

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE  
CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 87

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

October, 1972

## *The October Meeting*

*The October meeting of the Historical Association will take place on Monday evening, October 2nd, at 8 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. The program will consist of a talk and slide presentation on The Archeology of the 1812 Forts by Dr. Mark N. Cohen of the anthropology staff, and Miss Jacqueline Thibaut, a graduate student in history and archeology, both at State University College in Plattsburgh. They will present slides of the summer excavation at Fort Izard and information about past and future projects of the Archeology Society.*

*The public is cordially invited.*

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## NEWS OF THE MUSEUM

The Association's museum collection, now housed in its new quarters in the City Hall, is being prepared for display. The Exhibitions Committee, headed by Thomas Holland of the College's Fine Arts Department, has been meeting weekly to sort and re-catalog the entire collection, and will welcome volunteers every Wednesday evening.

Mrs. Helen Allan, Director of Exhibits, is ready to receive those many promised items from people who have been waiting for the Association to have a place to display them.

The Exhibitions Committee has drawn up this statement of broad objectives:

"The scope of the Museum collection shall be limited to materials directly related to the museum objectives dedicated to protecting historical things pertinent to Clinton County and adjacent territory, other than library and archival materials, from loss or destruction in order that they may be enjoyed and studied by the present and future generations of citizens of the North Country."

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## REGRETS ABOUT THE SEPTEMBER "NOTES"

The editors are sorry about the late distribution of the last issue of the "Notes". In part it resulted from a slow rebound from the summer doldrums. Partly it was caused by the institution of new procedures at our publisher's, the Clinton Press. We will make every effort to assure that members will receive future issues in sufficient time to learn of the monthly meetings.

## *The Dawn Valcour Agricultural and Horticultural Association*

The story of the Dawn Valcour Community, as it was commonly called, begins not on the Lake Champlain Island named Valcour, but a considerable distance away in the city of Chicago. It was in this city in the spring of 1874 that Colonel John Wilcox decided to establish a community if he could find the right place. It was to be no ordinary community. Its stated purpose was to be "The Head Center of Advanced Spiritualism and Free Love. As we will soon see, it was an attempt at much more than this name implies.

Colonel Wilcox after deciding to establish such a community, advertised in a number of journals and periodicals, among which was "Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly". It was in this publication that one Orrin Shipman of Colchester, Vermont saw the ad and immediately offered his land to Colonel Wilcox. He claimed his property to be worth \$100,000, but only asked approximately \$26,000 dollars from the members of the proposed association plus the payment of his debts, which supposedly did not exceed \$9,000. Included in this proposed arrangement was not only 800 acres on Valcour, but also Shipman's nurseries on the Vermont side of the lake.

After a lengthy exchange of letters between the two men Colonel Wilcox came to Valcour to inspect the property and being pleased with it, wrote to others in his group asking them to come. Near the end of August Mrs. Hannah Augusta White and eleven others came to join him. Of this number a few left after only a few days, disgusted with Mr. Shipman and his property.

As yet no investment in property had been made and no one was at all certain that it would last. The uncertainty of their future was due partially to the unfavorable reception by the people of the area and the cloud of scandal and misrepresentation that had been thrown about them by the press. To alleviate this problem and hopefully attract more members by doing so the members held a public meeting in October.

At this meeting one Professor Bentley, Colonel Wilcox and Hannah White spoke. What was said was in the broadest terms and did not fully explain their movement. The speeches did, however, make clear their socialist and free love intentions. Consider the following excerpts from the speeches of Colonel Wilcox and Mrs. White.

"The downfall of African slavery was but a miniature prelude to the terrible convulsions that are to result in the complete overthrow of every form of injustice that discriminates in the distribution of all those blessings that should make us all equal in the sight of God."

"There is no intrinsic worth in gold, greenbacks, and bonds; they are but the representation of wealth while the real wealth lies back of all this, in the hands of toil."

"Three fifth (3/5) of the wealth of this nation is wrenched from the hands of those who produced it, and is gathered up into the hands of those who never toil."

"Valcour move offers the only possible remedy."

"No man should hold jurisdiction over a woman's soul and body." (marriage)

"We have come among you to demonstrate the fact that any evil that afflicts humanity today is the result of false and underlying conditions, mainly attributable to the unjust distribution of wealth, and the cruelties perpetuated under the hell-begotten phase of the present marriage system. We believe that through the adoption of just regulations every evil that exists among us can be removed."

Apparently these liberal ideas were too much for the area's citizens to comprehend, or if they did understand, they didn't agree with them for no more than a few joined the communists on Valcour.

The financial position of the Association was likewise quite poor. Mr. Shipman, it turned out, was not going to be as benevolent as he had first appeared. They realized this when they discovered that there were one hundred acres less than Shipman had said there were, his debts were at least five thousand dollars more than he had stated, and there were mortgages on the property for more than the value of the land. The Association deliberated with Shipman over the conditions of the contract, but no fair deal could be made with him. Because of this, few would enter the contract. Those who did lost everything they put into it.

By March 1875 rumors surfaced that all wasn't going well on the island. The rumors turned out to be true. On March 9, Colonel Wilcox exposed Shipman's trickery to Sheriff Drene of Burlington, Vermont. He exposed his trickery, the extent of his indebtedness, and his domestic tendencies.

Because of these claims the case of Professor O. Shipman vs. Colonel J. Wilcox was tried at Winoski, Vermont on the thirteenth of March, and dismissed with "no cause for action." The case did serve a purpose, however. It brought to the attention of one Mr. Fay, who held a heavy mortgage on the property, the plight the communists were in. He offered the island to the community for the amount of his claims. The "free-lovers" did not have the money, however, and it appeared the experiment was doomed.

Colonel Wilcox, Mrs. White and a few others stayed on the island and were still determined to make a success of their plan for organization, their idea of "social freedom" and the basic socialist doctrine. This effort took the form of a series of four letters which were published weekly by the PLATTSBURGH REPUBLICAN. From them the public at the time, and we, studying about them today, get the first true, detailed explanation of what their association was all about.

In her first letter Mrs. White stated their motive as "establishment of better conditions for development." The rest of the letter concerned their history which I have already gone into in more depth than she did.

Her second letter expressed the belief that it was not the capitalists who were to blame for the injustices of the system, but rather the system itself. She further explained that what they were trying to achieve was a system that would "give each a fair chance, no matter what their abilities may be" and one that "takes into account the simple fact that the majority of mankind have not the "sharpness" to hoard and browbeat and beat their way to wealth, and if they are to get a share of the good things of this life, must do it by honest labor. Their basic principle concerning this was "that each should have the full value of all they produce."

Her third letter concerned their basic plan of organization. She described the advantages of cooperation as the ability to obtain better tools and machinery, to acquire more comforts in the form of better housing, clothing and food, and advantages of marketing they would gain by dealing in volume.

She then described what she considered the best method of organizing after studying many various methods. In this she included fourteen points which on the surface seemed very simple and ideal. Plans such as the ones she described, however, had for the most part proved to be failures in this country. All fourteen of her points will not be listed, but only a few which will give the flavor of her argument.

First, each family or member of the community was to lease, at cost price, as many rooms of the common house as he wants. In addition, each was to pay his proportion of the rooms used in common. She estimated this would cost a person approximately four dollars a year.

Second, food would be served restaurant fashion and each person would pay for food at cost of production and serving. One dollar and fifty cents per week was Mrs. White's estimate for this cost to a member.

Third, they would have a child-care center.

Fourth, the same price would be paid for all branches of labor, but there could be different grades of price according to the amount and excellence of work performed.

Fifth, the necessary officers would be elected by all persons over fifteen years of age.

Sixth, the hours of labor would eventually be reduced until the ideal rate of three hours a day was reached.

Her fourth letter was perhaps the most spectacular for the day. In it she described her interpretation of social freedom and why her group didn't believe in marriage. She said social freedom in its broadest sense meant "simply the right of each to regulate their own sexual regulations as they please, providing, always, that they do not infringe upon the rights of others." She finished with the following statement evoking her faith in the form of life she had chosen:

"But as no important or permanent industrial reform could be made in the present system, so neither could social freedom be successfully lived in isolated life. Society must be entirely reformed. 'Ye cannot put new wine into old bottles' - before people can live according to the higher laws and principles: and, in my opinion, the best form it can take is the Communistic."

This great effort on the part of Mrs. White proved to be of no avail, however, as it did not attract more people to join them.

The remaining few managed to stay on the island until November of 1875 when they left for New York City, in hopes of starting all over again. Thus ended the first and last communist-socialist experiment in this region.

One might logically ask what this bold experiment actually accomplished, since it obviously was a failure, probably never attracting more than twenty people at any one time. The most farming seems to have been a little fruit growing on the farm on the Vermont shore and the herding of about thirty starved cattle on the island. For all intents and purposes it did not really accomplish anything. However, there is one important reason for preserving its history. An experiment of this kind is a definite part of American history. On one hand, this community and others like it, such as Oneida, show the great degree of freedom Americans have had since the beginning of our country to decide on their way of life. On the other hand, they show that not all Americans have agreed with the course the United States has taken and have attempted either to change or drop out of their society. The fact that such an attempt can be made by any group of people says a great deal about their country, and deserves to have its story preserved.

Earle F. Vance, SUC

## Old Time Hints for the Homemaker

(From *THE WHITE HOUSE COOK BOOK, A Comprehensive Cyclopeda of Information for the Home*, by Hugo Ziemann (Steward of the White House) and Mrs. F. L. Gillette, Akron, Ohio, 1901. Loaned by Mrs. Doris Bolin of Plattsburgh.)

**Leaks in waste pipes:** Shut yourself into a room from which the pipe starts. Put two or three ounces of oil of peppermint into a pail of boiling hot water and pour down the pipe. Another person who has not yet inhaled the strong odor should follow the course of the pipe through the house. The peppermint will be pretty sure to discover a break that even an expert plumber might overlook.

**Family glue:** Crack the glue and put it in a bottle, add common whisky; shake up, cork tight, and in three or four days it can be used. It requires no heating, will keep for almost any length of time, and is at all times ready to use, except in the coldest of weather, when it will require warming. It must be kept tight, so that the whisky will not evaporate.

**To ventilate a room:** Place a pitcher of cold water on a table in your room and it will absorb all the gases with which the room is filled from the respiration of those eating or sleeping in the apartment. Very few realize how important such purification is for the health of the family, or, indeed, understand or realize that there can be any impurity in the rooms; yet in a few hours a pitcher or pail of cold water-- the colder the more effective-- will make the air of a room pure, but the water will be entirely unfit for use.

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### RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

**Old Riddle:** Congregational churches in early Clinton County tended to become Presbyterian because by a venture in cooperation, the Act of Union in 1801, Congregationalists in New York were able to select Presbyterian ministers, and Presbyterians in New England to select Congregationalists. Partly because of this arrangement, most Congregational churches in New York eventually joined Presbyterian synods, for a variety of local reasons.

**New riddle:** Why do most of the islands in Lake Champlain belong to Vermont?

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