

Near the end of the cemetery behind St. Mary's church, at the top of steps and down at the end of the upper path, lies a simple natural rock next to a steep bank and rock cliff. It's probably been there, in that place, for centuries. On the south side of the rock is a plaque with three names: Hans Christian Sonne (1891 - 1971), Carol Mulford Sonne (1909 - 1970) and Christian Richard Sonne (1936 – 2019). The Sonne rock. All three of these people lived most of their lives in Tuxedo Park where they were deeply involved in the social, political and economic life of the Village. Coincidentally, their home on West Lake Road is named Sunny Rock (nothing to do with their name) because of the big boulder next to the stone house that catches the first sunlight as it streams across the Tuxedo Lake. I am fortunate enough to live there today. Some day, I suppose, I will join the others at the Sonne rock behind the church.

Hans C. Sonne, a Danish immigrant, came to New York as a young man in 1917, to start a branch of a London bank. He had letters of introduction to various clubs. He tells about the excitement and awe he felt on his first visit to Tuxedo Park when he rounded what is known as "Maxwell's Corner" and caught his first glimpse of the Tuxedo Lake. He decided then and there that this was where he would make his home. He became a member of The Tuxedo Club in 1918 and rented Brookside Cottage from the Barbeys until he was able to purchase Sunny Rock in 1933. Hans, after leaving the London bank, began a successful business career when he took control of another merchant bank which financed trade in coffee and other goods to and from Latin America.

The financial collapse in 1929 brought ruin to many in Tuxedo Park. Hans was one of the few who did not speculate in the stock market, leaving him flush with cash. Property owners, unable to pay taxes and insurance, abandoned their houses. Some were torn down. We heard of the Colonel Keech house that was burned down by the butler. Much was going to ruin. Hans bought up many properties and large houses, not to have, or to live in, or as an investment, but to save them. He owned at least five Tuxedo Park mansions and also quite a bit of property. His aim was to keep them until he found someone who could care for the places. He gave away some land to young couples in need and encouraged them to build what they could afford. At one point he owned the Monastery, which he then contributed as a new location for the Tuxedo Park School.

He lent money to local businesses. He gave money to The Tuxedo Club for a new dining room with a trade-off that Tuxedo Park School personnel could use the Club facilities. He was probably best known in Tuxedo Park for his leading interest in The Tuxedo Park Association (TPA), which, until the early '50's when it became a NY state Village, was responsible for all municipal functions – roads, water, sewer, etc. Tuxedo Park had been an important place and he was not going to see it slide.

During the ensuing years, as the Village was slowly brought back to life, he participated in all the discussions and disputes that inevitably emerge with change and growth. One such issue was the relocation of the Club golf course when the state took the land for the NY Thruway in the early 1950's. A bitter dispute erupted. Some pushed for draining the WeeWah for a new golf course. Hans supported the others, who won. The TPA then acquired land and built the new golf course where it is today outside the south gate of Tuxedo Park.

The porch at Sunny Rock hosted many gatherings of interesting and influential people. One that I heard about was when Alfred Lee Loomis, whose lab invented radar and whose experiments led to the making of the atom bomb, visited with the Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Hans told his young son, Chris, that he had just been witness to and had heard a discussion about a scientific process that would change the course of the world.

The Sonnes focused much on Tuxedo Park, but also cast their eyes to the outside world when there was a calling or need. One of the houses owned by Hans was the mansion on Camp Comfort Road formerly owned by Charles E. Mitchell who went bankrupt in the 1929 crash. In 1940 Carol Sonne led the effort to create a home there for a group of British children who were sent to the United States for safety from the ravages of war. Since then, it has been known as the "Children's House."

Chris Sonne is the most recent occupant of the cemetery rock. Upon returning to the US after five years living and working in Paris, he also lived at Sunny Rock with his family. He continued his career as an investment banker and, at the same time, took on the responsibilities as a General Partner of the TPA, together with Penn Rogers and Buz Reeves, and later with George Boynton. Since the TPA was no longer responsible for running the Village, its objective was to rid itself of

its land holdings and to shut down. Much was given to the Village. The gifts included roads and sewer system, Tuxedo Lake, WeeWah Lake, and Pond No. 3, Eagle Mountain, Racetrack, land for the WeeWah Beach Club and DPW. To the Town of Tuxedo, it gave the powerhouse property along the Ramapo and the baseball field near the East Village. There was also about 2,000 acres of raw land in the Town. Paying taxes on land that generates no income became a financial drain on the partners. It had to be sold. Chris believed that growth was necessary for survival in Tuxedo and Tuxedo Park. As always, there was much controversy about this, resulting in many rumors and accusations. Chris endured it all. Finally, in 1989, the land was sold to the Related Company, which seemed, at the time, to offer an exciting and positive venture for Tuxedo. It was to be a cluster development leaving 1,600 acres forever wild. The rest would consist of office and commercial space and also homes of four different styles, consistent with the Hudson Valley, all designed by Robert A.M. Stern. Sadly, the Town Boards picked and fussed and whittled away until the current proposal, 30 years later, hardly resembles the original version.

Chris was fascinated with the history of Tuxedo and Tuxedo Park. He and Chiu Yin Hempel co-edited the book, "Tuxedo Park: The Historic Houses", whose profits went to revive the Historical Society where he served as President. He was also the Historian for the Town of Tuxedo for many years. He served on St. Mary's vestry and was a warden for many years. Chris and his family were involved in many aspects of sporting life in Tuxedo Park. The blue Sonne sailboat participated in and often won the weekend races on the Tuxedo Lake. Both parents and children played competitive tennis. They swam in the pool and at the WeeWah, as well as hiked and skied the trails. When Chris had the opportunity to donate some funds from a family foundation, he set up a Trail Fund with the Village to maintain, clear and open up some of the old bridle paths that had become impassable due to falling trees over the years. This effort continues. One constant link with the past for the Sonne family is the Teal, the wooden electric boat that has graced the waters of the Tuxedo Lake since it was first launched in 1907 by Ambrose Monell. It was subsequently sold, with the boathouse and property, to Hans Sonne and later passed down to Chris, who conscientiously maintained and enjoyed this magnificent boat throughout his life.

It has been over 100 years since Hans Christian Sonne came to Tuxedo Park, and much has changed since then. He and his wife and his son have all tried to contribute and influence some of the changes, always with a vision of necessity and progress towards betterment. I think that they succeeded, though, at the time, each one probably felt frustration and fatigue over some of the forces working against them. That's life. They led good and happy lives here. I try to do the same, remembering and honoring what they were.

By Sally Sonne