

Stephentown Historical Society Newsletter

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How Things Used to Be...

By DAVID J. JACOBS

The following is adapted from the tape of a conversation with a friend who lived in neighboring Hancock (Jericho) Valley, and who died too young in 1975. He was born in 1930, but his vivid recollections sounded more like 1830.

"There is nothing about being brought up on a farm like I was brought up on that I regret. Oh, there was some awful uncomfortable times, like being cold. You just couldn't get warm, particularly drawing hay in the winter...Didn't get electricity up to our house until 1933, and not down to the schoolhouse till '37.

"Every one of us kids had a job. Not for pay. First thing in the morning, we'd help with the chores. I had to take care of the calves, working till school time. After school, I had to get the cows down for milking. And gardening. I remember that very damn plain. If we wanted to go swimming, we'd have to first pull a bushel of weeds to feed the pigs. That's why I'm always looking for better ways to keep down the weeds.

"I used to help my father draw out wood. Before I was big enough to harness a horse my father would come out of the woods at noon, harness a horse so when I'd get home from school I'd take the horse on the mountain with a dray or sled, and I'd draw firewood in four-foot lengths. Everybody burnt wood. We had big, cast-iron stoves for cooking and in the parlor.

"Most of the logging was for building. If you knew the length of the members you needed, that was the length you'd cut the stick. We cut all the logs for our barn, the one that blew down in the '50 hurricane.

THE CIVIL WAR AND STEPHENTOWN

To the blare of bugles and the roll of drums, enlistments for a war between the North and the South began in 1861. The Northern Army had the greatest odds in their favor: 70% of rails to transport men and material as well as 80% of the factories.

The issue of slavery was being settled on battlefields. New York State had outlawed slavery in 1785. Twenty-six slaves were still owned in Stephentown according to the 1790 Census. In 1847 The Stephentown Center Baptist Church resolved that no slave owner could be elected officer. At the start of the Civil War, Stephentown had 13 black residents and no slaves.

Our men joined many regiments in Mass, Vt and Ill, but most joined the 125th Regiment formed in Troy. Nineteen of our soldiers died in action, six of them in the notorious Andersonville Prison.

William H. Brimmer received \$1,000.00 bounty to fight in place of an unknown man in Troy and was with the 21st Calvary Regiment.

In Nov. 1861, while visiting in Washington, Helen Gardner, a local resident, wrote in her diary: "Went to Camp Douglas...sad to see soldiers packing and getting ready...some rough looking men...went into some of their wagons, quite warm and comfortable...saw men cooking, 4 kettles coffee, beef soup, each one had tin pie plate, cup, spoon, knife, fork. Their supper didn't look very tempting...went to see Zoaves drill." While back in Stephentown, she reported they have "started a Soldier's Aid Society." After her return she "helped pack a box for soldiers...received a letter from A. He is at Yorktown where they are expecting a great battle."

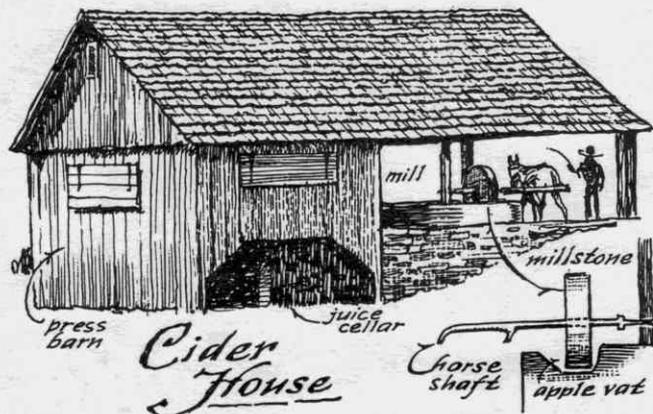
In a letter from Isaac DeWitt Coleman, Jr., Camp 125th, N.Y. Vol, Stevensburg, Va, Dec. 19, 1863, he wrote, "To the Hon. Committee, I have the honor to present 1/2 doz small size Sponge Cake for the benefit of the Donation table. Would be please could i do more in this respect but owing to the high price of Provisions in this vicinity, beg to be excused...The Mercantile name of this kind of goods is 'Hard Tack' or sometimes 'Lincoln's Sponge Cake'."

The Historical Society has been given Fisher Green's diary for 1865 in which he recorded: Feb - "Heard of the capture of Charleston"...Mar - "Battle of Gravelly Run where the company has lost 41 men...took many prisoners

...The Regt was on review again this time by Gens Grant, Meade, Warren and the President. "Apr-"Grant passed and repassed...Lay in the mud all day and night...rode out after forage...mail arrived and so did hard tack...marched 10 miles in mud and water sometimes up to our

waists...heard of Lincoln's death...marched 19 miles... Johnson surrendered to Sherman, Boys got in line and gave three cheers...drew soft bread...visited with Linc (brother Lincoln Green) not seen in 4 years... went to Washington on Parade...saw flag Booth tore in the President's box... Regiment reviewed by Governor of New York...Mustered out...A nice day, was to home."

P.S. Our museum has memorabilia of area residents: the uniform great-coat of Capt. Hastings Kellogg and 19 medals of James Thomson, collected at 12th Regiment annual encampments, up to 1910. We would appreciate if others would add to our collective memorial to our Civil War Veterans.



A well known authority on old historic barns Richard Babcock of Hancock acquired his love for rebuilding old barns over 30 years ago. He learned how to rebuild them the old-fashioned way from his grandfather.

At the present time he has three barns standing on his property. Three more are stored there and he hopes one day to have 10 or 12 on exhibit on his property.

The largest standing barn, a Dutch plantation barn circa 1683, contains among other features old cider making equipment.

In the center of the floor is a walkway made of slightly raised pieces of wood. This encircles the apple crushing equipment. The crusher, with two meshing wooden gears, was pushed by hand, horse power or by slaves. Once the apples are partially crushed, they are held for one day in a large bin. Then they go to the press. First straw was laid, then apples; more straw and more apples. The pressing screws were originally made of hickory, and as the operator began applying pressure, the juice was filtered through the straw and ran into containers.

One side of this particular barn housed cows, and the other side horses. The doors are wide enough for horses and a hay wagon to pass through from end to end. The barn was placed so the doors faced the prevailing wind. The bundles of hand-tied wheat were stored overhead, dried, then threshed on the threshing floor below. With both doors open the dust and chaff blew out.

Mr. Babcock uses old tools and methods in reconstructing these barns. He uses gin poles, pulleys and ropes. The huge doors swing on wooden hinges; pegs are used for joining beams.

The symbol of a cross designating the use of a barn as a meeting house or church has been placed on top of one of his barns. When this area was settled, barns were the first well-built structures, and were used by the community. This was customary in Hancock, MA and New Lebanon, NY.

All Mr. Babcock's sons have followed in his footsteps and have restored barns themselves.

Richard Babcock loves working on the old barns, and will continue to reconstruct them. He strongly feels this is a way of life that should not be forgotten.

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**THE KINDERHOOK CREEK:
Then and Now**

Spafford's 1824 Gazeteer of New York State tells us that the Kinderhook Creek, one of the best streams for mills in the United States, is formed of numerous branches that spread over the SE corner of Rensselaer County and the NE corner of Columbia County, which united runs to the SW.

The Kinderhook Creek takes its rise in South Berlin, Rensselaer County, at a point where the headwaters of the Kinderhook flows south and the Hoosic Creek flows north. These headwaters are but a few rods apart. The Taghkanic range of mountains passes north and south through the extreme eastern section of the county and in the western section the Petersburg Mountains pass in the same direction. The two are separated by the long deep valley through which flows the Kinderhook Creek in a southerly direction and the Hoosic Creek in a northerly direction. Between the waters flowing north and those flowing south, the summit level in this valley at South Berlin is 600 ft. above tide. This stream is sometimes referred to as the West Brook.

As the Kinderhook flows south, it is joined by the waters of East Brook near Grange Hall Road and continues its flow under the bridge in the village.

Approximately 500 ft. after the stream flows under the Rt. 43 bridge, this west branch of the Kinderhook joins the east branch of the Kinderhook, which starts in Hancock, MA.

This East tributary of the Kinderhook has its beginnings in a swampy area above the Hancock Central School in Hancock, MA. As it makes its descent towards New York State, four streams flow into it: Rathbun Brook, Jones Brook, Whitman Brook and Bentley Brook. It passes into New York in the Osgood Road area and then is sometimes referred to as East Creek. It continues to flow towards Stephentown where it meets the west branch that flows from South Berlin.

"We always had a skidway where you skidded your logs to roll them onto a truck or wagon, and we had a landing in the woods where you drew logs with a skid horse. A skid horse was a very amazing animal. You didn't need to be with a good skid horse. He'd have just a harness, a whiffletree, and a choker. You'd hook a log onto him and he'd get through to the road, all alone.

"You didn't use blinders on a skid horse. That way, if he got hung up he could turn around and see what he'd hooked onto. Talk to the real old-timers, they'll agree with me: If a good skid horse got the log hung on a tree, he'd pull that log away from the tree in the direction that would let him get it out.

"Mom would go out and work the woods with Dad. He'd hook the log onto a horse and the horse would come down on its own to the road where Mom would unhook the log, and send him back into the woods to Dad for another...

"The worst damn job in the Fall was harvesting shell beans for baked beans. You'd pull the shell bean plants out by the roots, tie them together, and hang them into the hayloft until they was thoroughly dry. If you had a good Fall, a dry one, they'd air dry in the hay. It hardly ever happened just that way; more often than not they'd mold and rot on you. When they was dry, you'd pull the damn brashy pods off, put them in a burlap bag, and beat them with something like a ball bat to knock the beans out of the pods. You'd dump them from one pan to another, and let the wind blow away the remnants of the shucks.

"Baked beans are still a tremendous dish to me. Tripe and fried salt pork, too. A lot of people shudder at it, but I tell you I have had many a delicious helping of fried salt pork and milk gravy. Of course, milk gravy and biscuits was the poor man's diet, but I know lots of people that grewed up to be healthy on that...

"There's no substitute for the experiences I had, knowing how things used to be...I just can't describe it."

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The Kinderhook Creek Bibliography: 1824 Spafford's Gazeteer; J.H. French-1860 Gazeteer; Sylvester's History of Renss. Co.; Dept. of Transportation Maps of NY, MA; 1868 BEERS ATLAS of Renss. Co.

SPECIAL EVENTS

This year's special fund raising events totaled nearly \$4,000.00. This included the Strawberry Festival and Pumpkin Festival held at Zema's which have become social events as visitors enjoyed the refreshments while listening to the live band provided by Angela Zema. The Tag Sale was also a very successful event.

This year's Craftfest saw an increase in exhibitors. We were again fortunate to have a donation for our raffle. Barbara Peterson donated a lovely hand hooked rug which was won by Anna Mary Dunton's granddaughter.

None of these Special Events could have happened without tremendous cooperation in the form of donations of goods and volunteer hours by members of the Society and community people. This support is heartwarming!

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- Dec 9 Holiday Potluck, Gifts and Singalong (Town Hall, 6:30)
Jan 13 One-Room School Houses (Town Hall, 7:30)
Feb 10 Recent Excavations in NYS (Town Hall, 7:30)
Mar 9 Residents of Other Lands (Town Hall, 7:30)
Apr 13 Estes Mill (Town Hall, 7:30)
May 11 Berkshire Scenic Railway (Heritage Center, 7:30)
Jun 8 Swords (Heritage Center, 7:30)



YOU ARE INVITED

TO JOIN

THE STEPHENTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

1991 membership categories and dues are as follows:

Individual member	\$5.00
Contributing member	\$15.00
Business/Organization	\$25.00
Life member	\$100.00

We hope you will join us this year. Checks payable to Stephentown Historical Society, c/o Anitta G. Burg, P.O. Box 339, Stephentown, NY 12168

HERITAGE CENTER UPDATE

The Heritage Center has been used to its fullest this past half year. Committee, Board and Public meetings take place here during the warm months. This year the planning, execution and opening of the Architectural Exhibit showed the full use of the building with its improved lighting, excellent display boards, and use of our peg boards and display cases to supplement the main exhibit. Outstanding was the mini post and beam barn frame and tools loaned to us by Charles Babcock. 212 people viewed the exhibit including the architecture class from Berlin High School. The front doors now open out and heat sensors are about to be installed connected to our alarm system.

The big news is that we have been awarded two grants by the New York Council on the Arts. One for the restoration of the portrait of Stephen Van Rensselaer. The second, added to the monies we already have in the Museum Reserve Fund will enable us to install a heating system. So we progress!

Editors: Virginia Atwater
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