

THE  
**QUARTERLY**

Official Publication of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association

January 1978



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Official Publication of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association

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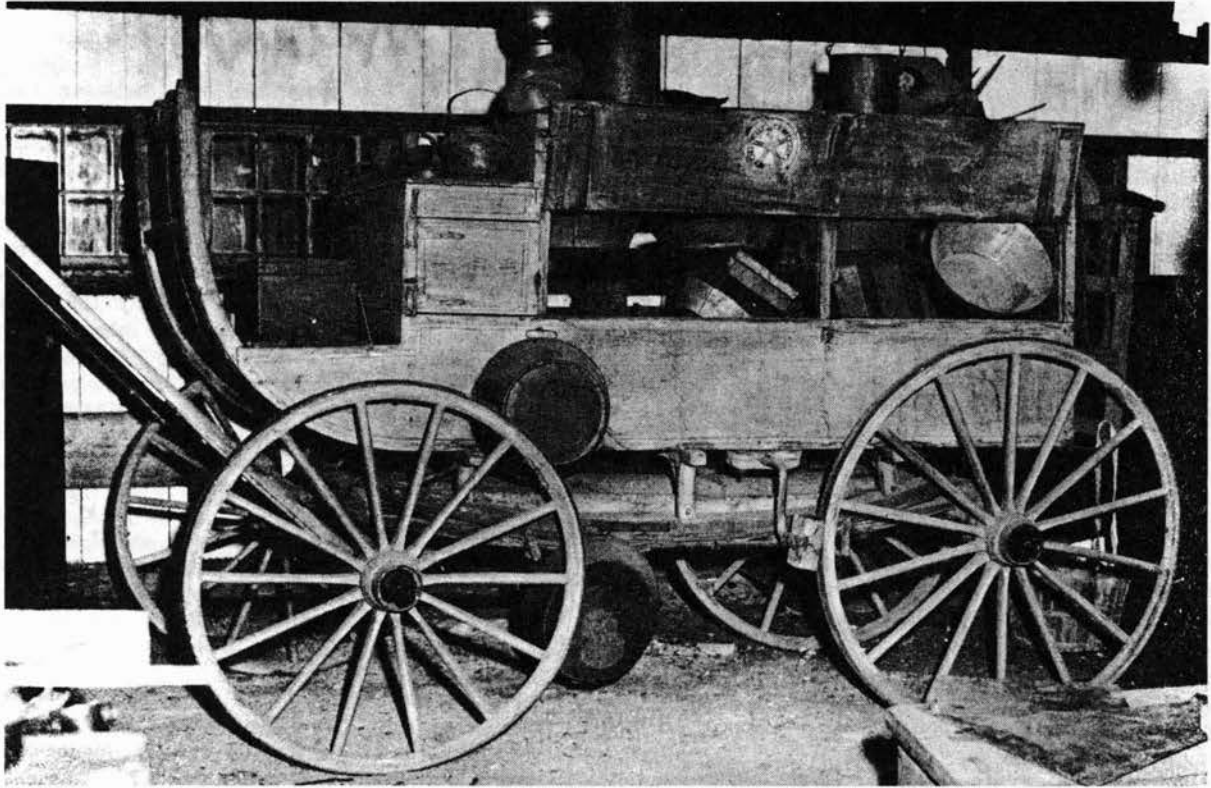
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Editor: Varick A. Chittenden

Cover: A nineteenth-century print, owned by the New York Public Library, of a scene familiar to many rural households of that time, the peddler and his cart. See Flora Garner's story, "Itinerant Guests of Bygone Days," beginning on page 3.



*A tin peddler's wagon. Old Museum Village of Smith's Clove, Monroe, N.Y.*

## Itinerant Guests of Bygone Days

by Flora Garner

*The very rural atmosphere of St. Lawrence County as recently as fifty years ago made a perfect setting for the regular appearance of itinerant salesmen and buyers who delivered goods and services — from tin goods to scissors grinding — and purchased by products of farm and woods operations — like cattle hides and furs. Flora Garner remembers well many of the men who visited her family farm when she was a child. Mayer Sperling retells many fascinating tales of his life on the road in those times.*

Living in the country in the early 1900s was quite a contrast to living there today!

It is difficult for some of our young folks to imagine existing without electricity, T.V., radios and cars; but we did exist and were extremely happy and contented. Many books have recorded the history of this period; what I want to relate is the role our "itinerant guests" played in our lives.

In the winter we were quite isolated on farms. The barns were full of hay and grain for our livestock and the houses were also adequately stocked — cellars and pantries held just about anything a family needed during the cold months.

A visit from a pack peddler was most welcome at this time. These men carried trunks strapped on their backs with smaller cases in each hand. What a thrill I enjoyed as they displayed threads and buttons of all colors and sizes, handkerchiefs and doilies with tissue paper laid carefully between to prevent wrinkles. As they spread out fine linens and laces,

which had been made in foreign lands, they told us many interesting stories of these far away places. The peddlers I remember were Mike Ferris and his nephew, Joe, from Armenia. Quite often they would spend the night at our house, and I found it difficult to restrain my curiosity the next morning as I waited to see what Mike would select from his "treasure chest" to give to my mother and her "littlest" girl, in appreciation for a night's lodging and meals. Then they were gone, trudging down the road with their heavy packs.

Another event of great importance to us was the visit of the tin peddler. Usually some youngster would spot his approach and spread the news so that the whole family could assemble to greet him. This was a social call as well as a business one as he brought us news from relatives and friends that we seldom saw. His horse-drawn, box-like cart was exciting, with brooms, pails, sap buckets, wash tubs and wash boilers, pots and

pans hanging on the outside. Even tin cups dangled there adding their wee bit to the clatter. The inside was well supplied with the many items a farm family needed, such as needles, pins and bright bolts of gingham and percales. The tin peddler also bought from us old rags and balls of tin foil we had been saving for weeks.

Grocery carts were also a welcome sight to the country folks. The first ones were similar to the tin peddler's cart; box like and horse drawn. Morris Roach, who operated a general store in Pierrepont Center, came for years on a regular schedule. This seemed like a rare luxury to us to have so many of the necessities delivered right to our door! His visit brightened up the day for the rural folks.

Then progress moved in as meat peddlers with motorized carts came on the scene. Frank Fox from Canton was the first one I recall; later Frank Veio came on the route from Pierrepont Center.



*Hattie Perry Hadlock, greeting the vegetable peddler. Hattie was a trained milliner — at Algie's in Ogdensburg — then worked for I. Friedman. Later she and two other Harriets opened their own millinery shop in Massena, then in Brier Hill. "The Three Hats." (Photo courtesy of Mary H. Smallman).*

We had other callers who had no particular purpose — men who seemed to have the wanderlust and lots of friends who welcomed them to their homes for days or even weeks. One was Ezra Perkins, a very neat and ambitious man, who seemed to enjoy tidying up a wood shed or tool shop during his visit. I was happy to have him come since he kept the wood boxes filled, and this was one of my jobs as the youngest of the family.

Another man who came more often but stayed only a short time was Orlo Weston. He was most welcome at our house as he always brought his fiddle. We would quickly invite our neighbors in for a "kitchen hop" one evening during Orlo's stay.

These men knew the peace and beauty of walking along country roads, taking time to observe nature, which few people do today.

I will not elaborate on Joe Bolieu's visits, which seemed to carry a shroud of

mystique with them. I recall that he always came after dark, and although a small man in stature, he carried a large pack basket, the contents of which he generously shared with his friends — truly a gourmet's delight. Then he vanished into the darkness as quietly as he had appeared.

As far as I know none of these men are still living.

I recently contacted one of our early "itinerant visitors," Mayer Sperling, who came to our area about 1915 when just a teenager buying furs. His North Country friends proudly watched his rapid rise in the business world — from a fur buyer to the owner of several large furniture stores in nearby villages. The experiences he related to me are so interesting that, having his permission, I will quote them for you:

*September 7, 1977*

"I was born in Poland in 1896 and after emigration to Canada in 1913, came to

Northern New York in 1915. I landed in Potsdam to work on a farm at Parishville Center, the Byron Parker homestead about half way between Potsdam and Parishville. I worked on the farm for a time before I started on the road, which was when I met your family. After I left the farm I started peddling around Potsdam. Actually, rather than peddling, my business consisted of buying hides, furs, wool and bran sacks; hides all year round, wool mostly in the Spring and furs in the Fall and Winter. I traveled all of St. Lawrence County and part of Franklin County.

In 1915 when I started my business, my largest suppliers were Mark Whitney from Cray Mills, Tom Basford from Degrasse and Henry Murray in West Pierrepont. I sold what I bought to the American Hide and Leather Company, the Burlington Rendering Company and John L. Paige in Binghamton. When I first started it was with a horse. I drove a wagon in the Spring and a sleigh in the Winter.

In 1916 I bought my first truck and from then on that was the way I traveled until 1919 when I opened the store in Canton. On one occasion I drove a Ford from West Pierrepont through the Buck Pond Road to Clare. I remember the car hit a stone in the road and bent the steering mechanism so that it couldn't go further. I left it on the Buck Pond Road and started to walk to Clare. This was about a four hour walk and as I didn't have any food with me, I picked blueberries along the way and carried them to eat during the trip. When I traveled the car was continually getting stuck in the muddy roads. I used to have a fellow come along with me to help push me out of the mud. One of those fellows was Ed Bushaw, and another was Harley Santimaw. In later years Harley was a policeman in Canton.

One day driving from Colton to Tupper Lake I got into a rut in the road which I couldn't get out of. At that time I had a Dodge car, and when I got stuck like that, I would put the car in low gear and run along behind it to push it. On this trip I left the car and walked back to Hollywood. Travel was so light in those days that the car was in the middle of the road all night with the furs and everything in it and nobody went near.

In the winter months of January, February and March, it was impossible to drive a car or truck, so I used a horse and cutter. One horse in particular was a fast horse, an old race horse. The harder I would pull on the lines, the faster he would go. That horse just didn't want to stop. The only way I could get it to stop was to drive it into the side of a building. That was a good horse, I covered a lot of miles with it. I should say it was a good horse if you could get along with a crazy horse. Another person might not have been able to do that. You just couldn't



*Interior of Mayer Sperling's first store, Riverside Drive, Canton.*

hold that horse. When he saw another cutter he just had to race, he had to beat the other horse. One time passing another cutter, my cutter tipped over and I ran along beside it trying to tip it back up in order to get in. The horse just wouldn't stop. It's hard for me to imagine myself, now, running along beside, holding on to the cutter, trying to get it right side up and holding on to the reins of a running horse all at the same time! That was quite a horse. On one day I could start out from Canton and drive all the way to Degrasse. Mind you, I made a lot of stops along the way and the only way I could stop him was to drive him up to a building.

I remember another horse I had. It was a good horse but very slow. I never believed in whipping a horse, but late at night when I was trying to get home I would touch him a little and the horse would turn around and look at me as if to say, "Why did you do that?" I had a horse one time that just wouldn't get started. The only way was to go ahead of him, pull him until he did start and then run along and hop in the wagon or cutter. I got so I could do it because I had to. Sometimes in the winter it snowed so hard you couldn't see the road. On one occasion the horse wanted to go one way and I thought we should go another. I steered him and wound up on Herb Eggleston's porch! That taught me never to try to steer a horse when you are lost — just let the lines go and he'll take you home.

I used to have a great time. There was a fellow by the name of Kingsley who was a trapper. He was a very industrious man and he liked to trap and he knew how to do it. I used to buy furs from him. One night I came into his place and he showed me a fur. I thought it was a fisher, but I wasn't really sure and I couldn't tell him because if I did, he'd put the price so high that I couldn't possibly afford to buy it. The mail order buyers used to rate the fishers up very high, but often times these high pressure houses wouldn't pay the prices they quoted because when they saw the hide, they'd claim it was a lower grade and wasn't worth as much. But I had to compete with that. They were as guilty of false advertising as any of the high pressure sales outfits are today. On this night, Kingsley had about \$300 worth of furs. A lot of odd pieces, and among them was this fisher. To make a long story short, I bought the whole bunch. Somehow or other he found out it was a fisher. The next time I went up there, I stopped at the Hollywood Inn. Charley Day, who operated the Inn, said "Don't go up to Kingsley, he'll shoot you. You bought a fisher from him and you didn't tell him it was a fisher." I said to Charley, "I bought a bunch of furs and I gave him so much money for it. I took my chances on what was in there, just like he did." But I added, "He won't shoot me. I

didn't beat him. I asked him how much he wanted for the furs and we agreed on a price for the whole lot." When I got up to Kingsley's I knocked. He came to the door mad as a mad dog. Needless to say, we made up and did business again. To bring the story up to date, not too long ago I was driving in that area with my family and I thought I had lost my way. I stopped at a cabin that was set back from the road, and who was there but the same Kingsley. He greeted me like a long lost friend. In all the dealings that I had over the years with all the bargaining and dickering that we did, we always wound up good friends.

One time in winter, I think it was February, I went in to Massawepie Lake to buy some furs and I was on foot. The snow was very deep. It was okay going in and I only bought as much as I thought I could carry out on my back. But the snow was so deep and I got so tired I just couldn't continue; I became so exhausted that I started to call for help, sure that no one was around to hear or answer me. I passed out or fell asleep in the snow. A forest ranger, name of Shumway, came along, found me, and carried me out. He took me into Gales, where I stayed for



*Mayer Sperling as a young man.*

about two weeks thawing out. I actually froze my feet and had to soak them in cold water before I could walk. I did some strange things in those days. They didn't seem strange at that time, but they do now looking back on them.

I knew that the trappers worked late on their trap lines and didn't return to their cabins until six or seven o'clock at night, after dark. So I would drive through the night to meet them, often leaving the car on the road and walking back to their cabins. The caretakers of the hunting clubs used to stay in the club houses and trap when the members weren't there. These club houses were set back in the deep woods. One time near Malone I went across Long Lake in a boat, starting at 11:00 o'clock. The water was so rough that we didn't get across

until about 2:00 o'clock. We didn't have any food with us and when we got where we were going, we asked the trapper if he had anything to eat. He said, "The only thing that I have is what is in the pot on the stove." The pot was a lard can, the food was a fox. But I was hungry enough to eat it.

I remember one time outside of Canton on the Ogdensburg road near the County Home, some people who lived in the swamp area were trapping. I came along the road, something cooking smelled good to me, so I asked if I could have some. They said "Sure, go ahead." It turned out to be muskrat. It was good too. I took some terrible chances. I walked from Cranberry Lake across to Wanakena. I was with Arthur Vebber. We had a pair of skis and a pair of snowshoes between us and I had never walked on snowshoes before. When we crossed the lake it was all slush. Each time I picked up a foot it seemed to have 100 pounds of slush on the snowshoe. Arthur had two uncles, Hick Salls and Arthur Salls. I went up there one day and Art was out with a party hunting. His wife said that I could wait for him, and while I was waiting we could get some fish. We went out on the lake and caught some speckled trout which she cooked right on the shore.

Thinking about it, the life I used to live was a lot of fun. Nothing to worry about, no responsibilities, no overhead, no problems. If I went into a place I liked I'd stay for a day and a night just for the fun of it. One time I drove into Massawepie Lake. It was right after a storm. There was a tree in the road. I always carried an axe with me. I started cutting the tree. I worked about two hours and couldn't get through so I left the car and walked in. I went up to the Stillwater Club one day. There were a bunch of deer hides that Bill Barbour, the guide, was going to sell me. He asked, "How are you going to get them?" I said, "I'll carry them out." He said, "You mean to tell me you are going to carry those deer hides out?" I said, "Yes, I'll carry them out." He said, "Well, if you carry them out, you can have them for nothing." So I did.

I remember there was a trapper by the name of Joe Injun. For that matter, they named a place, Joe Injun Pond, after him. He hunted and trapped all year round. He wasn't supposed to have venison all year round, but he did. He not only ate it himself, but he sold it. The game protector served papers on him and wanted to take him before the court. He wouldn't go, so the game protector took it upon himself to carry Joe out of the woods on his shoulders. Joe was chewing tobacco and he spit it down the game protector's back all the way. Most of those people aren't around here any more.

One day just a few years ago, I wandered into Shag Sheard's store in Cranberry Lake looking for someone that

I used to know, and I found Howard Gale right in the store. Recently I went up to Tupper Lake to see if I could find any of the people I used to know but there seemed to be none of them left. When I think back I could probably fill a book with some of the horse trading I used to do. I'd leave Canton at 9 or 10 in the morning and when I drove a horse I wouldn't go over 4 or 5 miles and I'd have to stop to feed the horse. I'd eat dinner, go another 2 or 3 miles, turn around and come back stopping along the way. It used to take me a week to go to Tupper Lake. I'd come back through Santa Clara, St. Regis Falls to Potsdam and Canton. I'd stop at practically every house. Someone might have only a weasel, muskrat, a coon or a fox. Other folks would have a lot of furs. The houses weren't very close together. Sometimes they would be 3 or 4 miles apart.

Every week I used to go to Clare and to Degrasse. There were 50 or 60 houses on the way. Now there are perhaps 10 farmers. All the farmers used to trap. Milk was selling for only 75 cents or \$1 a hundred and they had to trap in order to survive. The farmers used to have a tough life. When I worked on a farm, I was up at 5:30 each morning and worked until 9 o'clock at night.

One time I was driving from Canton toward Potsdam. I had just bought a new Ford truck. I remember I bought the chassis and had the body built in Canton. \$385 was the price of the truck. I went by the Jim Paul farm, I waved and he waved me in. He said, "Let me show you something, see if you can buy it." He had been a blacksmith for years and years, piling up horseshoes and all kinds of old iron. There was a big pile of it. He asked, "Would you like to buy it?" I didn't know any more about iron than I did about chewing gum, but I said, "Sure I'll buy it, how much do you want for it?" I don't remember how much he said but whatever it was, I offered him half of it and he took it. I made enough from that iron to pay for my new truck. This was during the period of the first World War when iron was very valuable and the price was very high. I was drafted to go to the war, but I got influenza and wasn't taken right away. When I was finally called the group I was with was to report at the Armory here in Ogdensburg. We went from Canton to Ogdensburg on the bus, and we were here with our packs and everything ready to go to camp when the war ended and we were discharged. I was always disappointed in not going. I had settled all my affairs, left my car and money with the bank with instructions of what to do in case anything happened to me. Harold Barnes of the Canton Hardware Company was to be my administrator.

To back up a bit as to how I happened

to stay in the North Country: when I got through working on the farm I went into Potsdam to the Goldsmith store. Louie Goldsmith sold me a shirt and asked me where I was going. I told him that I was going to Chicago to work for Swift and Company. He asked, "What do you want to go away for? You can earn a good living here in the North Country." Just about that time a gentleman by the name of Max Swerdlow walked by carrying a fur. Goldsmith pointed him out to me and said, "There's Mr. Swerdlow, he has made a lot of money here traveling around buying furs. You could do the same thing."

There were a lot of fur buyers around Potsdam at that time. Swerdlow had a horse and wagon, Sussman had a horse and wagon. They all did about the same thing. Goldsmith convinced me that if others could be successful buying furs I could be too. So I bought a horse and wagon from Fred Williams, and I started out to buy. I was shown around by Sam Krupnek and I stayed at his house for a while.

In the olden days every farmer had horses and they all wanted to trade. What they were really interested in was how much they could get to boot; ten dollars, twenty dollars or fifty dollars. One day, near Canton, I traded with Charlie Liscomb for a gray horse. I didn't know it, but the horse kicked! The next day while driving it between Heuvelton and Depeyster, it was very hot. The horse started kicking, broke the thills, tore the harness, kicked the wagon apart and ran away so that I had to run to catch it.

When I bought my first truck, I was driving from Morley to Madrid. Two



*Sperling's first truck, a Ford.*

ladies came along in a buggy, and their horse, scared by the truck, tipped over the buggy. It was Mrs. Dandy and Mrs. Bartholomew. I was so embarrassed I never did look those ladies in the face again.

Back around 1919-1920 and 1921 the fur market went down. I decided I wanted to go into the retail business. I looked around and the only other person in the furniture business was an undertaker, and he didn't look like he would be very tough competition. I went to visit Sam Katzman, who had a furniture store in Gouverneur, for advice. In those days you didn't have to know a great deal to be in the furniture business. I went to Lowville and Boonville where there were furniture factories; also to McConnellsville, New York, and Medina, where I bought from S.A. Cook. They were the big upholstery house in those days . . . and Halligan in Newark, New York. They were especially nice people. It didn't take much money. I had a little and I went to the bank and borrowed a couple of thousand dollars. It wasn't hard to borrow money because I knew the banker well.

On Sunday I used to sit in front of the Hodskin Garage, that was owned by Cornell and Barbour, with Riley Beard, the banker, Bing Stevens and John Bird. It was next to the Harrington Hotel. There is a supermarket there now. We'd sit 2 or 3 hours on a Sunday and visited with a lot of good people passing by. Canton was and still is a good town.

I came over from Europe on August 9, 1913 and I came to Canada. But Canada is a whole other story, and I could ramble on for a long time about those years. So I will close and thank you for including me in your historical article on St. Lawrence County."

*Mayer Sperling*

Although we have all succumbed to the modern conveniences and would hesitate, I'm sure, to return to the way of life in the "Good Old Days," yet we find it truly delightful to reflect on these times — when the world seemed much larger and the pace was so much slower.

As I ponder on these memories I try to imagine what changes the next sixty years will bring??

May they bring everyone happiness.

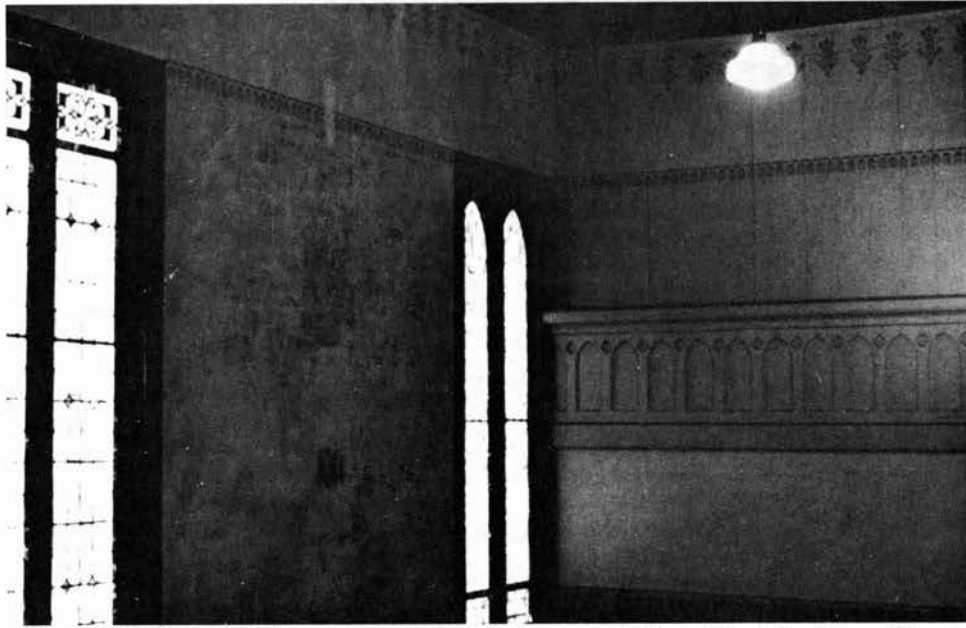
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#### For Further Reading

J.R. Dolan's *The Yankee Peddlers of Early America*.  
Richardson Wright's *Hawkers and Walkers in Early America*.

#### About the Author

Flora Garner grew up on a farm near Hannawa Falls and still returns frequently to visit her relatives. She has been a loyal member of SLCHA and a past contributor to *The Quarterly*.



Interior walls of Brick Chapel with stencilling intact, before remodeling. (Photo by James Stambaugh, 1974.)

# Victorian Wall Stencils in Brick Chapel

by Judy Campbell Chittenden

*The decorating of interior walls of homes, churches, public buildings, and business buildings was common throughout the nineteenth century. Most examples have long since disappeared as remodeling of buildings occurred or as the buildings themselves were torn down or otherwise destroyed. But Brick Chapel, just south of Canton village, still is active and until recently retained all of its stencilled walls. This is the story of the desperate recording of these old patterns as they were about to be completely covered by the painter's brushes, one other kind of historic preservation. We include samples of other Victorian stencil designs. If you know of other existing examples, the author would appreciate your telling her.*

One day in late June, 1975, Sigrid Ouderkirk, who lives on Barnes Road just south of Canton and around the corner from Brick Chapel Church, received a call from her friend and neighbor, Janet Favro. Jan, knowing of Sigrid's interest in wall and furniture decorating and particularly in stencilling, had called to tell her about the crew of young people coming from New Jersey the first week in July to clean and redecorate Brick Chapel. (See the *St. Lawrence Plain-dealer* July 2, 1975). In the process the wall stencilling which Sigrid had long admired would be painted over.

With that news Sigrid promptly assembled her pad and pencils and, accompanied by her husband John, set off to trace the Brick Chapel stencils. By standing on the highest rung of the tallest ladder the Ouderkirks own, Sigrid was able to preserve all of the stencil patterns.

Perhaps the simplest definition of stencilling is provided by Janet Waring in her book *Early American Stencils on Walls and Furniture*: "Stencilling is . . . the simple process of applying form to a surface through openings made in a superimposed material. . ." It has been

done and can be done on a wide variety of surfaces including furniture, tin ware and plaster walls. Wall stencilling was formerly done in imitation of the more expensive and often imported wall papers and, while the earliest date for stencilling known in this country is 1778 (Waring, p. 19), stencilling flourished primarily in the first quarter of the 19th century. As is the case with many arts and crafts, however, evidence of later examples is more abundant. This is certainly the case with Brick Chapel Church.

As a country tin painter and stenciller herself, Sigrid was, quite naturally, curious about who did the stencilling, when it was done and where the materials might have come from. As she questioned church members, Sigrid discovered that the only written source of church history giving any clues about the stencilling was the books of the Ladies Aid Society, which begin about 1906. The minutes of this group reveal that on May 25, 1922 a committee consisting of Mrs. Hosley, Mrs. Lobdell and Mrs. Poole was appointed to see Hall and Jubinville about redecorating the walls of the church. The July 6 minutes indicate that the committee decided to consult Mr.

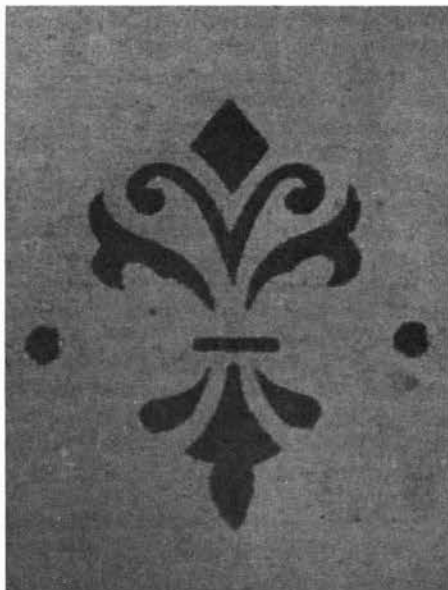
Ransom Empey about the work. The next pertinent entry is October 4, in which a money order in the sum of \$153.00 was made payable to Mr. Empey as payment for his work in decorating the walls of the Brick Chapel.

Further information about the stencilling may come from a page in the 1922 ledger of Barr Pharmacy, until recently located on Main Street, Canton. (Please see Figure 1) Examination of the dates of entry correlate well with the dates of the Ladies Aid meetings cited above. The items purchased indicate that they could well have been used for painting and stencilling the church walls. The chrome yellow, raw sienna and burnt umber would have been mixed to produce the reddish brown of the Brick Chapel stencils. The varnish might have been used on the pews or on the wooden ceiling. Mr. Roy Barr remembers selling packages of Farber New York Stencils, although he does not recognize the particular designs used in the Chapel. Figure 1 also locates the Brick Chapel at Crary Mills. While the Brick Chapel area was once known as South Canton, the origin of the Crary Mills reference is unknown.

There were actually three different stencil designs on the walls of the Chapel. The bottom stencil (Figure 2) was placed about 18½" above the bottom of the window casement and 48¾" from the floor. One motif measured 5½" from the top of the slash line (the - - in Figure 2) and was 2-5/8" at its widest point. The slashline (- -) of the middle stencil was placed even with the top of the window casements and was 4¾" tall and 2½" wide. The top stencil (Figure 4), placed about 1½" from the ceiling molding, was 12" high at its tallest and 10" wide from the center . to center . of the swag (the curved line connecting the large motifs). The walls themselves were painted in three shades of tan, changing above the point where the stencil was placed. Each of the three succeeding colors was lighter, with the darkest at the bottom. Examples of the top two stencils still exist on the back wall of the Brick Chapel which was not repainted in 1975.

How the work was actually done is somewhat debatable. The use and location of a number of half motifs leads Sigrid to believe that the stencilling was probably done counter clockwise. There is also evidence of use of both "bobs" and stippling brushes (short, blunt brushes lending themselves to paint application in a series of dots or very small strokes.)

Whether or not the stencils will be repainted on the walls of Brick Chapel is uncertain. The point is that Sigrid Ouderkirk has preserved an interesting and important aspect of local history. This is, indeed, much of what historic preservation is about. Recording the past is sometimes the only way to preserve it. It is not always either feasible or desirable to maintain buildings, furniture or decoration exactly as they have been. When this is the case, careful records make real vestiges of the past to the benefit of the present and future.



Detail of one motif of Brick Chapel, at chair rail.

STATEMENT			
		Canton, N.Y. Oct 19 9-2	
<i>Brick Chapel (Cray Mills)</i>			
IN ACCOUNT WITH			
<b>The Barr Pharmacy</b>			
ROY M. BARR, PROPRIETOR			
" A GOOD DRUG STORE "			
TERMS CASH		PHONE 64-W	
Aug	20	30 Gals Paint	90 00
Oct	2	2 Gals Oil	2 50
		1 lb Chrome yellow	75-
		2" Raw Sienna	1 00
		2" Burnt Umber	1 00
		5 lbs Plaster Paris	25-
		5" Glue	1 25-
Oct	9	1/2 Gal Turp	1 00
		1 lb R. Sienna	50
		1" Chrome yellow	75-
		1/2 pt Oil	25-
Oct	10	2 gal Varnish	10 00
		1 lb Burnt Umber	50
		14 oz Gold Beige	1 75-
Oct	13	1/2 Gal Varnish	2 50
		Buy 15 Gals Paint	45 00
		" 5 lbs Glue	1 25-
		3 1/2 oz Bronze	48
			114 00
			46 73
			67 27

A page from Barr Pharmacy account book listing items used in 1928 stencilling. Courtesy Roy Barr.

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#### About the Author

Judy Campbell Chittenden is a graduate student at Syracuse University with a personal interest in decorative arts. She has been active in SLCHA, both in fund raising efforts and in arrangements for programs and publications, like the calendars and Christmas cards.

#### For Further Reading

Esther Stevens Brazier's *Early American Decoration*.

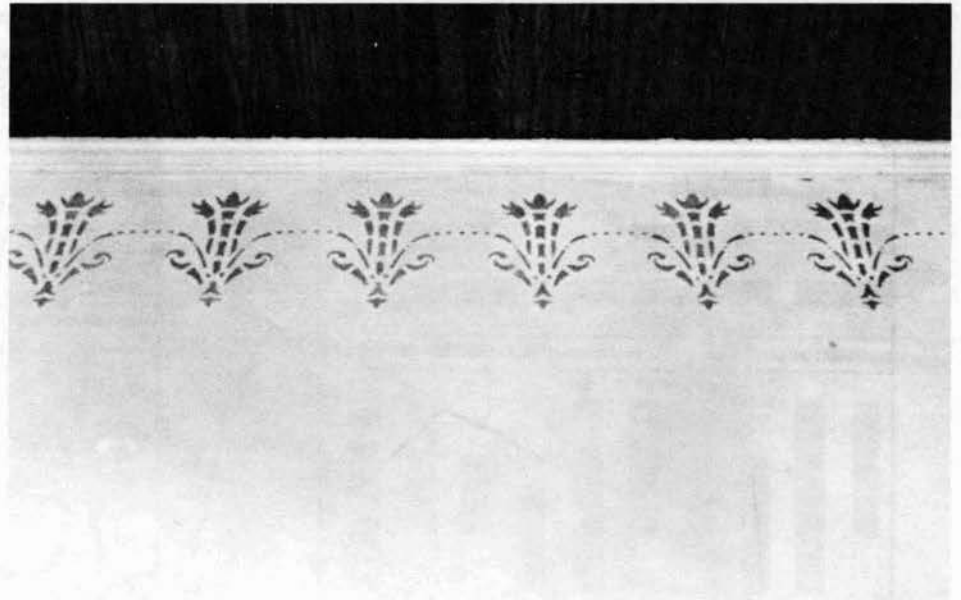
Arthur Louis Duthie's *Stencils and Stencilling For All Purposes, Artistic and Decorative*.

Janet Waring's *Early American Stencils on Walls and Furniture*.

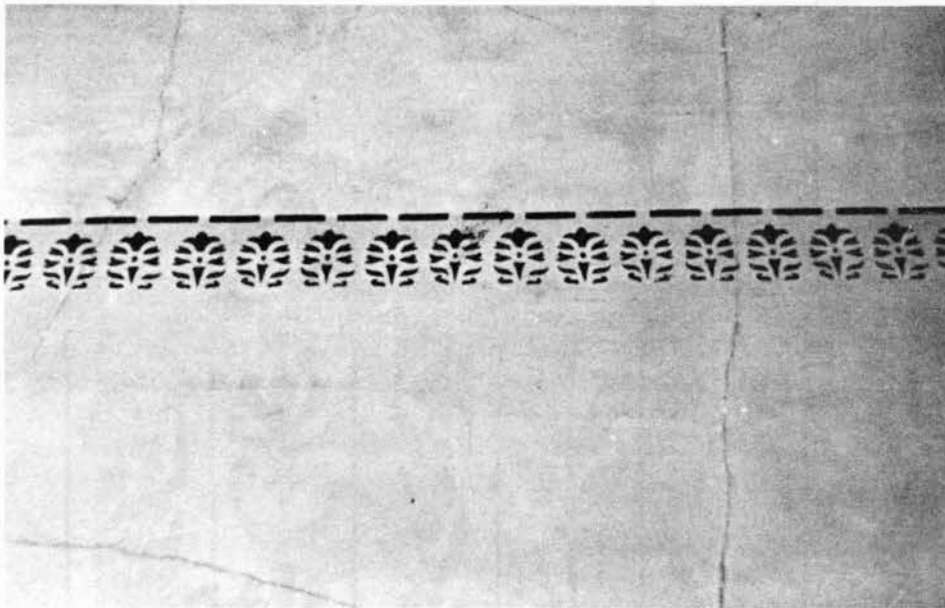


Stencil patterns found in  
Brick Chapel.

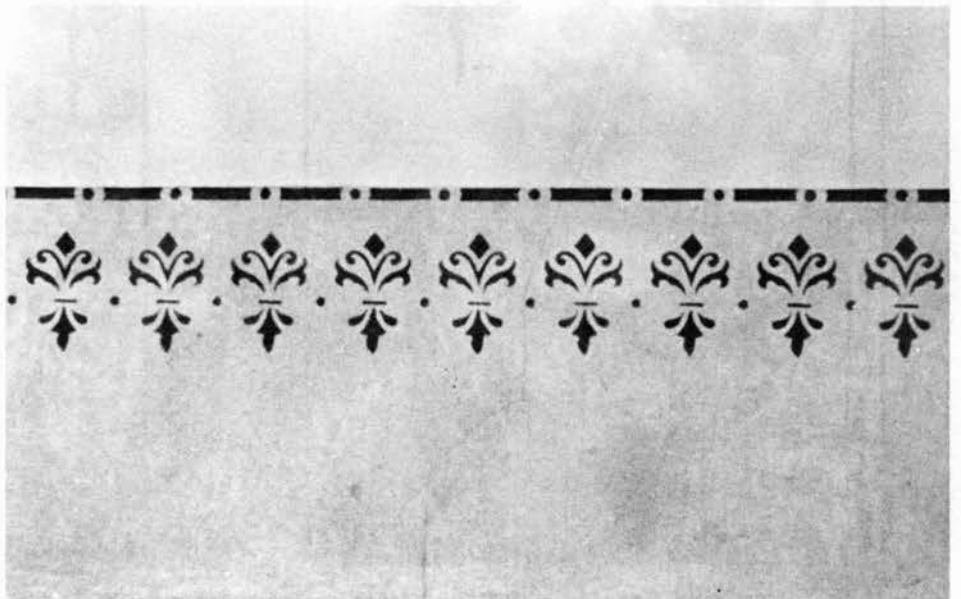
Photographs courtesy of  
Sigrid Ouderkirk.



Frieze just below ceiling moldings.

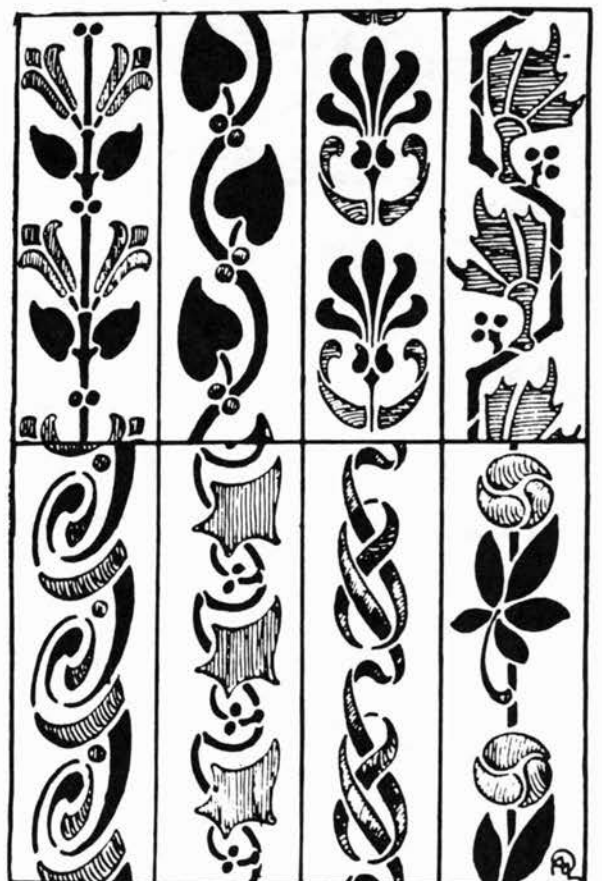
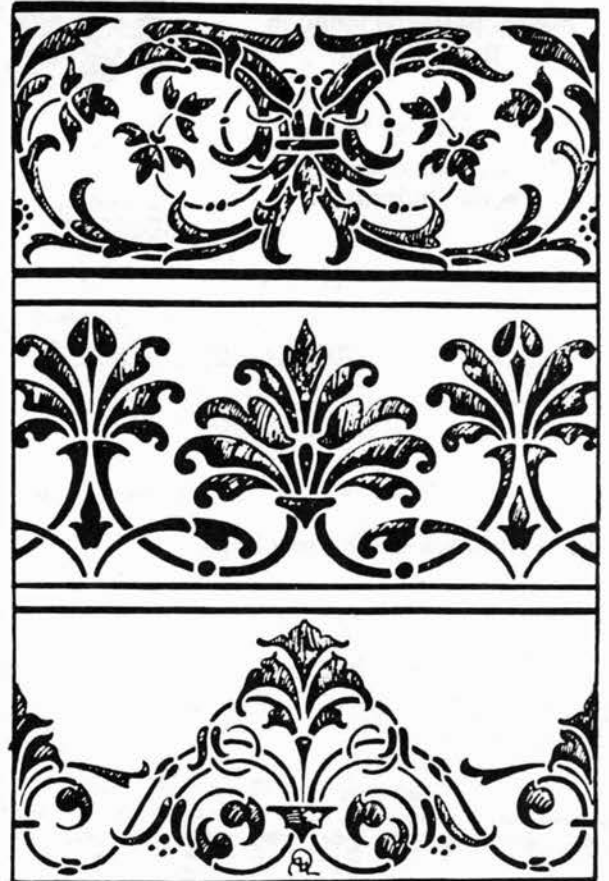
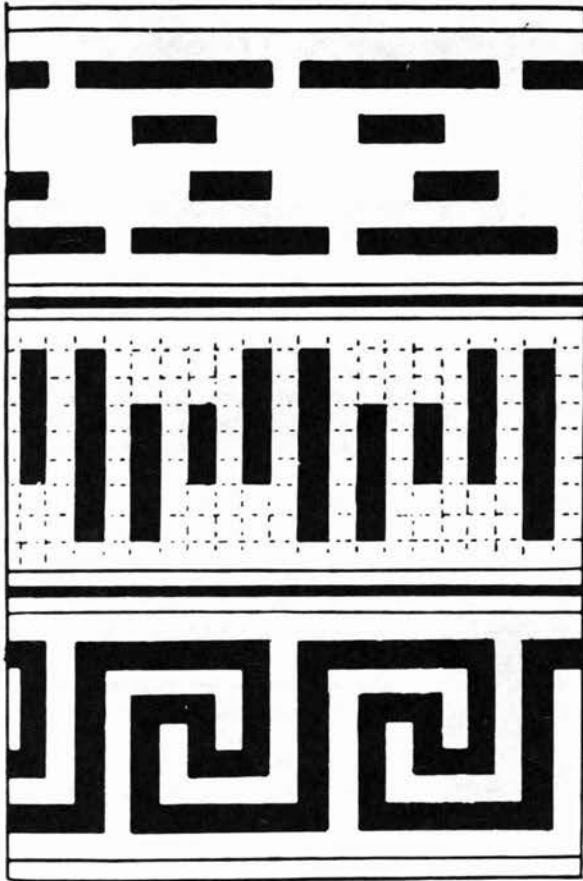


High sidewall pattern.



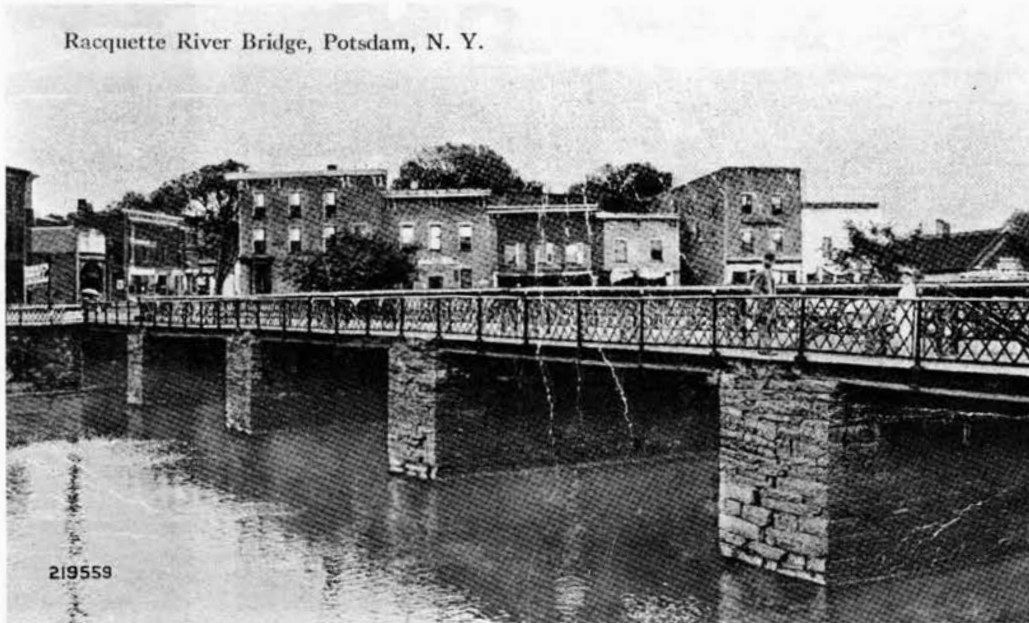
Chairrail pattern.

Examples of Victorian Stencil Patterns



Taken from Guthrie's Stencils and Stencilling for All Purposes, Artistic and Decorative, 1914.

Racquette River Bridge, Potsdam, N. Y.



## Crossing That Bridge When We Come To It —

**A nostalgic postcard album tour of some early spans  
— some large, some small —  
that crossed our rivers and streams,  
making travel and commerce bearable,  
even beautiful.**



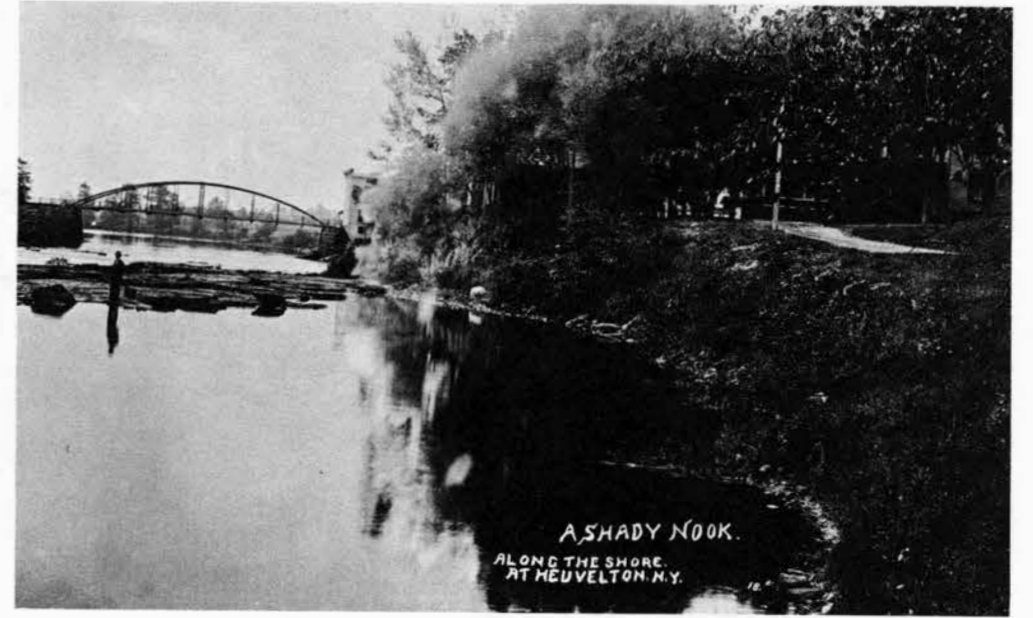
WEST CHANNEL OF GRASSE RIVER.



R.R. BRIDGE NEAR POWER PLANT MASSENA N.Y.

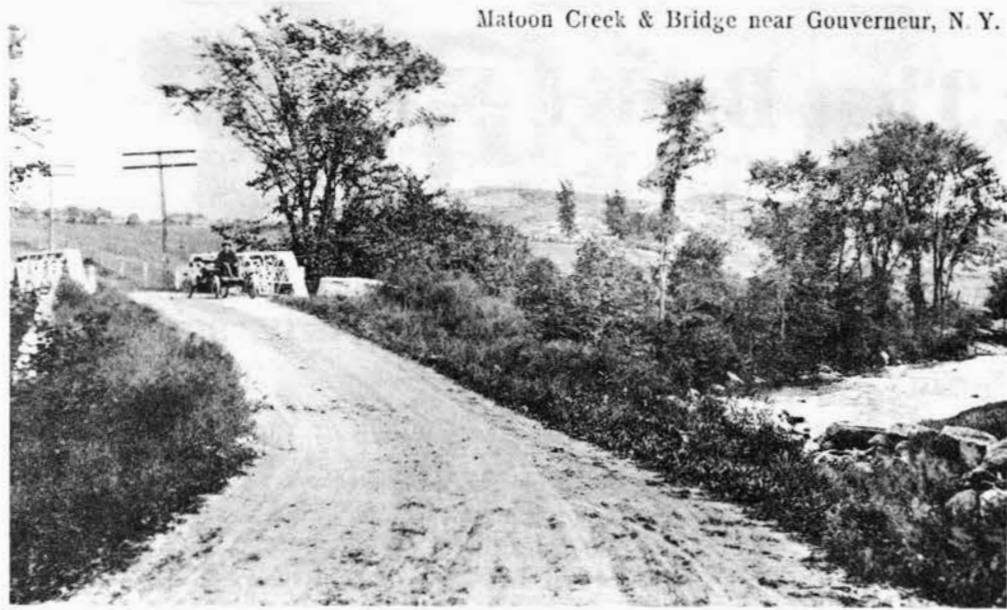


01206 Gouverneur, N.Y. Main St. Bridge, and Wood Building.



A SHADY NOOK.  
ALONG THE SHORE  
AT HEUVELTON N.Y.

Matoon Creek & Bridge near Gouverneur, N. Y.



THE OLD COVERED BRIDGE BRASHER FALLS N.Y.

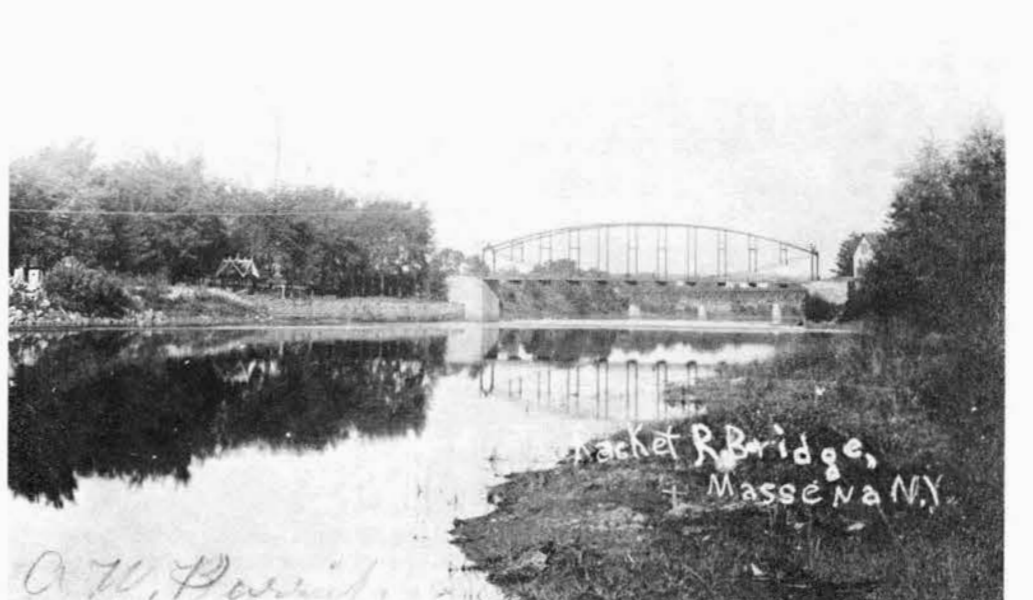
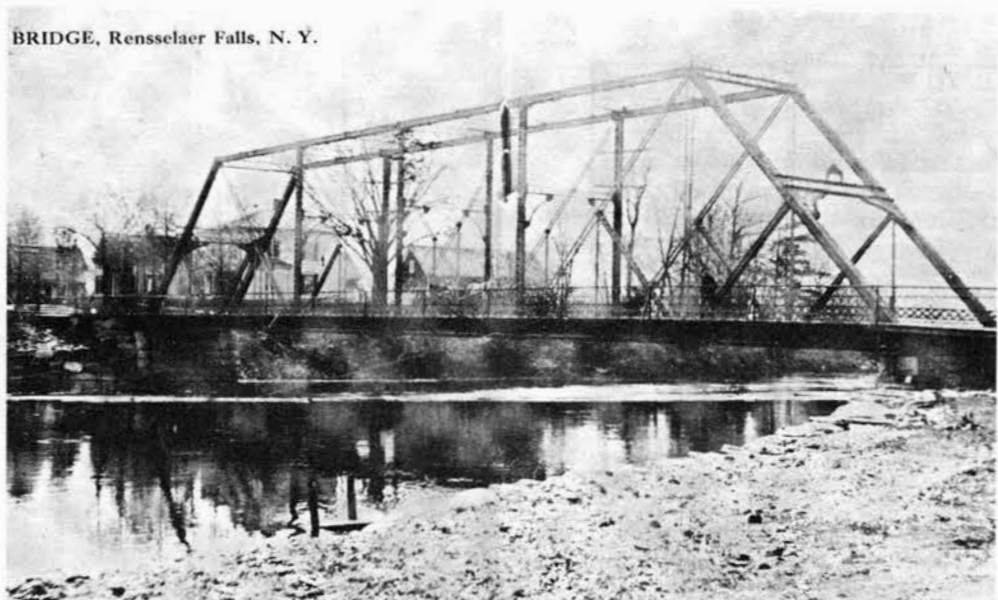


RAQUETTE RIVER AND BRIDGE HANNAUA FALLS N.Y. 16.



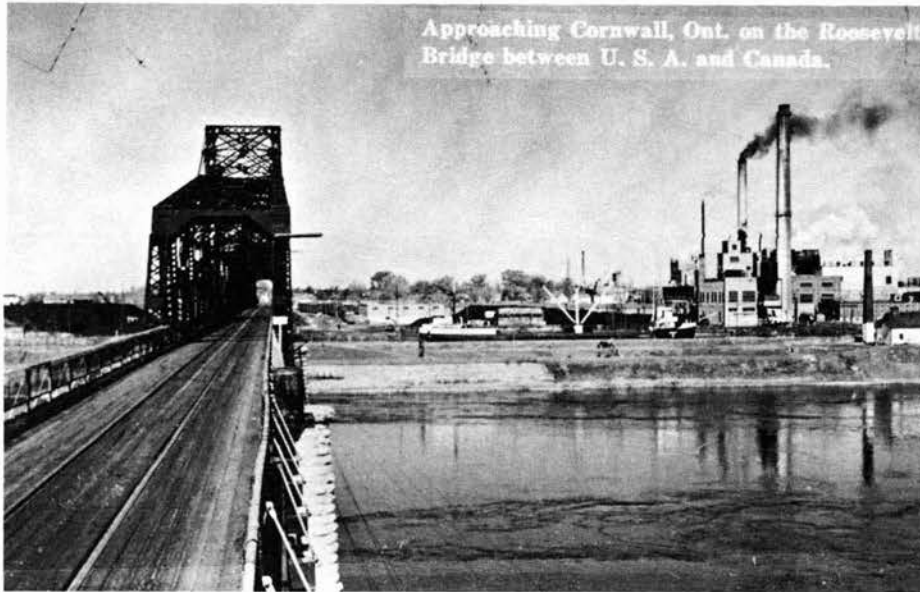
THE GORGE, FAIRBURYVILLE, N. Y. 15.

BRIDGE, Rensselaer Falls, N. Y.

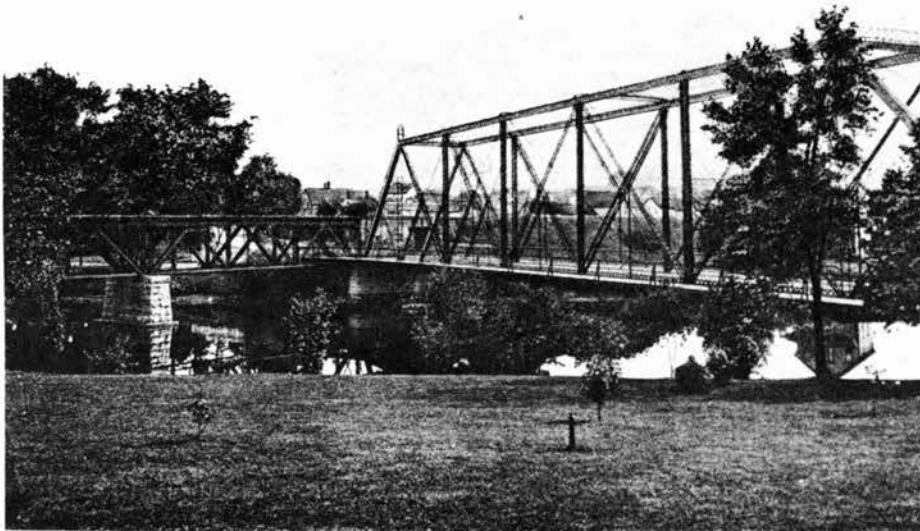


Hackett R. Bridge,  
Masseena N.Y.

*A. W. Parrish*



Approaching Cornwall, Ont. on the Roosevelt Bridge between U. S. A. and Canada.

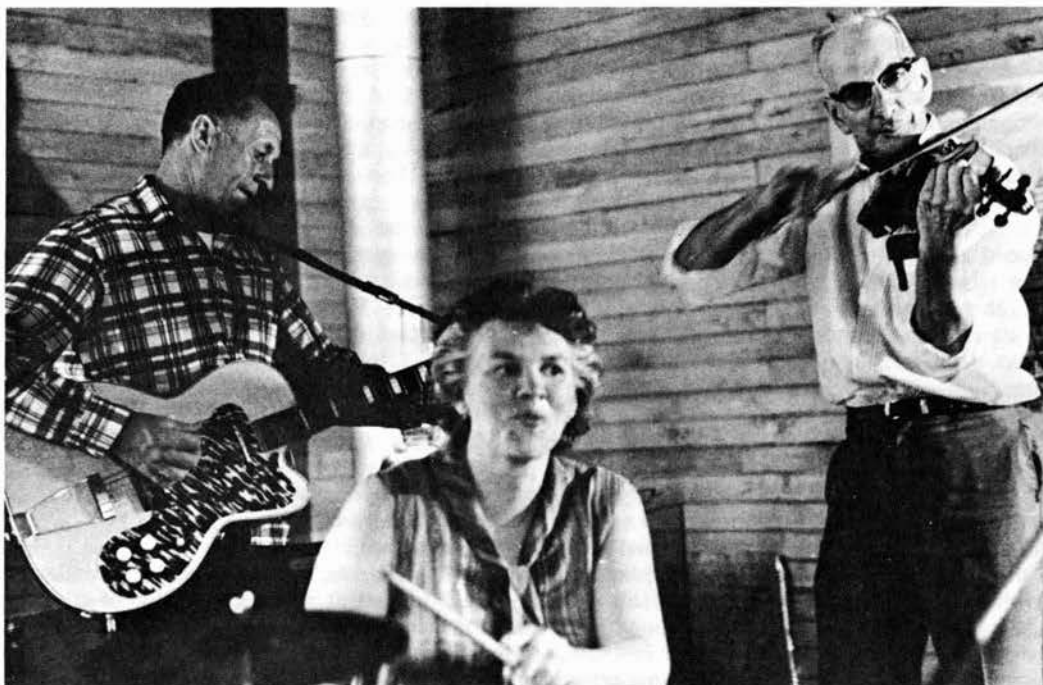


N. Y. C. R. R. and Williams Street Bridges, Gouverneur, N. Y.



Postcards used in this essay are from the collection of the Archives at the County History Center.





"The Country Cousins" in 1972. Fiddler Ralph Aldous, with Jess and Barbara Day.  
—photo by the author

# Old Time Fiddling and Social Dance in Central St. Lawrence County

by Robert D. Bethke

*Within the past five years we have witnessed a great awareness and revival of interest in the fiddling tradition of the North Country. Hardly a week goes by without a fiddler's contest somewhere nearby and even an active North Country Fiddler's Association has formed with recordings already being made. Much of the credit for all this activity can go to Dr. Bob Bethke, whose original field research and this article, first published in 1974, focused our attention to this significant aspect of our heritage. Further, his work is very important for us to see the professional folklorist's serious and intensive efforts to find and analyze the tenuous, passing parts of our rich, traditional culture.*

## Author's Foreword

This essay originally appeared in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, 30 (1974), 163-182. It is reprinted here in slightly revised form. I suspect that many readers of *THE QUARTERLY* will find the treatment excessively "academic" in nature. At the time I wrote the piece very few discussions of the subject matter were available in folklore scholarship, my professional discipline. In fact, I was unable to find any previous studies which described the heritage (in the North Country or elsewhere) in terms of past and present community life or active performers. The situation hasn't changed much since then. Collections of fiddle tunes and affectionate biographies of individual folk musicians continue to far outnumber the kind of folk cultural approach I employed. While some readers may disagree with some of my findings

and interpretations, I hope that all will come away with a sense of the importance of folklore field studies. There is a need for more of them in St. Lawrence County, an area rich in "old-time traditions" of various types.

## OLD-TIME FIDDLING AND SOCIAL DANCE IN CENTRAL ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY

The upsurge of public interest in old-time fiddlers' contests throughout the county may well foreshadow the "discovery" of the vital fiddling and social dance heritage in Northern New York. Significantly, the trend toward the formation of organizations dedicated to the preservation and promotion of traditional instrumental music appears to be moving westward across the Adirondacks. A case in point is the small and little-known local fiddlers' contest held annually in October

since 1971 at the Knox Memorial Central High School in Russell. To date, this south-central St. Lawrence County contest has attracted an enthusiastic group of entrants engrained in the old-time instrumental musical tradition of the surrounding rural communities. That heritage deserves to be better known among many natives and non-residents of the North Country.

Based on my field observations during the period 1970-1973, including a series of lengthy interviews with six male fiddlers ranging in age from 60 to 81, it would appear that the fiddling tradition in central St. Lawrence County has been perpetuated mainly among residents of mixed English, Scots, Scots-Irish and Lowland Irish backgrounds. My method has been to ask known fiddlers for leads to similar performers. I have used the same type of approach during informal

conversations with patrons in local bars and with residents at various public and private gatherings. Another procedure has been to attend round and square dances in taverns, Grange Halls, barns and other large capacity structures. To date, French-Canadian fiddlers have been conspicuously absent at the latter events. Direct inquiries about living fiddlers in the area have produced the names of a dozen local musicians whom I have yet to contact; few of the surnames, at surface view, hint at French-Canadian stock. This finding has been contrary to my initial expectations.

Given the clear-cut and substantial impact of French-Canadian fiddling tradition upon old-time music in northern New Hampshire, Vermont and the Champlain Valley, one would expect to find similar influences throughout St. Lawrence County. Indeed, if one is to go by the responses of local fiddlers to questions along these lines, and their reaction to recorded French-Canadian fiddling from Canada and elsewhere, it is clear that the Anglo-Scots-Irish musicians greatly admire their music-making counterparts. But these same Anglo-Scots-Irish fiddlers are also quick to point out the perceivable differences in tune repertoires, bowing techniques, rhythmic complexity and other performance characteristics (including marked and intricate foot-tapping) which often identify the fiddler working within the French-Canadian heritage. In short, the British-derived heritage seems to predominate overwhelmingly in central St. Lawrence County. Were one to document fiddling tradition more to the west near Ogdensburg, or to the north, say in and around Massena, or to the east in the vicinity of Tupper Lake, Franklin County, I suspect that the findings might be different. There might well be greater evidence of hybridization in musical repertoire and stylistic mannerism, as reported elsewhere in the Northeast. The fact is that I have not found it during preliminary investigations within the field site.

#### **Fiddling and Social Dance: The Domestic Tradition**

While radio and television have diminished the currency of household traditional singing over the past fifty years, television in particular has had just the opposite effect upon patterns of fiddling. Local fiddlers rarely miss an opportunity to watch weekly country music shows, many of which feature talented fiddlers performing traditional dance tunes. By far the most popular of these broadcasts has been the "Don Messer Show" transmitted on CKWS-TV from nearby Kingston, Ontario. Messer's recent death may thus prove to have significant long-range effects upon fiddling tradition in St. Lawrence County. His many years of personal appearances, radio and television broadcasts and phonograph recordings have had major impact upon Cana-

dian and Northeast fiddling style in general. Numerous local musicians continue to watch similar televised offerings, however, including "The Pig and Whistle," "Sing-a-long Jubilee" and "The Tommy Hunter Show."

Fiddlers will gather at the home of a fellow musician to watch these musical grab-bags and to "visit," the latter activity including expressive conversation which mixes gossip, news exchange and what amounts to talk for the sake of talk. Sprinkled throughout the discussions are comments about the technical virtuosity and performance manners of the television performer. For some local fiddlers like Dave Snow, a 60 year-old retired town highway department employee from Madrid, the broadcast programs and related get-togethers have contributed heavily to personal tune repertory and technique. At the conclusion of a televised segment, it is not at all uncommon to find such musicians turning to their instruments for the sake of solo or group performance within the household. In the case of small group gatherings, fiddlers will often retire to the kitchen to make their music. In the older homes, the kitchen is usually spacious, sparsely functional in furniture and decor, and warm. It is often symbolically — if not literally — the heart of the household, and a focal point for a sense of home, hearth and camaraderie.

The contemporary pattern of fiddling and friendship in local homes is one which has precedents in the rural "kitchen hops" (alternately, "kitchen dances," "house dances" or "house parties") of earlier years. The kitchen hop was a major social institution in central St. Lawrence County, for it served as a bridge between the domestic unit and people in the neighborhood. Men and women were drawn together in expressive communal activity within what was ordinarily a private setting. All of the elderly residents with whom I have spoken recall participating in such events; most have expressed regret at the tradition's demise by the end of the Second World War.

House parties were held throughout the year, but most frequently following the fall harvest and during the early summer. The consumption of large quantities of cider and food played an important part in such gatherings. Canton plumber Avery St. Louis, an active fiddler in his early 60s, recalled one memorable occasion: "When I was 20 years old or so, they used to have dances every week somewhere. House dance. Everybody'd bring a cake. I went to a dance one night and they had fourteen cakes there. Had a little piece of each one of them!"

To some extent, the typical house party provided a communal context for the distribution of surplus food commodities within the farming communities of



*Dave Snow at his home in Madrid, 1971. The "unorthodox" way of holding the instrument enabled old-time fiddlers to play and call dances simultaneously.*

—photo by author

the central Valley. In addition, the preparation of specialty dishes lent prestige to individuals and families, while the consumption itself afforded an opportunity to "visit" among local acquaintances. It was also an ideal setting for courtship. In all, the effect was to solidify a sense of neighborhood and neighborliness.

The highlight of every kitchen hop was the dancing among couples to the accompaniment of a fiddle or mouth organ. Adroit fiddlers with physical stamina who had an extensive repertory of tunes, whose instruments had "good loudness and tone," and who had a keen sense of "time" were widely favored. Nearly all of the elderly musicians with whom I have spoken have had experience playing at the occasions, although the frequency varied from player to player. "There's a lot of them can play square dances," accomplished fiddler Ralph Aldous of Canton once put it with a sense of pride, "but there's a lot of them can't get up and play a dance all the way through, all night, for 4 hours. Playing round dances, and waltzes, and everything. You've got to know how to play them for the dances." Claude Guthrie, retired baker and long-time fiddler also from Canton, described the kitchen dance of his youth:



*Avery St. Louis swapping tunes at Claude Guthrie's home, Canton, 1971.*

—photo by author

"As far back as I can remember," he told me, "we used to have kitchen hops. And they'd hire a fiddler. And of course they had cook stoves that burned wood in them days. And they'd generally set him in a chair up on there — but not fire in it! And they'd dance two sets there in the kitchen. He set up there and play, and do his own calling."

Kitchen hops placed heavy demands upon the local square dance fiddler. Most of the reward for performance was more in the way of prestige than monetary gain. Seventy-year-old Emmett Hurley from Hannawa Falls described his role at a typical gathering:

"I got to where I could play a little bit. And people began to kinda look up to it. And finally I got a job playing to square dances. I didn't want to, but I did. And I got by. And by Judas priest, for ten years I used to play about twice a week to kitchen hops . . . Then, everybody was poor. And they'd have it right in their own home. Invite their friends for birth-days, and anniversaries, and so on and so forth.



*Claude Guthrie, Canton, in his kitchen, April, 1971.*

—photo by author

. . . Boy, I'm going to tell ya, they were ambitious, too! They wanted a lot. We could play from 9 till 2 in the morning. Square dance after square dance. Ordinarily we used to play two changes, and then a breakdown . . . You take two changes and a breakdown right after it there, fast, and it'll take quite alot of energy, I'm tellin' ya.

. . . They'd pass the hat around, you know. Get guys to throw in a dollar, quarter, (or) fifty cents, and then give it to me. Or whatever I wanted. I never took it all; they always said you could. Had everything you needed and wanted. Sometimes they'd come and get ya (and) bring ya home."

Such kitchen dances not only showcased the local musician, but they provided a forum for the public exercise of individual skill and interpersonal decorum. Solo stepdancing in the form of "clogging" and "jigging" was common-

place at one time, and one can occasionally observe elderly men or women performing such maneuvers at present-day round and square dances in the towns. In the past, as in the present, there has been a need for acceptable ways to assert one's individual identity and creative energies within these small North Country communities. Kitchen hops, in one sense, provided an opportunity for controlled exhibitionism within the limits of propriety.

North Country kitchen dances brought the community into the household; "barn dances," in effect, extended the household into the community. The two patterns of socio-musical activity were intimately related in earlier years, and they often overlapped. People congregated at a barn to engage in communal activities like husking corn would later shift their attentions to household music-making and dance after completion of the work. Avery St. Louis recalled playing at one such "huskin' bee" in the town of Lisbon, a community in the western portion of the county where he spent part of his youth: "Big barn there. Boy, they had a pile of corn. I don't know how many people were there. They husked the corn. They had ten 10-gallon cans of cider. And pumpkin pies were piled up there. I'm tellin' you, you never saw such a sight! And then they had a dance. That was an all-night session. They held it in the house."

Other field contacts described similar patterns of domestic-based but community-focused social dance. John Russell, an 81 year-old former square dance fiddler living in Parishville, told about a number of musical occasions at which he performed, and he described their settings:

"Down to Parishville Center, there's a place they call Parker Homestead . . . Well, in the back part of that house there, up over the garage and woodshed, a man put on a floor and built a little platform on one end. And he put in a fire escape. And he held dances there. I played there three years running, for all the summer. The dances would start along the last of April or the first of May, and they'd continue through until Hallowe'en. Every two weeks . . .

Floyd Fallon, on the other side of Colton, had a big barn that he cleaned all out. Cleared it in good shape. It was a hayloft. And he held three dances there. Last of May and June until haying time. I played for those three dances . . .

While I was doing that, I was working on the town roads, too. We'd work until six o'clock on the road. I'd get home, and wash up and change, shave, eat my supper, get in my car and go to the dances. They'd dance until three o'clock in the morning. Then I'd come home and get a few winks of sleep, and go to work. I couldn't afford not to work, and I couldn't afford not to take up the

dancing. So, that's the way that was."

Community dances after the Second World War began to change character, in that they became less tied to family and neighborhood. They were gradually assimilated into a coexisting pattern of intercommunity dances at town halls, Granges, taverns and other settings of essentially nondomestic identity. Ralph Aldous linked this transition to changing patterns of domestic food production in the central and eastern portions of St. Lawrence County: "(The community dance) kinda died out after people began not to raise gardens. Years ago, farm women raised their own stuff — pork, beef, potatoes and so forth. And they'd bring baked beans, scalloped potatoes, salad . . . just like a banquet! And then, after they quit raisin' them and go to buyin' them, they quit bringin' them. It'd cost too much."

In a broader sense, the demise of the community-based domestic dance tradition, apart from the more private music-making which continues within some private homes, is indicative of the general decline in rural settlement in numerous parts of the county. In recent years many people have abandoned homes in older neighborhoods in order to move closer to Potsdam, Canton and other centers of commerce in the central and western Valley. Many young people are looking beyond their immediate communities for economic opportunities. Increased automobile usage has extended neighborhood boundaries and enabled an elaboration of intercommunity networks of friendship. This is not to say that the role of the family in local social life has changed markedly. But it is the case that in the central portion of the county and nearby foothill towns, public forms of tradition-based musical entertainment have moved progressively away from the home. With the shift in milieu, one finds differences in the tenor of the socio-musical activities.

#### **Fiddling and Social Dance: The Nondomestic Tradition**

Contemporary nondomestic old-time fiddling and social dance in central St. Lawrence County represents a "continuity of tradition" which stretches back to the early years of settlement and ultimately to the British Isles. But the heritage has not remained static and insulated from patterns of social and musical change in North Country life. Instead, as true generally for systems of folk music, it has been more a matter of continuous evolution than "survival" in the narrow and antiquated sense of the latter concept. The signs of this socio-musical change against a backdrop of continuity are in evidence throughout the central Valley.

Old-time fiddlers are much less common today at organized round and square dances than they were as recently as the 1950s. Many of the older men who



customarily "played to dances" in a semiprofessional capacity are now deceased or have retired to warmer climates. Others have "put down the fiddle" for a variety of reasons including physical impairments to arms, hands and fingers otherwise critical to playing ability. In talking with elderly fiddlers, one also finds a growing reluctance to perform publicly out of deference to younger musicians playing amplified guitars and "up-to-date" Country-Western and rock music. Still, a small percentage elderly traditional fiddlers continue to perform at both private and public social functions in St. Lawrence County, and apparently with greater frequency than found in other parts of Northern New York.

The public visibility and constituent features of present-day nondomestic fiddling activities vary with context and event. Some fiddlers, for instance, continue to find sporadic one-night dance jobs at social functions sponsored by local fishing-and-game clubs and similar organizations of restricted membership. There is minimal publicity for most of these events, and those which are open to the public cater heavily to middle-aged and elderly couples from nearby communities. Ralph Aldous, for example, has recently played a mixture of reels, waltzes and polkas at round and square dances held in the lodge of the Raquette Valley Fish and Game Club in Colton, and at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Canton. An occasional participant at such events will request a nostalgic jig, two-step or quadrille, but the number of people who recall and can still perform the intricate dance movements accurately is usually quite small nowadays. The atmosphere at these get-togethers ranges from sedate to exuberant. As Ralph noted, "Sometimes you don't have to play but one round dance; they all want square dances. Well, it depends on the mood of the people, I guess."

Much more frequent and accessible than the club dances are the public round and square dances held in Grange, American Legion, VFW and firehall facilities. The dances appear to gain popularity as one moves eastward across central St. Lawrence County and into the foothills. This pattern seems to be due in part to the infrequency there of the theatres, drive-in movies and other commercial forms of nightly entertainment more typical of the larger western Valley communities. The attraction of the dances in towns like Norwood, West Stockholm and Crary Mills may also reflect a sense of "community" which has begun to erode elsewhere. There needs to be a great deal more inquiry, however, to test these speculative correlations.

Dances at Granges and similar locales occur throughout the year, although they are least common during the cold winter months. Advertisements for the occasions appear regularly in local news-

papers like the *Potsdam Courier & Freeman*. I have attended numerous dances of this sort during my field work, but the round and square dance held at Crary Mills Grange on December 26, 1970 seems especially indicative of one pattern of evolution taking place within the region's old-time music and social dance traditions.

A Potsdam radio commentator announced that weekly dances were being held at the Grange every Saturday night from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. Upon arrival, my wife and I discovered that the admission at the door was seventy-five cents. We entered the nineteenth-century wooden structure, ascended a narrow flight of stairs to the second floor, and found a large and noisy assemblage of participants. Most of them were young teenagers. About a dozen adult chaperones mingled with one another on either side of the wooden dance floor. There were light refreshments and no alcoholic beverages, although I observed a number of youths slip out a side door for a clandestine drink and smoke.

The "Grasse River Rangers" dance band consisted of two musicians with amplified guitars and a third man playing drums. We were disappointed not to find a fiddler. Subsequent inquiries and observations disclosed that fiddlers are now much less common at dances where there will be predictably high numbers of youths. Fiddlers simply do not adapt well to the mixture of Country-Western and rock which the young people insist upon at these functions. Accordingly, on this particular evening a set of three square dance pieces was played on the hour; the remainder of the time was devoted to round dances and rock. The square dances seemed to be aimed mostly at gratifying some of the adults, and momentarily at least to restore some of the decorum lost during the progress of the other dance activities. Indicative of the gradual changes in repertoire, instrumentation and musical preferences in general at these events, one of the square dance numbers performed by the lead guitarist was "Darling Nelly Gray," an ubiquitous late Victorian tune in traditional circulation which I had previously heard several old-time fiddlers play at public dances elsewhere in the county. Such changes throughout the Valley seem to make their way northward from Syracuse and Watertown, and eastward from Ogdensburg. By contrast, musical and social dance patterns in the eastern foothills remain somewhat more "tradition-bound" in comparison to other parts of the immediate region. Located about ten miles to the west of the foothill geographical demarcation line, the Crary Mills dance thus represented the front wave in one stage of change within the musical heritage.

The contemporary Firemen's Field Day round and square dance as yet represents

more of a stronghold of continuity in the inter-community nondomestic dance tradition typical of earlier years. These fund-raising dances in towns like Colton and Parishville are held within large, semi-enclosed permanent structures situated on former pasture land. Upwards of a hundred people will attend most of the dances, which are held from about early June to Labor Day. Usually no more than two dozen people occupy the plank dance floor at any one time. The acoustics of many of the structures encourage the use of amplified instruments among musicians. Fiddlers, however, appear to be the exception, at least in the communities with which I am familiar. To date, I have failed to observe any old-time fiddlers who rely upon amplified violins at dance jobs of any sort, although I certainly do not rule out the possibility that such usage exists in central St. Lawrence County.

It was at a typical Field Day round and square dance sponsored by the Parishville Volunteer Fire Company in the summer of 1970 that I made my first contact with Ralph Aldous. In addition to him, the dance combo included two guitarists with electrified instruments, a drummer, and an elderly caller. Teenagers and old adults mingled on the dance floor and enthusiastically responded to dance tunes like "Darling Nelly Gray," "Marching Through Georgia," "Turkey in the Straw," "The Spanish Cavalier," "Golden Slippers" and several venerable breakdowns and waltzes. Most striking was the qualitative difference between this type of public nondomestic dance and the reports of household dancing in years past. If one is to judge from oral reminiscences, the latter events must have been constrained and decorous affairs by comparison. A sense of social license prevails in the contemporary nondomestic dance setting; beer flows freely from nearby concessions, talk is free flowing and sometimes unmodulated, and various sorts of harmless shenanigans are commonplace on and off the dance floor. The same pattern holds for the popular Friday and Saturday evening dances at numerous taverns and hotel bar-rooms throughout the central Valley.

Present-day "beer hall dances," as I heard several fiddlers term them, offer the greatest opportunity to observe old-time fiddling and social dance in a public context. The dances occur throughout the year, with location and frequency largely dependent upon an establishment's facilities, the musical preferences of the management and clientele, and the economics involved in providing live entertainment. Obviously the feasibility of such dances depends heavily upon the availability of local musical talent. Guitarists and drummers are numerous, whereas accomplished round and square dance fiddlers are nowadays more difficult to locate and contract for evening engage-



*The "Timber Tavern," Parishville. A contemporary setting for round and square dances in the western foothills.*

—photo by author

ments which may stretch over several weeks or months. I have observed that many of the older fiddlers drift from job to job, as do square dance callers. Occasionally tavern owners are fortunate enough to locate a fiddler who does his own calling, thereby resulting in a monetary savings and reducing the chances of cancellation due to the absence of only one member of a four-member dance combo.

As of the fall of 1973, at least three bars in the vicinity of Parishville and Colton feature this type of weekend entertainment. The taverns may vary in outward physical appearance and inner decor, but the types of music-making and attendant social dances prove to be more or less consistent from one setting to the next. The most evident difference from locale to locale is not in the nature of the music but in the extra-dance social atmosphere.

The tavern at the 7-Springs Sport Center on the outskirts of Colton is the most isolated and restrained of the three representative establishments. The tavern owners make a point of ejecting "rowdy types," which appear infrequent. The tavern caters predominantly to local residents in the winter, spring and summer months. In the fall an occasional nonresident big-game hunter will stop for light food and a drink or two in the late afternoon or evening. The crowd is usually small (ten to twenty couples on a dance night is average), close-knit in terms of familiarity, and intent upon having a good time within the limits of

courtesy and good taste. Numerous organized combos and make-shift combinations of local instrumental musicians have performed at the tavern over the last several years. One evening, for instance, the band consisted of a guitarist (Jess Day of Canton), a female drummer (Barbara Day), a fiddler from West Potsdam (Ward Burdick) and an octogenarian caller (Mahlon Spring) from West Parishville. With exception of regular twenty-minute breaks, the group played continuously from 9:30 p.m. until 1:30 a.m. The scene was repeated a week later, during which time the band had added a rhythm guitarist. In both cases the music alternated from square dance numbers to waltzes and polkas. At the latter occasion several elderly men and middle-aged women attempted some traditional solo step-dancing and were greeted with shouts of approval.

Elsewhere in the vicinity of the western Adirondack foothills these tavern dances lend themselves to more unrestrained behavior. Two barrooms near Parishville, for example, attract large crowds of patrons ranging in age from their middle twenties to sixties and

seventies. At the "Timber Tavern" and "The Bucket" male clientele tend to out-number the women. The dance floor is always crowded on a Friday or Saturday night. There seems to be relatively little concern for maintaining formal precision in the dance maneuvers; it is enough that a square dance set is executed smoothly enough to ensure its internal continuity. Men will exuberantly swing their partners nearly to the point of physical abuse. This manhandling is expected and various women appear to encourage it in subtle ways. Other women dance with their female counterparts during square dance breakdowns and polkas, in so doing often emulating the performance mannerisms of certain male participants. There is little effort to conceal intoxication. Typically one hears comments like, "Hell, I'm just having a good time." And indeed, this opportunity for relaxed fun and sanctioned public display in the barroom setting would seem to lie at the heart of this flourishing pattern of old-time music and social dance. Apart from the obvious enjoyment in the nature of the music and dance itself, patrons find the stimulus for a wide range of personal interaction. While this socializing is distinct from the heritage of music-making per se, it is nevertheless intimately part of the overall fiddling/social dance complex in local rural social life.

In sum, the heritage of old-time fiddling and social dance in central St. Lawrence County continues to serve and to satisfy social impulses as well as aesthetic ones. Informal fiddling and friendship among musicians in area homes functions to extend and reaffirm interpersonal relationships at the individual and household level. Although small in scale, these get-togethers in turn help to perpetuate the music and music-making tradition. Public nondomestic dances, similarly, serve to draw people together at the community level. Collective participation in old-time dances reinforces not only a sense of neighborhood and region, but through feedback enhances the likelihood of continuity in the musical heritage despite gradual and inevitable change. Whether or not these North Country communities will experience a revival of interest in some of the older streams of the musical and social dance traditions remains to be seen. Certainly the foundations for that kind of revival are already well-entrenched.

☆☆☆☆

#### **About the Author**

Dr. Robert D. Bethke is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Delaware, where he heads the Folklore Program and serves as Director, Folklore and Ethnic Art Center. A member of SLCHA, he recently produced the album *Ted Ashlaw: Adirondack Woods Singer* (Philo 1022). He is currently completing two books on folksong and storytelling traditions among woodsmen in and around St. Lawrence County. His in-laws, Mr. and Mrs. Edward McHugh, live in Potsdam.

# Col. Goodrich and His House

by Cecil Graham

*As discussions of County jail expansion plans continue, they help Cecil Graham to recall significant details of the life and death of Col. William Goodrich of Canton, a Civil War officer who died in the battle of Antietam. Goodrich's house on Judson Street in Canton is likely to be demolished if the expansion of the jail goes on. The author also lived there years after Goodrich when he was Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds for the County.*

There is now speculation that the home of Col. William B. Goodrich, a famous Civil War soldier, of the village of Canton, may be demolished to make way for future County Jail expansion. As I lived in that old house for twenty-five of the forty plus years I served with the County of St. Lawrence, I naturally have a personal interest in it and in the man who was its builder and as a casualty of the Civil War was brought home and was for many years buried on the property at the rear of his domicile. During our retirement, my wife and I have twice visited Antietam battlefield and seen the bronze plaque that was erected where Goodrich met his death in that awesome holocaust, called by some the bloodiest engagement of the war.

Goodrich was born Dec. 1, 1821 at Wilna, Jefferson County, N.Y. As a young man he spent some years in Wisconsin busying himself in the mercantile trade. At the outbreak of the Mexican War he volunteered in the service of the Missouri Infantry Battalion

and went to the seat of war as acting adjutant of recruits. After the war's end he spent a year in California trading in some of the rushing gold towns in the Sierra foothills. Returning to New York State, he attended law school at Ballston Spa, where he received his degree. For nine years he was Judge Advocate of New York State Volunteers with the rank of Major. In 1851 he married Lydia Hildreth of Herkimer. They had one child, a daughter.

They moved to Madrid, St. Lawrence County, where he practiced law for awhile. On Aug. 7, 1856, in partnership with S.P. Remington, he founded the well known weekly newspaper, The St. Lawrence Plaindealer, still being published at the county seat. At the beginning of hostilities of the War between the States, he was sworn in as captain to recruit a company of volunteers. His unit became Co. A of the 60th N.Y. Infantry. As the regiment readied to board the train at Ogdensburg, it was given a rousing send-off speech by Judge Ama-

ziah B. James. Judge James incidentally became the father-in-law of Dr. Grant C. Madill, noted north country surgeon. The judge's picture was at the Court House when I ended employment there. On Jan. 14, 1862, Goodrich was promoted to be colonel. His unit saw much action during the entire war. It was at the battle of Antietam that he was killed. At the time he was an acting brigadier, commanding three other regiments in addition to his own. It was known as Goodrich's Brigade, a part of Green's Division. He must have had a premonition of impending death as he gave his regimental sergt. major the name and address of his wife, whom he wished to be notified. The body was shipped home to Canton, and an account some years ago in the Commercial Advertiser, edited by the late John Finnegan, relates that the citizenry of Canton turned out en masse to meet the train at the station. A riderless horse, saddled, and with boots in the stirrups appropriately turned backwards, together with a band playing a dirge, led the procession to the Goodrich home on Judson Street.

After the funeral, he was buried at the rear of the home, somewhere in what is now the small parking lot owned by the county and out in front of where the District Attorney's office is located. A monument was placed there at the time. For some reason the body was disinterred some years later and reburied in New York City. I have read an account somewhere that his horse was also buried in the lot behind the house, and if so it must still be there.

The property was owned and occupied a great many years this century by the Charles Howe family that operated a hardware store and heating and plumbing business on Main Street for a considerable length of time. Charles Howe was the father of Milford Howe, former mayor of Canton and currently living there. In 1945 the county purchased the property of the Howe Estate to be used for future expansion, and I had the use of the house until I retired at the end of 1970. While living there I found a book in the attic titled History of the 60th Regt. and written by its chaplain, Richard Eddy and published by him in 1864. On the flyleaf is the signature of Edwin Merritt, quartermaster of the regiment. The book gives a very comprehensive



*The Goodrich house in Canton, as it appears in January, 1978. (Photo courtesy of Rich Carlson, St. Lawrence Plaindealer).*



*Elmira Goodrich*  
Courtesy of SLU Archives

account of the unit from the time it was recruited among the various towns of the county, through the campaigns it participated in as part of the Army of Virginia,



*Col. William B. Goodrich*  
Courtesy of SLU Archives

to the battles of Chattanooga and Look-out Mountain. In the book are the lists of casualties as they occurred during the campaigns. Many incidents relating to

the men, their joys, their sorrows, the hardships of living in rather primitive conditions in the war-ravaged battle areas make interesting reading and were written by perhaps the man best qualified to do so, the regimental chaplain.

☆☆☆

#### About the Author

Cecil Graham is a long-time member and trustee of SLCHA. Encyclopedic in his knowledge of famous American figures, he has a very personal interest in this subject, for he and his wife lived in the Goodrich home for years when Graham served as Superintendent of County Buildings and Grounds.

# Folklife Center Established At Canton

by Terry Koch

*A major study is underway of traditions and the people who still carry them on in our County. The project is a cooperative effort of a new center at SUNY Agricultural and Technical College at Canton and the SLCHA. This story appeared in the Ogdensburg Advance News on Sunday, December 25, 1977.*

St. Lawrence County is the rich loam from which has grown an old and sturdy tree of folk tradition.

A half-dozen people are studying the fruits of that ancient tree now, before the powersaw of progress cuts it down.

Melanie Smithers of the Pope Mills area is one of the 12 who make up the Center for the Study of North Country Folklife based in Canton, whose goal is to preserve on tape, film and paper the time-honored customs and traditions of the county.

#### A Better Time

"It's fascinating," Ms. Smithers said. She is a field worker for the center. "The thing that has struck me is the way things are changing. From what I've seen, it seems that the quality of life might have been better in the old days."

The Folklife Center will for a year be seeking out what it calls "tradition-bearers" — the people who practice or remember the old-fashioned ways of doing things.

Those traditions, to name a few, may be Christmas wreath-making, 'hay-jumping,' cedar oil making, quilting, snowshoe making and storytelling.

Ms. Smithers was struck by the way the older people of St. Lawrence County can spin a yarn.

"I went to see three old men, all about 80 years old," she said. "They told tales in a way that showed they had grown up before television. I talked to a town historian about it. 'They just know how to talk,' she told me. 'The young people don't know how to talk.'"

#### A Rich Tradition

Varick Chittenden, a teacher at ATC and a student of American Folk culture, is the director of the Center.

"I think this area is particularly rich in folkways," he said, "because of its remoteness. Despite television and other modern influences, the people here still have a tendency not to be quite so quick to take on the affectations of the outside world."

Storytellers like Ham Ferry of Childwood, woods singers like Ted Ashlaw of Hermon, and fiddlers like the Woodcocks of Rensselaer Falls are still active, he said.

Many of the traditions still follow the seasons of the year. In winter, for example, there are hog-butcherings, Christmas decorations, ice fishing and trapping. In the spring will come maple sugaring, followed by beekeeping and wood-cutting.

The so-called "ethnic" groups have enriched the folkways, he noted with Scottish dancing, Welsh singing, and Hungarian, Italian and French-Canadian cooking adding flavor to the region.

#### The Longterm Goal

The Center's efforts in the county are a pilot project, Chittenden said, and later it hopes to expand its search to other northern counties, continuing its work. "You could find just as much," he said, "in each of the other counties of the North Country."

At the end of the year Chittenden plans to have an archive set up at the ATC campus where the information will be available to scholars and students.

But he also plans public presentations. "We hope to have some demonstrable products so its not just a file drawer of tapes, slides and forms," Chittenden said. "The Center plans a booklet for general audience and a series of slide shows with

sound and script.

#### The Method

Valerie Ingram, project supervisor studying for a master's degree in American folk culture, said the Center's field workers were first given an orientation period of several weeks, during which she and Chittenden explained folklore to them and gave them a list of the types of people — town historians, postmasters, local officials — whom they might contact.

"We talked a lot about ethnics," she said. "We explained that we would give people assurances that the information we got would be used very carefully and not published without their permission."

Teams of field workers were then each assigned a group of contiguous townships, and went to work seeking out people who have preserved traditions.

"Most people," Ms. Ingram said, "have something valuable that we'd like to know. They just don't realize it. Often when one of the field workers shows them a list of activities we're interested in the people will say, 'Oh, I thought everybody did that.'" Ms. Ingram then meets with the field workers weekly for a review and study session.

The Center, funded through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) and approved by the county legislature, should be completing its work by September.

**More will follow as the results come in. Folklife as it is here represented is contemporary, ongoing, living history. If you would like more information or think you could help, write for a brochure or call: Center for the Study of North Country Folklife, SUNY ATC, Canton, N.Y. 13617 [315] 386-7128.**

# The St. Lawrence Yields Up A Bounty Buttons!

by Ethel C. Olds

*This article is primary testimony of the dedication and sense of purpose that founding members of SLCHA had for the research and preservation of our County's heritage. Ethel Craig Olds of Waddington, who many remember as a moving spirit in our Association, wrote frequently for The Quarterly. Her son, Lawrence B. Olds of Washington, D.C., kindly forwarded the manuscript and pictures to us, all of which he had found in Mrs. Olds' papers after her death. He says: "The envelope containing the photos was labeled 'For Quarterly' so assume my mother had in mind to send the story to you. The manuscript was retyped at some time or other and the original draft is crumbling."*

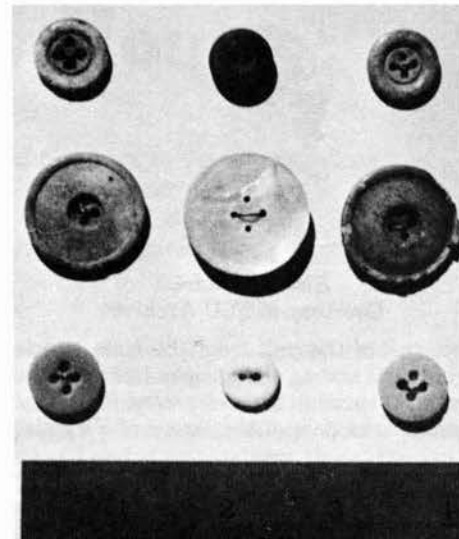
The necessary excavations for development of the St. Lawrence River's power and waterway potential were conducted between 1954 and 1958. In this interval, normal channels of the river at Waddington, N.Y., were diverted to facilitate deepening and straightening the future channel. At one period in 1957 the river bottom between the village of Waddington and Ogden Island was completely dry

and exposed. Casual examination of the river bottom turned up dozens of relics of former commerce and life, including fragments of tools, toys, weapons and ship fittings. Many objects were in surprisingly good condition.

Perhaps the most fascinating find was a small hoard of pearl, composition and bone buttons, the latter embrittled and stained a mellow amber. That they survived at all is probably due to the exclusion of air by a layer of silt and sand.

They were found in a cluster slightly downriver from the site of a dam linking Ogden Island and Waddington, and near the site of a stone paper mill. Both these structures and other remnants of early Waddington industry were demolished prior to the de-watering of the original river channel.

Local historical research offers the probable explanation that the buttons were the refuse of a paper mill which flourished in Waddington between 1826 and 1883. In its earliest days, the Thayer, Whitcomb and Wales Paper Mill made hand-laid sheets from macerated rags, with some later production from rye, oat and flax straw. Ownership of the mill passed through several hands and through various phases of paper-making technology before it finally burned in 1883. It is recorded that it became Waddington's major industry, employing many residents in the conversion of rag, straw and wood pulp into wrapping, ledger and newsprint paper.



*Composition, bone, and china buttons of the 19th century found in a cluster deposit downstream of the paper mill flume at Waddington, N.Y. River bottom was left dry after Seaway dewatering operations. Buttons were found by Carlton B. Olds of Waddington.*

Baled shipments of rags were hauled to the mill by ship and wagon and, when domestic supplies were scarce, they came from foreign sources. The rags had to be sorted before use and local women and girls were ideal for this light work. As many as fifty women were occupied at this, and part of their task was to snip off the buttons which turned up on salvaged clothing. Possibly these "foreign objects" were pitched into a bin, or perhaps they were tossed out a window into the swift depths of the St. Lawrence to be strewn along the river bed. But some of the buttons were simply too perfect or fascinating to discard and they ended up in a rag sorter's pocket and, ultimately, in the family button box. Though the sorters' names are not recorded, there are scattered examples of buttons in Waddington households which must have come from China and other exotic countries.

Water skiers and speed boaters now frolic over the ripples of majestic Lake St. Lawrence, which stands 30 feet above the spot where the rag sorters once toiled. Unless there is such an unlikely combination as a button collecting Scuba diver, it will take another event as cataclysmic as the St. Lawrence Seaway Project to uncover the remainder of Waddington's button-trove.

### The Foregoing

The manuscript of this article was among the personal effects of the late Ethel C. Olds, former Town Historian of Waddington. It was probably written in 1962 or '63, and the photographs were made by Mrs. Olds at various times from 1948 to 1956.



*Looking north toward Ogden Island past ruins of Thayer, Whitcomb & Wales paper mill. (1948). Clusters of buttons were found downstream (right) after dewatering for Seaway construction in the 1950s.*

## Researcher's Requests

Names and subjects currently being researched in the St. Lawrence County History Center:

Childbirth in the early years  
The Lead Mine near Pierces Corners, Macomb  
The Power Canal in the city of Ogdensburg

Cleghorn (Kendrew)  
Dashnaws (Richville, Ogdensburg)  
Ramsay & Foot(e)  
Curry, Abraham (Ogdensburg?)  
Beck & Trogner  
Risley, Jesse (Canton, DeKalb)  
LePierre, Gray (Brasher)  
Goodnough (Hopkinton, Louisville)  
Burnett, Young (?)  
Keating (?)  
Pitt (Canton)  
Fisk (Ogdensburg)  
Bevins (Edwards)  
Hoyt (?)  
Jerome & Morris (Ogdensburg)  
Rutman (Parishville)  
Viner & Wicks (Parishville)  
Swartfigure, etc. (Morristown)  
Russell & Palmer (Pierrepoint)

Defunct rail lines  
County buildings (jail, alms house, etc.)  
Weather phenomena

Warner (hatter in Ogdensburg)  
Curley & Marron (Potsdam)  
Simmons (Pierrepoint)  
Heath (Rossie)  
White, Downer (Canton)  
Horsfield (Lisbon)  
Heaton, Richard (Canton)  
Ferris & Coolidge (Lawrence)  
Merritt (Pierrepoint, Rossie)  
Gilbert (Ogdensburg)  
Sander (?)  
Majors (Pierrepoint)  
Foster (Hermon)  
Smith, Solomon (Oswegatchie)  
Van Valkenburg (Hermon)  
Graves (Potsdam)  
McNeil (Stockholm)  
Bisbee (Norfolk)

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## From the Book Shelf

What may be the last of the Bicentennial histories in Northern New York has appeared in the "History of Massena — the Orphan Town," published by the Massena Bicentennial Committee.

The book has a soft, buff colored cover with a sketch of the well-known old oak tree on Main Street in front of the Niagara Mohawk building, setting the tone of the history.

There are over 200 pages and 100 sketches by local artist Mrs. Jane Ashley. Mrs. Ashley says of her sketch of the tree, "This stately giant, perhaps Massena's oldest living inhabitant, still stands at the edge of Massena's Main Street. What this burr oak must have heard and seen over the years. I waited to sketch this beautiful giant until leaves were again bursting forth — symbolic of hope for the future perhaps while being an example of the past."

Massena's new history was written by Mrs. Eleanor L. Dumas and her daughter, Miss Nina E. Dumas, descendants of the earliest settlers along the Long Sault Rapids, in Norfolk, Madrid and Chamberlain's Corners. Mrs. Dumas' mother, the late Mrs. Ella R. Lahey, was Massena Town Historian for ten years and had a lifelong interest in the North Country's origins.

Focus of the book is on the early settlers, whence they came, why and how they came, how they lived and prospered. Tables of names of the early families, and the New England towns and counties

which were their original homes, have been included, as far as possible. A great deal of research went into the Civil War period, with a list of the Civil War soldiers, who comprised 25 percent of the population of the town.

It has been the hope of the authors, the town historian, Mrs. Margaret Ringwall, and the Bicentennial Committee, that local residents and former residents might come forth with additions, corrections and stories of their families, so that the book might be re-written and expanded.

Massena was especially fortunate to have Mrs. Ashley to capture the flavor of the early settlers and the manner in which they lived. Mrs. Ashley was most gracious in doing an immense amount of work at no cost to the town. As a matter of fact, the only costs have been those of the printing, and this too was done at a minimum by the Massena Printing Service.

Contributions to the content of the book were made by Mr. Sam Jacobs, who wrote the first story ever to be printed here of the Jewish community, and by the late Daniel Cuglar, who graciously added a chapter on Long Sault Island. In addition, Daniel C. McCormick and Robert Graham, experts on St. Lawrence River shipping, added an invaluable chapter.

The book has been described as a "chatty" history by Mrs. Ringwall, who was indefatigable in producing material

for the authors.

"The History of Massena" (and why it was called an orphan town) is for sale in Massena at \$4.00 (no tax) at the Town Historian's office, the Massena Chamber of Commerce office and Westcott's stationery store on Main Street, or \$4.50 by mail from the historian.

*The cost of publications and other operating expenses of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association are partially subsidized by this advertising support.*

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