

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association

QUARTERLY

Volume XLIII - Number 3 - Summer 1998



“MOVIE STARS”

or

“JEAN HARLOW AS I KNEW HER...”

Painting by Seth Moulton

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association at the Silas Wright House

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is a private, not-for-profit, membership organization based at the Silas Wright House in Canton, New York. Founded in 1947, the Association is governed by a constitution, by-laws, and Board of Trustees. The Historical Association's membership meets annually to elect its officers and trustees.

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The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is a not-for-profit membership organization and museum which serves as an educational resource for the use and benefit of the citizens of St. Lawrence County and others interested in the County's history and traditions. The Association collects and preserves archival material and artifacts pertinent to the County's history. In cooperation and collaboration with other local organizations, the Association promotes an understanding of and appreciation for the County's rich history through publications, exhibits, and programs. The St. Lawrence County Historical Association operates within museum standards established by the American Association of Museums.

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Membership in the St. Lawrence County Historical Association is open to all interested parties. Annual membership dues are: Individual, \$25; Senior/Student, \$20; Family, \$35; Contributor, \$50; Supporter, \$100; Patron, \$250; Businesses, \$50 to \$1,000. Members receive the *SLCHA Quarterly*, the Historical Association's bi-monthly newsletter, and various discounts on publications, programs and events.

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Issue Editor:
J. Rebecca Thompson

Cover Illustration:
Courtesy of Stockholm Historical Organization

The Art and Humor of Seth Moulton

By Vicki Martin

He was a spinner of tall tales who wove words and pictures together to tell his stories; a humorist who delivered his punch lines with a brush instead of a pen. His pictures are stories, not meant to be merely viewed, but to involve the viewer in the artist's particular vision of the world. It is a merry vision, full of good-humored practical jokes and people caught with their pants down. In almost any picture Seth Moulton painted, one can almost see him hiding behind a tree or bush with an impish grin that seemed to say, "Now, what do you think about that?"

Seth was born in Wibraham, Massachusetts on November 18, 1888. He was the son of Austin A. and Mary J. Sweeney Moulton. He loved to tell how the Sweeneys were all descended from Tim McSweeney who had to change his name because of some great, unknown larceny on his part. Seth grew up in Vermont and many of his paintings reflect the Vermont countryside. According to an article by Richard Case, Seth and his wife, Jessie Hyde, moved to Winthrop, New York in 1932 where they operated a small dairy farm until poor health caused Seth to retire in 1947. Richard Case related the saga of Seth's move to Northern New York, "He came to the brush land north of Potsdam to die forty odd years ago, he told me. 'We were living in Vermont. The doctors said I had a weak heart, that I only had a couple of weeks to live. I nearly died thirty times that winter. Well, my wife didn't agree with the doctor. She threw him out of the house...

Besides,' he said, 'It cost \$800 to be buried in the city and only \$75 out here.'"

Seth and Jessie raised three daughters. Jessie died in 1963. Seth died in 1971 at the age of eighty-three.

Seth began his career as a painter in the 1950s. Looking

around for something to occupy his time, he saw some of Grandma Moses' paintings. Seth told his wife, "I can do as good as that. If I had some paint, I'd try. I'd put some feet and faces in, too." Thus was born Seth's career as a painter of 'Pictures'. (Seth always capitalized the word "pictures".)

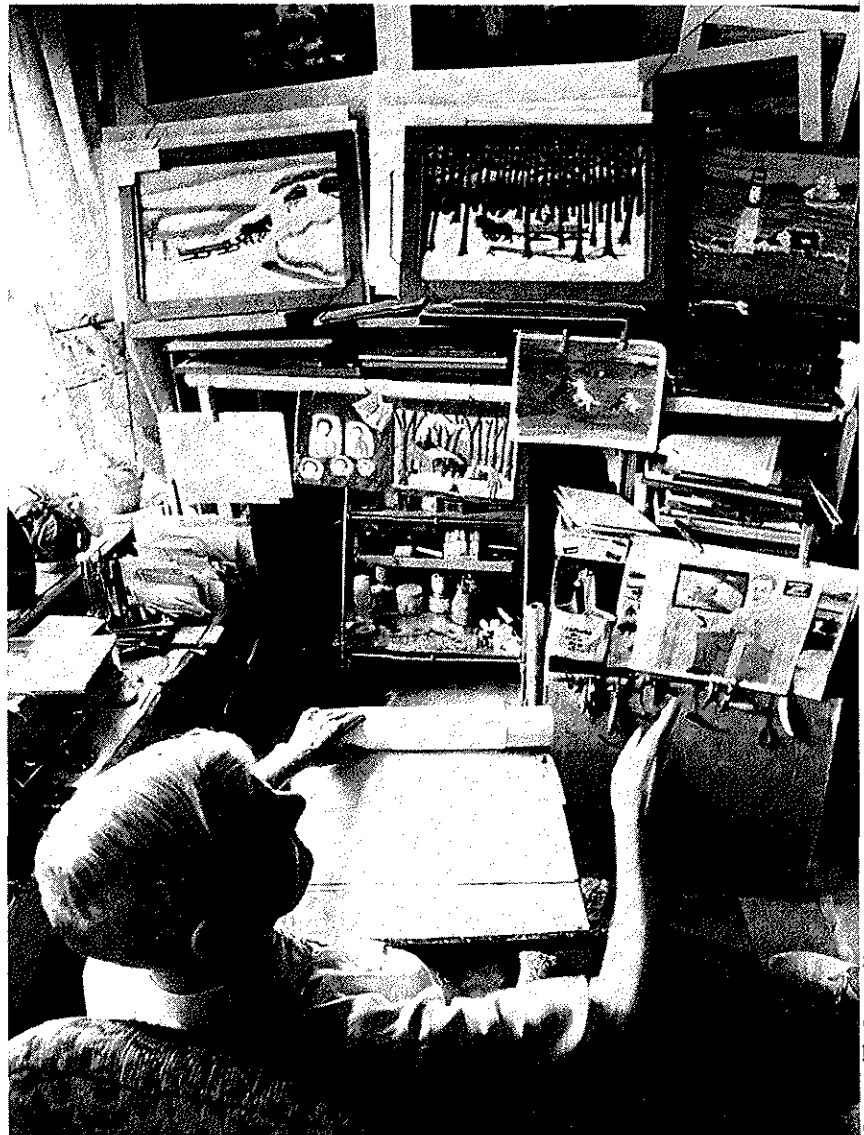


Seth and Jessie

Courtesy of Opal and Cynthia Merrick

Seth's painting technique and medium can best be described as unconventional. He often painted on whatever was available (such as the undersides of oil tablecloths) and used plain lead house paint, aluminum paint, and ballpoint pens. For texture, he used either flour or the scum from the paint. He would use pieces of tape to build up an area and complained once that he had visitors who didn't watch their children and the children pulled the tape from his paintings. "Well I just had some company with kids boy this place is a mess Pictures all over you would think they would see what there kids are doing and controll them wouldnt you Ive got to tape up three or four that they pulled apart that's kids I gess I was one once where there was depth in the Picture they took of the tape to see what was in back." Seth used whatever was readily available and did not worry about the correctness of the technique.

Many of Seth's paintings are of the Naïve School of painting, but he never limited himself. There are paintings that look like Picasso and Dali. There are beautiful and realistic landscapes, as well as sailing vessels, castles, and movie stars. The subjects of Seth's paintings were limited only by his fertile imagination. Richard Case stated that "Seth, one feels, is a photographer without a camera. In his case, the film has been in the camera for years and is only now being developed. His memory brings to canvas scenes nobody bothered to record, even if a camera had been at hand." In his biography of Seth Moulton, Richard Wilson noted, "he painted his memories of his long life and the people and places he knew in Northern New York. One painting of Winthrop, done from above as if he sat in the helicop-



Seth Moulton and his Pictures

ter of memory, shows the St. Lawrence County hamlet as it was in 1892."

Though he was a faithful recorder of life as he had seen it, his works are full of merriment and his own special irony. Paintings such as "Movie Stars" (or 'Jean Harlow as I Knew Her...')* reflect Seth's sense of humor and his delight in his fellow man. Many of Seth's pictures also contain a legend and the spelling is uniquely his own as well. Seth explained to Richard Case in

1969 that "the teacher threw me out of school when I was sixteen. She was only seventeen herself. I gave her a heck of a time."

Seth made his own brushes by whittling the handles out of cedar and using the hair of horses

* "...I got an old straw panamaw hat Ive had for forty years cost thurty two dollars at that time...it was a present from Jean Harlows mother...I worked for (her) every summer for twelve years." — Seth Moulton, May 6, 1969.

Courtesy of The Syracuse Newspapers

and other animals as well as the hair of his grandchildren. This technique seemed to fascinate the "expurts." Seth told Richard Wilson in an October 1968 letter that he "didnt feel well enough to go [to an exhibition] all the big shots men and women shake hands and ask about this and that the bruches are the worst how did I ever figure out how to make them were I got the hair how I knew what kind o boy I feel like taking a hand full out of there head but am afraid the whole wig would come off have me arrested for scalping..."

Seth's disdain for "expurts" was well known. In September of 1969, Seth wrote that "I expect to show in Potsdam againts some expurts out there about sept. 24 ... a fool has no feer you no I mix with the expurts I seem to get more attension then most

of them they come and bunch up and talk of my pictures and ask questions." Even though Seth is complaining about the attention, one suspects that he enjoyed the fuss that was made over him. In February 1970, he wrote about an exhibition that he had been invited to. "I was invited to show a good friend was here and says you arent going to buck them are you I says shure I don't know enney better so I did and got the only write up in the paper."

Seth went to the local exhibitions if he liked the organizers or wanted company, but he turned down more than he attended. Selling his paintings was not something that Seth wanted to do. If he liked you, he would give you a painting, but he would not allow his paintings to be put in a gallery for sale. Nelson Rockefeller was interested in

acquiring one of Seth's paintings. Seth said Mr. Rockefeller could have one if he came and got it, but Seth said he would not send it in the mail. "NO. the heck with it. Forget it" was Seth's response. However, Seth did win an honorable mention in a statewide exhibition sponsored by the state office on aging. He framed it and hung it on the wall. It was signed by Nelson Rockefeller. Seth was content.

Seth delighted in the ridiculous and the ordinary and he somehow made the ordinary seem ridiculous. Seth painted over 400 paintings in the fifteen years of his career. Each and every one of them are imbued with his sly humor, his caustic wit, and his genuine love of the subject. Whatever caught Seth's fancy, he would paint, and paint again and again to get it just right. If someone admired a painting,

Courtesy of The Syracuse Newspapers



Seth and some of his hand-made 'bruches'

he might paint him or her a copy, just a little different from the original.

Richard Wilson, the News Director for Syracuse University and Richard Case, a columnist for the Syracuse paper, were both active supporters of Seth's art. After Seth's death, they worked to get his paintings as part of a permanent collection. St. Lawrence University, SUNY Potsdam, and the St. Lawrence County Historical Association all expressed an interest in obtaining Seth's paintings, but somehow nothing ever came of that interest. His paintings were recently donated to the Stockholm Historical Organization by his granddaughter, Meredith Fayette. Seth would probably be pleased that his paintings stayed close to home and not with the "expurts".

Although Seth did not receive the recognition that his art deserved while he was alive, the sly, practical joker may have had the last laugh. Time has only served to bring into sharper focus his skills as a painter and storyteller. Richard Wilson may yet prove to be a prophet when he wrote in 1972:

"SETH MOULTON, AMERICAN PAINTER, 1888-1971. ART HISTORIANS, PLEASE NOTE."

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Case, Richard. November 9, 1969, September 26, 1971. *Syracuse Herald American*.

Moulton, Seth. Letters to Richard Wilson 1967-1971.

Wilson, Richard. Biography of Seth Moulton prepared for the Museum of Folk Art, New York City, 1972.

About the Author

Vicki Martin is the Archives Manager at St. Lawrence County Historical Association and the President of the Stockholm Historical Organization.

Tribute to Seth Moulton

Seth Moulton taught me one of the most important things that I have ever learned, and, in fact, started the change of my philosophy of life.

As a girl I did not like him. He always made joking remarks to my mother and whenever she saw him coming, she'd say, "Oh, here comes my boyfriend!" It made me furious and very resentful.

When I was ten years old, I was slapping my pony, Buster, because he didn't do something I wanted him to. Seth saw me and told me I must not do that, that I should treat him with love and kindness, and that if I mistreated him, I would someday be sorry. I was somewhat ashamed and to cover this I scoffed at him, but he took it kindly and told me to remember what he said. After he left, I thought, "How dare he tell me how to act and what to do!" But I kept thinking about it and I knew that he was right. Buster loved me and trusted me and I was trying to show my superiority over him. Seth saw an injustice being done and he did dare to speak out. From that day on, I have never mistreated an animal and have regarded them with love and compassion—as life forms which happen to differ from me in shape, but nevertheless living creatures—as I am a living creature. I did not see Seth again that I can remember for about twenty-eight years. I never told him of the respect I gained for him that day. I never thanked him.

I feel that the debt I owe him can never be repaid in a material way. But maybe it has been repaid by my change of attitude and actions. I hope that I can help ensure that this kind man is not forgotten. I shall remember him.

Anonymous

From SLCHA Archives

AUSABLE RIVER

1952

This is one of Seth's earliest paintings and exhibits the realism and attention to perspective apparent in most of Seth's early works.

Courtesy of Stockholm Historical Organization.





Courtesy of Stockholm Historical Organization.

FIGHTING THE ELEMENTS
1953

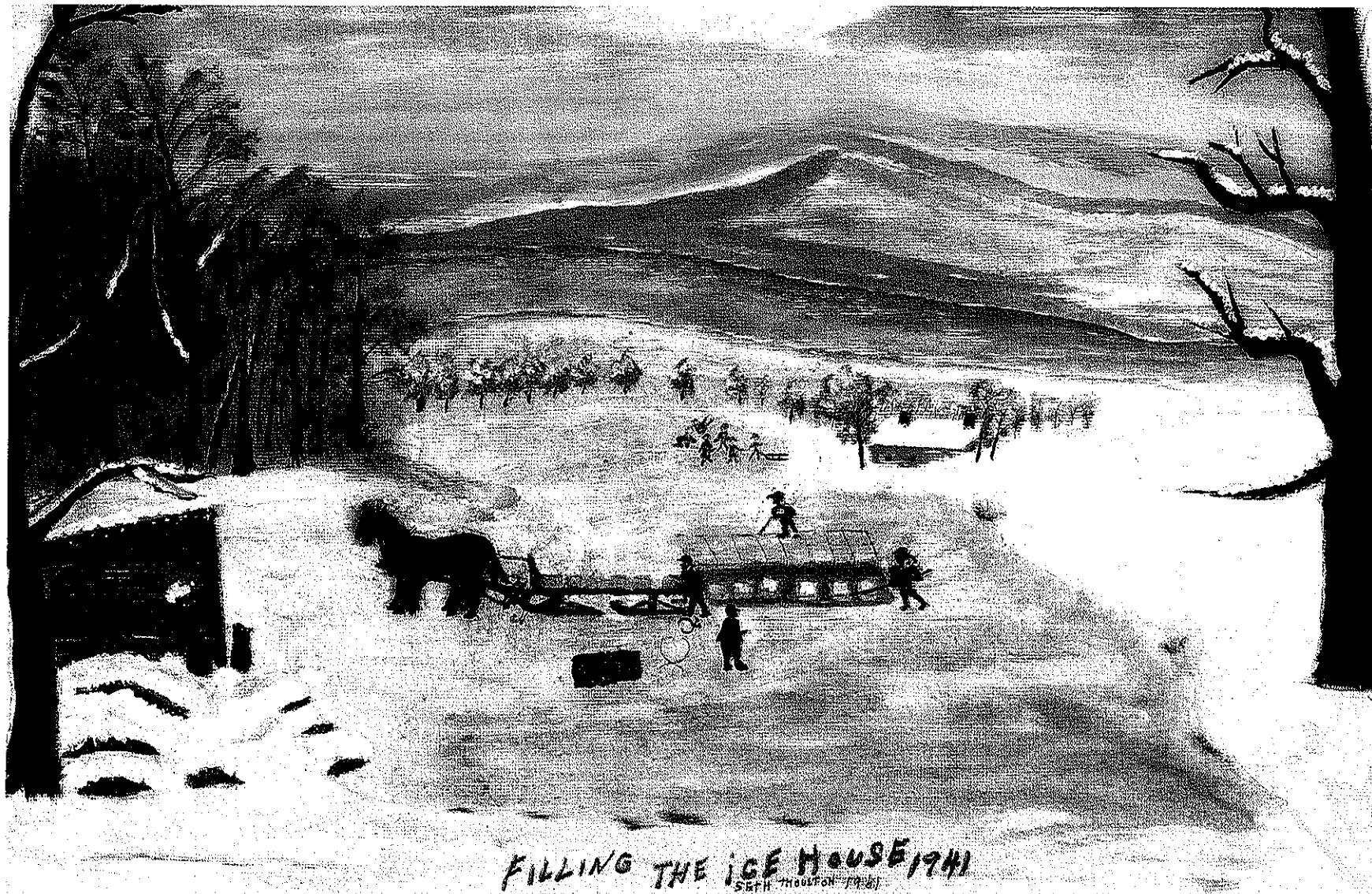
At the first showing of Seth's work by the Stockholm Historical Organization, this painting was picked as the favorite of the more than 300 people who attended the exhibit.

*RE-LAY HOUSE LAWRENCE VILLAGE STAGE GOING WEST ABOUT 1882
1958*

*This snapshot of an earlier time shows the stage crossing the Deer River
on what is now Rt. 11 in the village of Lawrenceville.*

Courtesy of Stockholm Historical Organization.





Courtesy of Stockholm Historical Organization

FILLING THE ICE HOUSE 1941
1961

The soft pastels of this painting add to the nostalgic aura of the scene with its depiction of the chores of a simpler time.

GOING TO GRANDMAS FOR DINNER

1969

The simplicity of the scene conveys the spirit of winters past

Courtesy of Stockholm Historical Organization.



STOCKHOLM HISTORICAL ORGANIZATION
1969

GOING TO GRANDMAS FOR DINNER



Courtesy of Stockholm Historical Organization.

LITTLE VALLIE

*Little Vallie seems to shimmer and glow with life
when viewed from a distance, with its bold use of yellow and blue.*

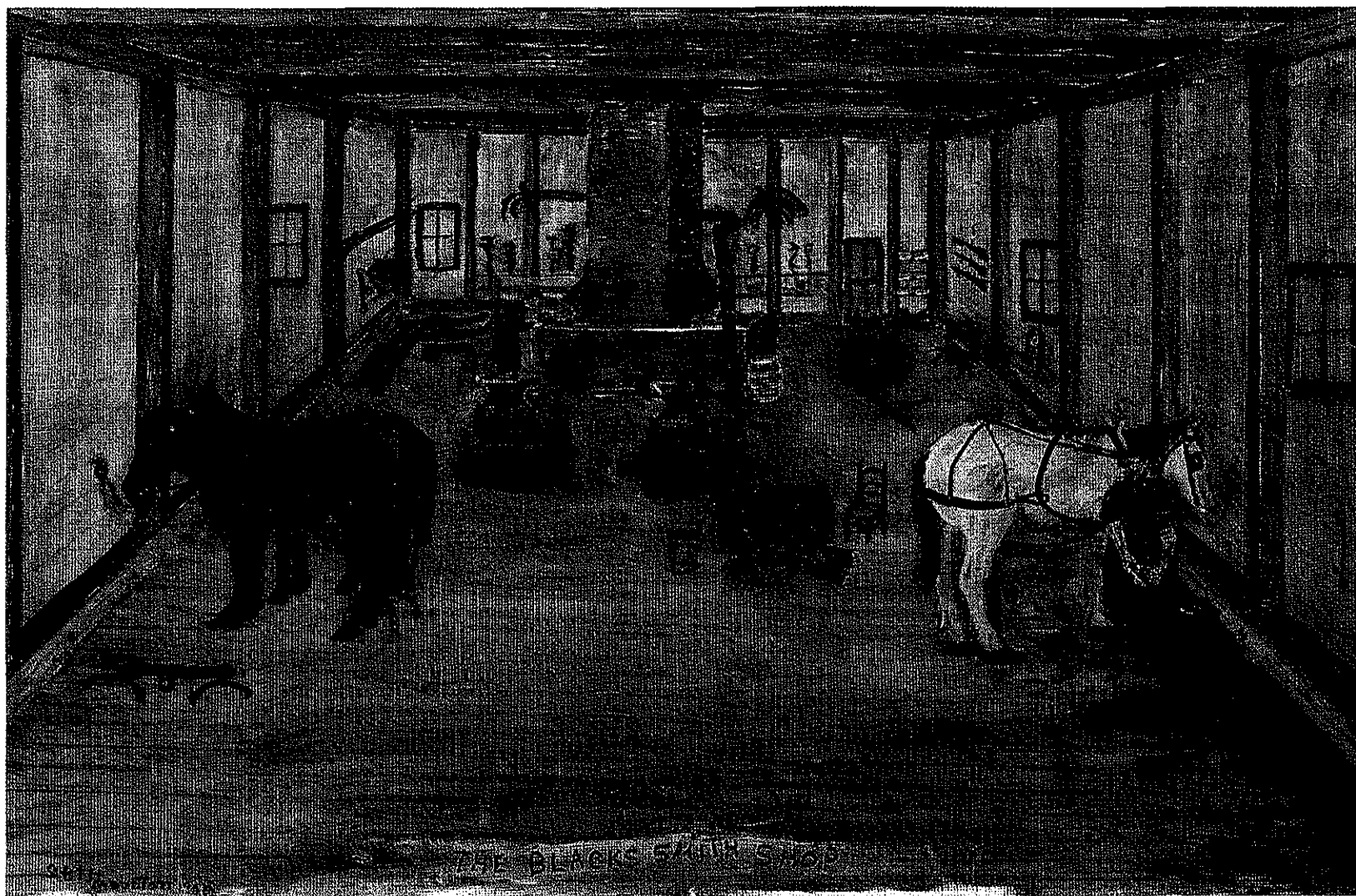
BEING CHASED BY A BULL

*AUNT UNICE AUNT BERNICE AND MIKE YOU CAN SEE WHILE I SIT SAFTLY UP IN THE TREE HOW WELL I REMEMBER THE OLD SWIMMING HOLE
THAT MEAN OLD BULL I REMEMBER SO BOLD THAT USE TO BE GARDING OUR OLD SWIMMING HOLE.*

*During the first exhibit in Stockholm of Seth's art, one viewer was heard to exclaim, "Oh my gosh! That's my mom and my aunt. I want a copy of that painting!"
Seth captured a humorous moment and made it a part of area folklore.*

Courtesy of Stockholm Historical Organization.





Courtesy of SLCHA

THE BLACKSMITH SHOP

*Seth loved to paint horses and painted hundreds of them.
This scene recreates Keegans' Blacksmith Shop in Winthrop, New York.
Seth painted several different scenes from this blacksmith shop.*

A Step Back in Time at the Stockholm Historical Organization

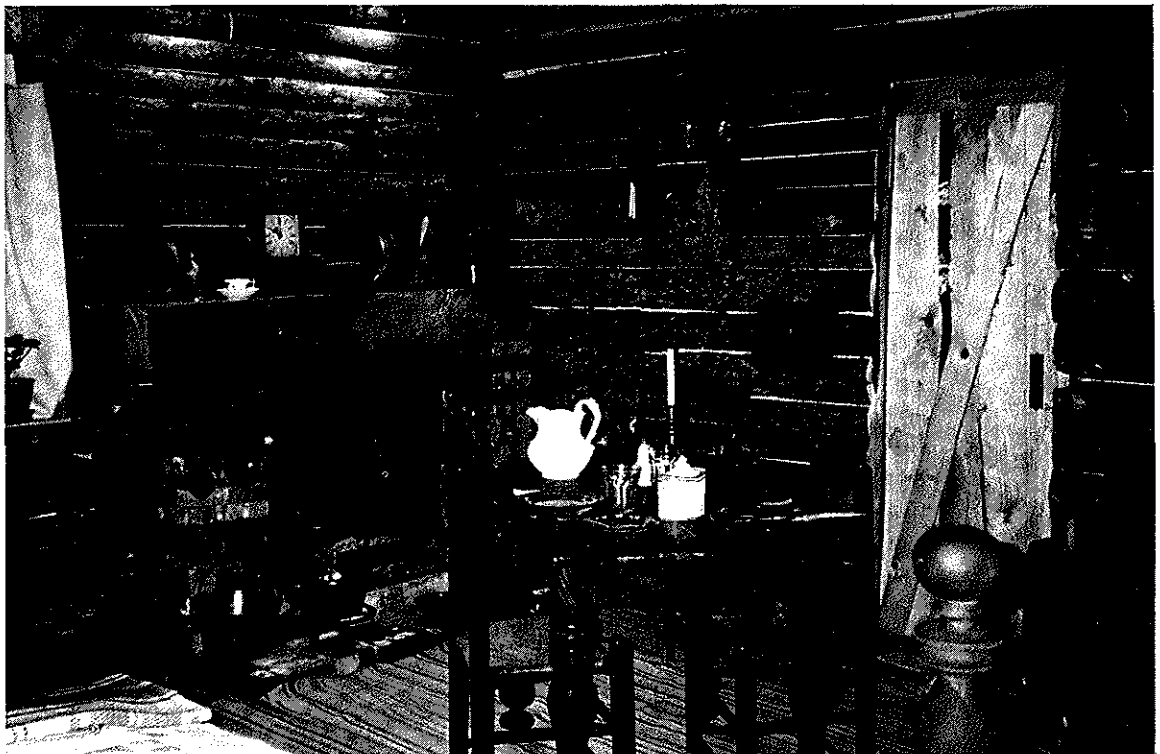
One can step back to the early to mid 1800s at the Stockholm Historical Organization where members have created a replica of a one-room log cabin within the walls of the organization's History Center.

Split, unpeeled cedar logs nailed to existing sheet rock walls, a rough lumber false window and door, and a false fireplace built with old bricks and capped with a mantel of rough-hewn cedar all combine to create the illusion of being in a small log cabin. The room is richly furnished with artifacts dating from

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These not only imbue the space with the look and feel of the period, but, in their details, are a wonderful source of information about what it was like to live and work at the time.

Rag rugs cover the floor, upon which sits a variety of period furniture. A hide covered trunk sits at the foot of a low post, Empire style bed. As was common, the trunk is lined with newspaper. Careful scrutiny of the faded print reveals that the newspaper was printed in 1824.

The bed is covered with a handmade quilt. Under the foot of the bed, just within reach, is a bed wrench used to tighten the cords that support the corn husk-filled ticking that serves as a boxspring. Also under the foot of the bed is the chamber pot, more convenient than a trip to the outhouse in the middle of the night. A two-drawer, lift-top blanket chest stands against the wall next to the window. A wash bowl and pitcher sit on it, as well as a curling iron and a brass candle snuffer and tray.



Courtesy of Patsy McGraw

A hogscraper candlestick sits on the windowsill. Made of metal, its name comes from the fact that it doubled as both a tool to scrape the skin of butchered hogs and as a candlestick. Careful examination reveals some old hog bristles caught in the metal base.

Between the chest and the bed, a Canadian rocker with old red paint waits patiently for the woman of the house to finish her chores and take a much needed rest, her quilting blocks set aside until her return.

In the corner of the room stands the hand-built fireplace which not only gave warmth to the cabin, but also served as the main cooking stove. Various cooking utensils and pots hang or rest upon it. Close at hand on the wall is the brass bedwarmer, ready to be filled with coals from the fire and placed in the bed before bedtime to warm the covers. A whale oil lamp sits on the mantel.

A pair of leather boots, probably worn by a young boy, are drying by the fire. The workmanship that went into making them is reflected in the tiny wooden pegs that attach the soles to the uppers, a technique common before the Civil War.

In front of the fireplace is the eating area. Two ladderback chairs are pulled up to an Empire style table. The table is invitingly set with pewter plates, a salt glaze sugar box, and a white ceramic pitcher embossed with a daisy pattern.

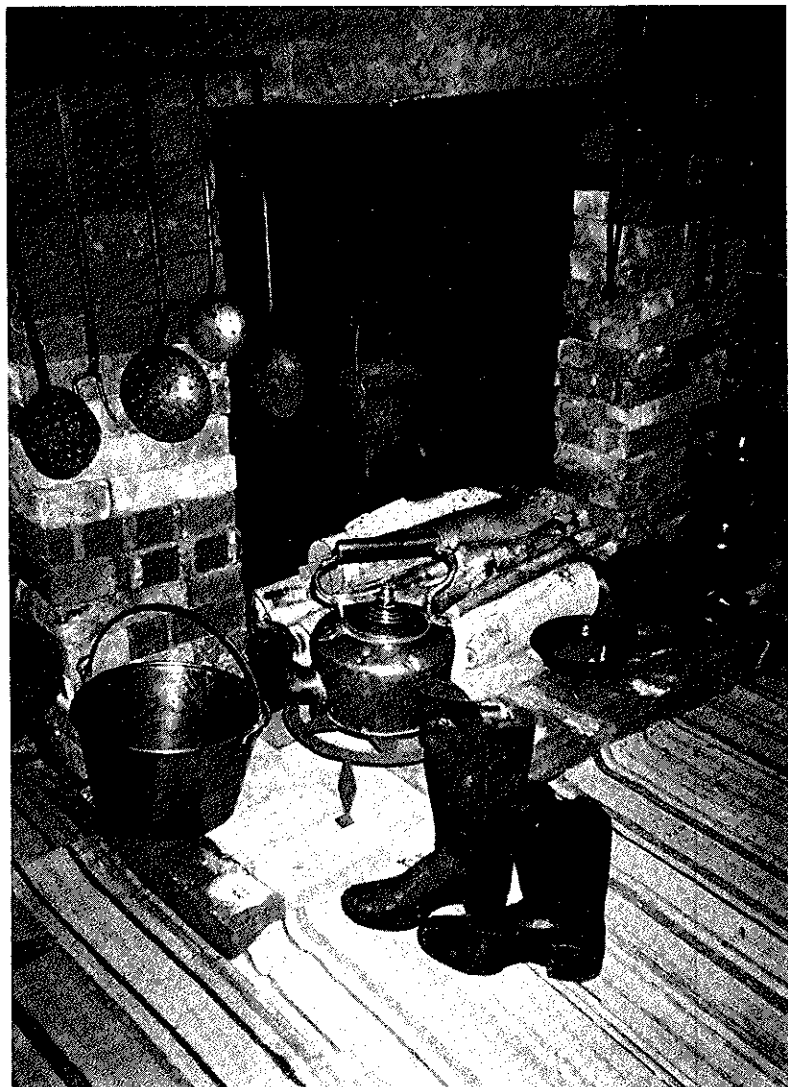
A Windsor style rodback armchair stands against the wall between the fireplace and the door. On the other side of the door is a butter churn. The age of a wooden bucket hanging on the

wall is evident from the hand-carved wooden nuts and bolts that are used to attach its handle.

A step-back cupboard, painted blue, holds the varied dishes and accoutrements of the household. Such items as an oval straw basket, a leather covered document box (lined with hand-stenciled wallpaper), and two red-ware bowls are just some of the period pieces that fill the shelves.

A flax wheel sits next to the cupboard. Resting beside it is a hatchel, ready at hand to comb the flax. With these last additions, the scene has been set. You can almost see the family living there, enjoying its warmth and a respite from a harsh and dangerous life.

The Editors thank Carleton Stickney and, especially, Patsy McGraw, both of the Stockholm Historical Organization, for their contributions to this feature.



Courtesy of J. Rebecca Thompson

Update

Leonora Barry

Our last issue (volume 43, no. 2) profiled the life of Leonora Kearney Barry Lake in an article by Betsey Kepes and Emily Owen. Mrs. Barry was nationally known as “the eloquent voice of working women,” but little has been recorded of her first twenty five years in St. Lawrence County. Since her article was published, Ms. Kepes, a creative and persistent researcher, has uncovered more information about her subject which she describes below. She and illustrator, Joanne Lincoln, are collaborating on a children’s book about Leonora Barry designed to be used in the fourth grade local history curriculum.

In the Fall of 1998, Montgomery County, New York chose Leonora Barry as the “woman of the county” because of her work as an organizer in the textile mills in the manufacturing city of Amsterdam. A bronze marker donated by the Governor’s Commission on the Achievement of Women honors Leonora’s life and work.

At the unveiling of the marker, several North Country natives were special guests. Molly Morgan, Ann Duffy, and C. Joseph Post of Potsdam are third cousins of Mrs. Barry. Their grandmother, Katherine Kearney, grew up on the Orebed Road in Pierrepont, just a few miles from Leonora Barry’s girlhood home on the Irish Settlement Road.

Leonora’s parents arrived in Pierrepont in 1852 from Ireland. “They were poor people, but both were educated, the mother being a graduate of a young women’s school in Dublin.* Educated women were very unusual in the mid-nineteenth century, especially in rural northern New York State.

Leonora is quoted in a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article: “My people were pioneers in northern New York and my education was gained, not at the knee of my mother, for she never had time to sit down to it, but through contact with her superior gifts and attainments. My mother was a highly educated woman, mistress of seven languages and rarely gifted in the quality of motherliness.”

When Leonora was fourteen her mother died. Leonora did not have enough money to attend a “young women’s school” even if one had been available to her.

Instead, “the young girl, pinning for a more complete education, left home and sought assistance from Miss Hepburn, the sister of Comptroller Hepburn... The kind-hearted woman must have read trouble in my face... for she said, ‘Stay here with me and I will have you ready for school-teaching in six weeks.’”^{*} Leonora passed her teaching exam at age fifteen and began teaching at age sixteen.

^{*} Chicago newspaper, 1901, “Talks Temperance Among Catholics.”

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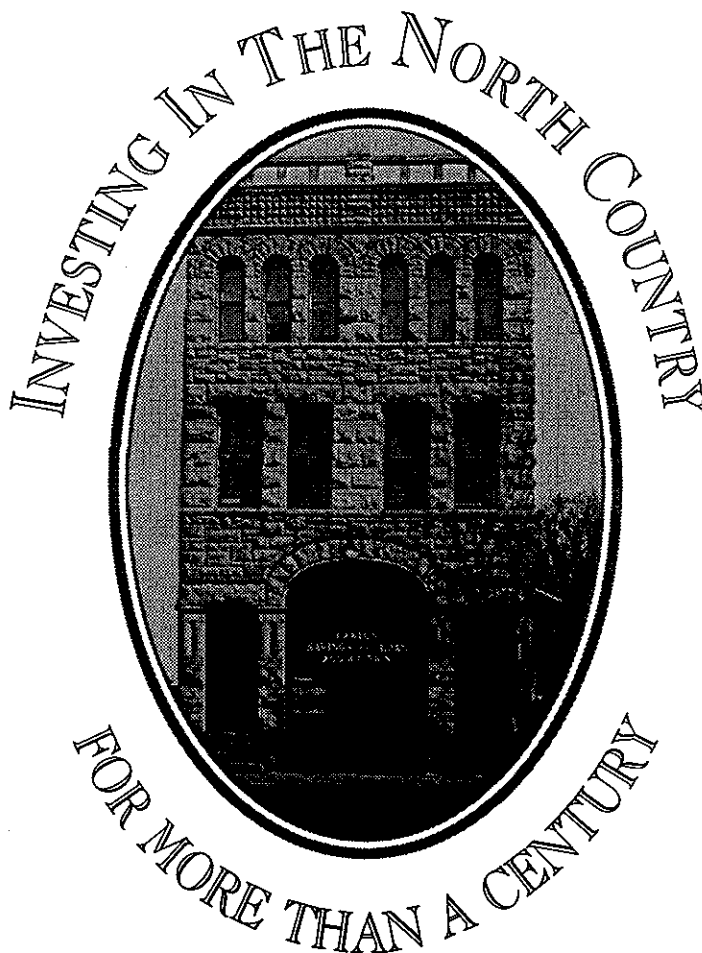
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