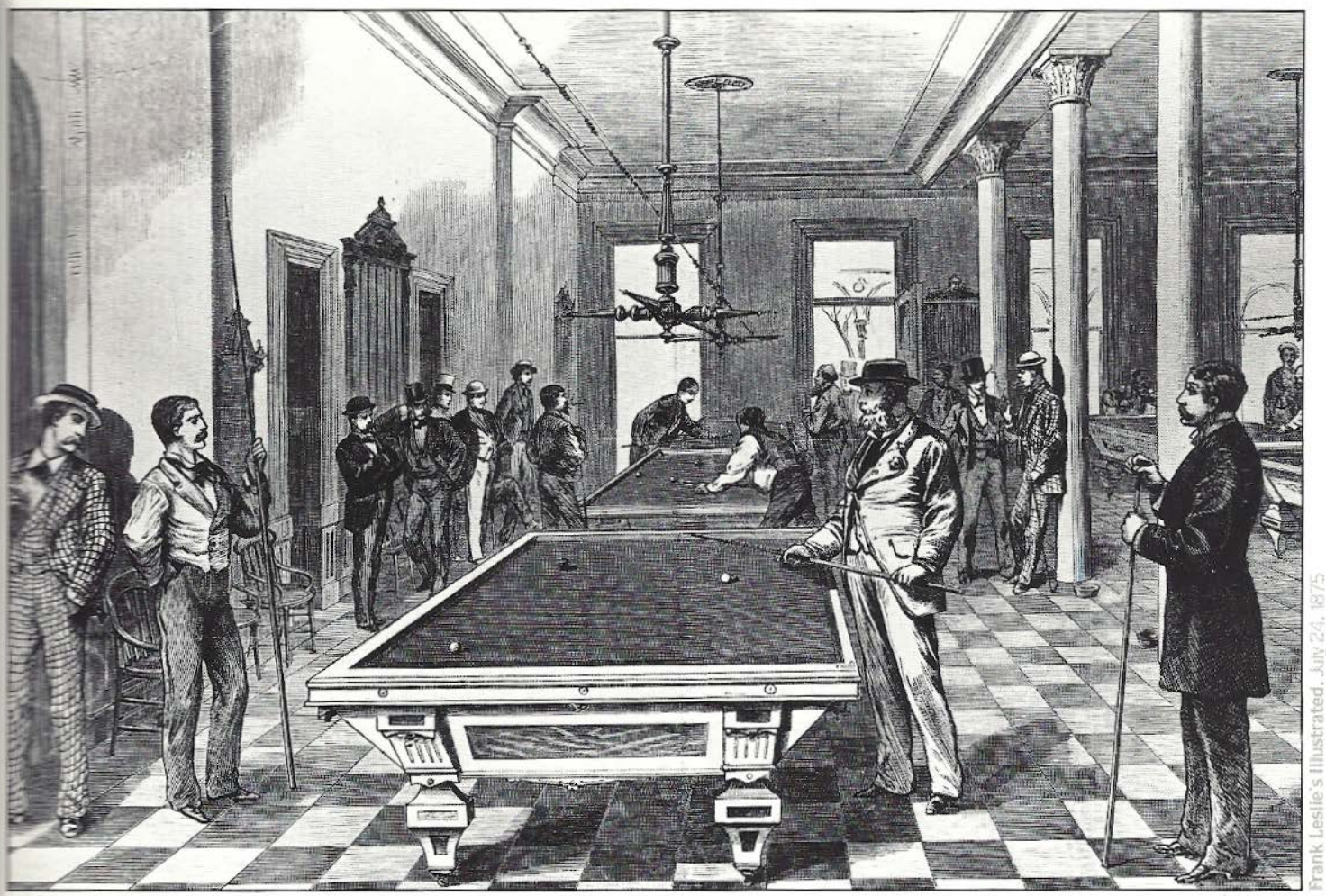
Even before the War of 1812, accommodations were abuilding for the halt and the lame at Saratoga Springs, blessed as it was with a large number of springs, each touted as being beneficial for a specific set of ills. But Saratoga had even more—far-sighted, risk-taking developers who were unwilling to permit the place merely to be a sanatarium. It was as if by design that Saratoga Springs would become "a perpetual festival," a "resort of fashionable people," not just another fashionable resort.

If Ballston Spa had the head start in resort development, its sister village of Saratoga soon eclipsed its neighbor. Each decade saw phenomenal growth in popularity of "the most celebrated watering hole in the world," as it modestly called itself in 1842. The number of its accommodations, the social status of its habitues, and the variety of its amusements placed the famed spa in a class of its own. In the decade of the 1830s, when the railroad first reached Saratoga Springs, there was fishing in the nearby lake, riding, "promenading," hearty meals, "hops," and tepid baths in addition to the medicinal waters. The next decade saw a marked increase in available activities. A circular, double track railroad, eight miles in length, was built for hand-operated cars capable of carrying two people. Through a fairy-like wooded setting, stylishly attired guests would pump the little cars (eight revolutions was deemed sufficient), "passing each other as feathered arrows" amid shrieks of pleasure from the ladies. There was a rustic garden replete with shady bowers and primitive huts for rendezvous. And for the enjoyment of all, there was "a platform of flying horses" (possibly the first carousel in America). Along Broadway, the main street, there were thirteen bowling alleys, several billiard rooms, gambling saloons, and livery stables for coaching and riding. At night, each major hotel held simultaneous balls, cotillions, parties, and assemblies to which all were invited. There were two libraries for the studious, and band music could be heard almost continuously during the day.

Unquestionably, the early arrival of rail travel to Saratoga, shrewd development, intense promotion, and the acceptance of the Springs by the elite as a place to make an appearance each season were the reasons for its early popularity. It was common knowledge by the 1850s that Saratoga was the most fashionable resort on the American continent with the possible exception of Newport. Here, *Baldwin's*

Harper's New Monthly, June, 1856

Richfield Springs.



Frank Leslie's Illustrated, July 24, 1875

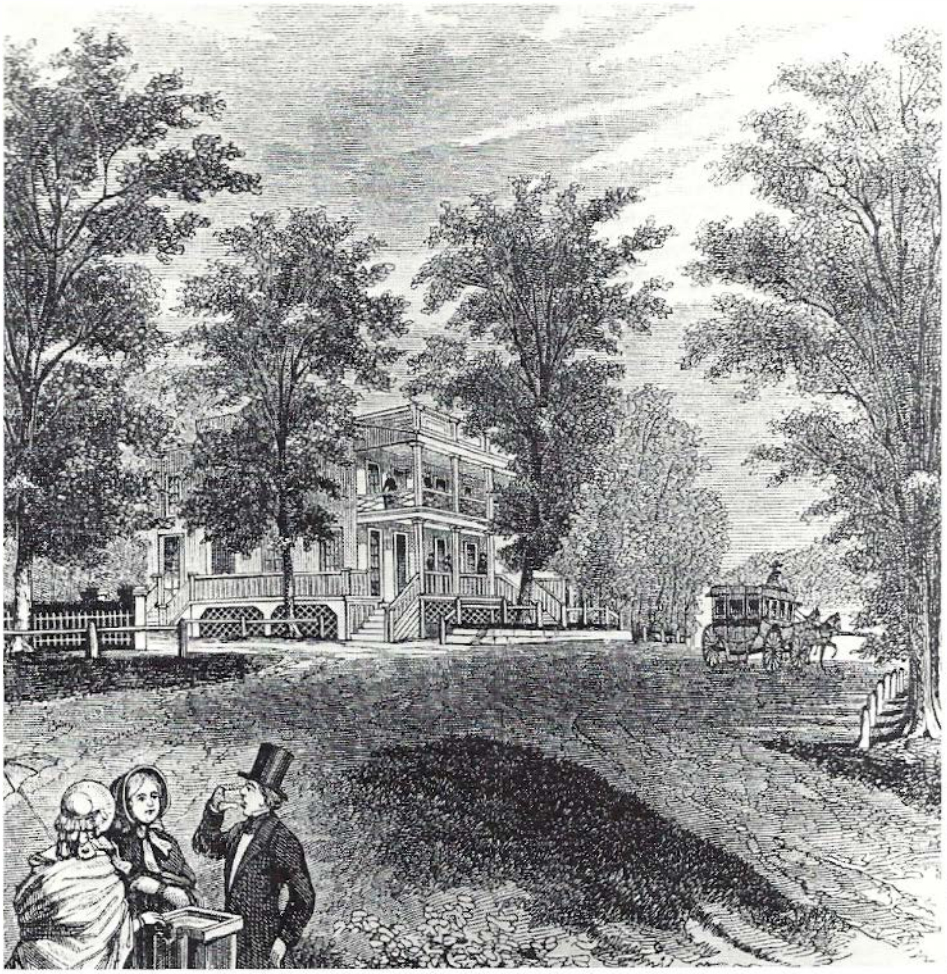
Grand Union Hotel billiard room, Saratoga Springs.

Saratoga pronounced in 1854, "assemble the devotees of pleasure and the victims of disease; the passé belle bedecked in jewelry and artifices; the wornout roué in search of an heiress—the gambler seeking his prey, and the brainless, bedizened fop, his easy victim, all are here."

The nature of the resort and its offerings continued to change after the Civil War. Millionaires and "managing mothers" were joined by sportsmen as horse racing was introduced by John Morrissey, a Tammany Hall politician and heavyweight boxing champion. He added a gambling casino and race track to Saratoga's other appealing attractions. Two new opulent hotels, the Grand Union and the United States, with a total of 1,600 new rooms were opened.

New York's other spas, while not as dazzling as Saratoga, were each well known for their specialties. Some were indeed fashionable resorts. At these smaller spas, healthful activities and the benefits of the waters and baths were stressed. Avon in Livingston County was known for its quiet, relaxing atmosphere for invalids and the fashionable, each clientele having its own hotel. There were billiards, tenpins, bathing, quoits, walking, horseback riding, fishing, and an occasional ball. By the 1880s, the spa had gone into decline. Clifton Springs in Ontario County had a single hotel that had begun as a dispensary in 1806. Dansville in Livingston County opened its large water cure hotel in 1845 under medical proprietorship and catered largely to patients requiring a quiet and "regular" life. New Lebanon's tepid springs were celebrated for bathing in the 1830s where hotels with "ample" accommodations were available. Columbia Springs had a hotel by 1854, but never achieved fame. Chittenango Springs near Cazenovia in Madison County was developed in 1850s. Here, White Sulphur House and gushing fountains of water amid a deep forest appealed mainly to the ill.

Only at Sharon and Richfield Springs did Saratoga feel competition. Gideon Putnam built the first boarding house at Sharon Springs in 1803, two years before the village was platted. The first luxury hotel began to be constructed at Sharon Springs in 1811. By 1836 development of the spa was begun in earnest and centered around three springs: White Sulphur for bathing, Gardner Magnesia for drinking, and Eye-water for splashing on the eyes. No railroad linked Sharon to metropolitan areas, so the ten-mile stage coach trip from the depot at Palatine Bridge was fatiguing to visitors. Nevertheless, new hotels opened—the Pavilion, the most grand, in 1841, to attract a distinguished Boston clientele. Fishing, shooting, bowling, billiards, riding, driving, and dancing were principal amusements. It is said that



Harper's New Monthly, June, 1856

Knickerbocker Hall, Avon Springs.

ladies at Sharon spent more time at primping before dinner than those at Saratoga, and the result was worth waiting for. Unique at Sharon was an annual encampment of St. Francis Indians who made and sold baskets, fans, and splint work. Saratoga would imitate the Indian craft village idea.

Sharon was the favored spa of the genteel, a first stop for the tourist in July before visiting Newport in August and West Point in September. Yet by the 1890s, decline had set in. Smaller numbers and less socially prominent middle class visitors, particularly prosperous German Jews from New York City, early in the century took their places. To this day, Hasidic and Orthodox Jews of Eastern European origin frequent Sharon Springs where the dilapidated ruins and poorly maintained remains barely mirror its former glories.

Sharon's sister resort, Richfield Springs, has today few, if any, visible evidences of its former splendors. In 1856 it had three hotels and was becoming fashionable. In spite of new hotels and heavy promotional activity into the early twentieth century, Richfield never achieved Saratoga's success. Early in the 1880s, travelers said its bathing facilities were deficient and unattractive, there was no sanatarium for the ill, and few amusements for thrill seekers. These problems were temporarily abated by the completion and opening in 1887 of the Hotel Earlington. Richfield's claims to fame in its heyday were those of a fashionable resort for invalids and the cleanliness of its environs.

A day in the life of a spa visitor at Saratoga in the 1870s was one of posturing, flirting, eating, light exercise, and obligatory water-quaffing. By seven in the morning, drinkers would stroll from quiet hotels to the springs for their libation. Breakfast followed a stroll, then came more exercise of various kinds—riding, billiards, conversational strolls in which gossip about persons met in passing was the major topic. The older settled in at tables under hotel colonnades by mid-morning to read the papers and chat. By noon, bands would strike up and the main street would be filled with activity—carriages four deep with liveried drivers, riders, and strollers. There were horse races and lake regattas to attend until two o'clock when the ladies retired to prepare for three o'clock dinner hour.

Dinner was the "kingpin" upon which the day, an observer noted, hinged. It was served at large settings in the enormous hotel dining rooms. Menus were lavish, quantities large, as there were but two meals a day. A place setting would include a goblet filled with ice, six or seven spoons, four knives, four forks, and fifteen china dishes used during the course of the meal. It was estimated that a waiter would make twelve trips to table for each diner. The cavernous rooms were filled with the din of voices and clatter of china and flatware as men in coats and ladies in silk and jewels satisfied appetites that had been whetted by spring waters.

After dinner, in late afternoon, a mood of quiet repose settled over Broadway. Many retreated into piazza chairs. Others strolled to the springs for yet another glassful, pursued aimless strolling, or held quiet conversation in rustic bower, as preparations were made for the evening's entertainment. Evening was the time of day at Saratoga compared to the "glory of the rockets," when gas lights were lit and the orchestra struck up their first numbers. Processions of single men and women would move from hotel to hotel, stealing covert glances, dancing, sipping champagne. The waltz was the last dance, at midnight. "Saratoga is the waltz. The waltz is Saratoga. Long live the waltz."

There were those in Victorian America who found spa life boring, ritualistic, unfulfilling, and sinful. Their viewpoints, read in magazines and books, heard in sermons of the day, were strong. Lydia Child in her *American Frugal Housewife* (1835) urged sensible Americans to "stay at home." Travel in general, to spas in particular, she termed extravagant and unwise. She told of a young farm couple who left family, fields, and livestock to vacation in Saratoga where they fell in with the wrong crowd, had possessions stolen, and returned tired, bored, and grumpy to find

Frank Leslie's Illustrated, August 21, 1875

Afternoon promenade, Broadway, in front of Grand Union Hotel, Saratoga Springs.

the horse in the cornfield, children unattended and ill, the house a mess, and a firkin of butter turned rancid. The next year, neer-do-wells they had met in Saratoga freeloaded on them at home for two weeks. My friends, that's trouble!

"And are not we becoming luxurious and idle? Look at our steamboats, and stages, and taverns! There you will find mechanics, who have left debts and employment to take care of themselves, while they go to take a peep at the great canal, or the operadancers. There you will find domestics all agog for their wages worth of travelling.... There you will find mothers, who have left their children at home with Betsey, while they go to improve their minds at the Springs.

"If only the rich did this, all would be well. They benefit others, and do not injure themselves..., idleness is their curse and uneasiness the tax they must pay for their affluence. . .e You say travelling is cheap. So is staying at home," Lydia pronounced.

Less Puritanical voices were also raised against spas. An Englishman staying at Saratoga's Congress Hall Hotel in 1844 wrote, "I'm in a little room of about the size and temperature of an ordinary oven. ... I cannot say that I enjoy Saratoga. ... This, I think, beats in stupidity most that I have seen [in America]." Ladies' costume "gives a woman the appearance of something between a trussed fowl and an hourglass. . . . ë

Many others objected to vacationing with the ill and invalids. Still the lure of rubbing elbows with one's social superiors, the thrill of novel amusements, the excitement of finding a wealthy mate, the opportunity to flirt with the stylish of the opposite sex, and the pageantry and sparkle of a resort hotel overcame practical reasons for staying home.

To your health!

Photo by Pam Buell

Rocking chair, Sharon Springs, 1984.