

CLARK'S TRADING POST FIFTY YEARS IN REVIEW

BY W. MURRAY CLARK

The year 1978 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Clark's Trading Post, a family business established in 1928 by Edward P. and Florence M. Clark at its present location in Lincoln, New Hampshire. Ed Clark's Eskimo Sled Dog Ranch, as it was originally called, exhibited the couple's trained sled dogs to summer visitors. The Clarks had settled in West Milan in 1922, raising and driving their sled dogs in winter and exhibiting them in summer. They decided to move southward in 1928 and establish their operation on a well-traveled tourist highway where they could attract more visitors. The present location on U.S. Route 3 was leased for one summer in 1928 with an option to buy, and that first year the fledgling business enjoyed a modest income of \$1,100.

In 1929 the first native Black bears were leased along with the services of their owner, one Al Morris, the purpose being to attract passing motorists and get them to visit the Eskimo dog kennels. An admission fee of twenty-five cents per visitor had been charged for a guided tour of the dog kennels but in 1929, with ominous financial difficulties facing the nation, admission was reduced to a paltry ten cents, where it remained until 1942.

Years passed with a substantial group of Eskimo dogs being maintained by the summer income. In early March 1935, three bear cubs born in Randolph, New Hampshire were purchased and raised in her kitchen by Florence Clark until late spring.

In the summer of 1937 Ed Clark's driver and guide on the Labrador Coast of twenty years earlier came to New Hampshire bringing several Eskimo dogs and a collection of Eskimo and Indian artifacts. This same year the first gift shop was erected adjoining the souvenir stand, which had been built to sell such items as ice cream (kept cool with ice and salt), Moxie, home-made root beer, ginger ale, film, cigarettes, Old Nick candy bars, postcards, maple candy and syrup, furs, fox scarves, bearskins, and the like.



"Jasper," a 500-lb. New Hampshire Black Bear enjoying a spoon of ice cream from trainer, W. Murray Clark.

The Clarks decided in the summer of 1938 to build three bear pens to accommodate Toggle, Soggle, and Woggle, the young bears acquired in 1935. The building of these bear pens was a major improvement and a milestone in the development of the business. It was during this 1939-1944 period that things really began to prosper.

Mr. and Mrs. Clark's sons, Edward and Murray, were working and growing with the business and in 1941, a banner year, the business name was changed from Ed Clark's Eskimo Sled Dog Ranch to Clark's Trading Post in recognition of the tireless efforts of the whole family. On the Sunday of Labor Day weekend in 1941, 3,300 persons were admitted at ten cents each, an attendance figure never achieved since.

The war years were a great blow and in 1942, with gas rationing, income was only 20% of the previous year's figure. After the war business began building again. By this time young Ed and Murray Clark were grown men able to handle many of the problems of construction as well as care of the bears and dogs which were the primary attraction. In 1948 the price of admission returned to twenty-five cents to offset rising labor costs. The next problem was improving attendance. The solution came in part by intention and in part by development. Clark's acquired two young female bear cubs, named them Ebony and Midnight, and trained them for a 15- to 20-minute show. The idea caught on quickly and boosted attendance. An admission ticket entitled the patron to view the arctic exhibits, Eskimo sled dog kennels, bear show, and an exhibition run of a sled dog team on the grounds.

When in the fall of 1950 the first logging locomotive was purchased from the nearby paper mill, the Trading Post inaugurated a "green pastures for Iron Horses" theme. As the bear show continued to enjoy increased patronage, the White Mountain Central Railroad came into being with the first ride offered in 1958. Gradually, new museums and a railroad station (from Freedomland in

Clark's Trading Post main building was built 1948 and enlarged in 1957.



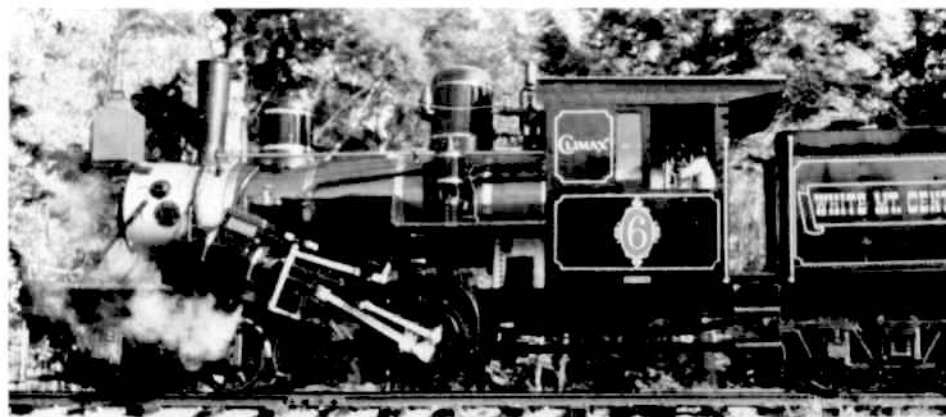
The Climax Geared Locomotive, built in 1920 was acquired in 1950. This was the first engine on the White Mt. Central Railroad. From 1969 to 1977 it had a complete overhaul in Clark's shop.

the Bronx, New York) were added. A railroad covered bridge at East Montpelier, Vermont was acquired and dismantled, with the components of the two-hundred-ton structure brought 65 miles to Lincoln and reassembled. This 120-foot-long bridge now spans the Pemigewasset River and has been a major factor in the success of the railroad venture.

The theme of Americana gradually developed as people showed interest in old items the family gathered, restored, and displayed. In 1954 the first old-time music machine was exhibited. It was a Seeburg coin-operated piano, the nickelodeon of the 1920s. Soon followed by more instruments, this was the beginning of the large collection displayed today. It's an exhibit that pleases everyone within hearing distance.

The Clark brothers eventually married two Avery sisters, making their resulting offspring double cousins. The wives and families represent a substantial part of the work force and talent required to develop a business of this complexity. In 1978, as the observer looks at Clark's Trading Post, he is seeing the combined efforts of four generations. In 1977 there were fourteen family members working for the organization. Clark's now has one of New Hampshire's finest gift and souvenir shops, a dairy bar, haunted house, old-time photo parlor, museums, trained bear shows, railroad excursions with a steam-powered standard-gauge locomotive, and above all, personal family entertaining of the visitor.

The gradual success of this unique enterprise has been based on one simple precept—give people something for their money. Clark's business slogan, "Gold Standard Entertainment Since 1928", is



not taken lightly. Each summer season many complete strangers come forward to announce that Clark's Trading Post offers the best family entertainment for the money in the White Mountains. Frequently a customer will announce that he visited the attraction on his honeymoon and is now bringing his grandchildren. Still another welcome statement is "This is our third visit here this summer!" It is therefore no surprise that people from as far as 600 miles away seem to know more about the Clarks, their bears, railroad, and family enterprise than do many New Hampshire people living a few miles from the Trading Post.

Florence Clark passed away in 1950 and Edward P. Clark in 1957. Their descendants are busy summer and winter with new ideas and exhibits for the short summer season. They truly have to make hay while the sun shines.

Construction of I-93 bypassing the Clark establishment has had its effect on the business, but family members feel the real dyed-in-the-wool vacationer knows where Clark's is and how to get there. Through the years the Clarks



The Photo Parlor was built in 1977.

have had ample opportunity to expand with a filling station, restaurant, motel or cabins, but consistently refuse to take this route because their neighbors are already earning a living in this manner. The family has tried to be fair with its customers: even now, in 1978, raising the price of admission or the retail price of merchandise is a serious consideration.

Breaking down the tourist dollar spent in New Hampshire, it has been estimated that the entertainment and attractions business accounts for only about seven cents, with the remaining ninety-three cents going to restaurants, motels, and incidental services to the vacationer.

On behalf of the Clark family, I invite you to visit us in 1978. ■