

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 91

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

February, 1973

## *The February Meeting*

of the Historical Association will be held on Monday evening, February 5th, at 8 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. The topic of the evening is "A D K's First Fifty Years", a pictorial review of the growth of the Adirondack Mountain Club since its founding in 1922. It will be narrated by James Bailey, curator of the Essex County museum in Elizabethtown.

Mrs. Janice Jensen of Syracuse was primarily responsible for putting the collection together. She obtained contributions of slides from the 22 chapters of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

The public is cordially invited.

## OFFICERS ELECTED FOR 1973

VICE PRESIDENT — C. Randall Beach, Altona

SECRETARY — William Stanford, Ingraham

TREASURER — John Baxter III, West Chazy

CURATOR — Ruth Hecht, Plattsburgh

## FROM THE OUTGOING PRESIDENT

1973 will be a crucial year for our Clinton County Historical Association. We will need the support of all our members in order to meet it successfully.

Our temporary museum in Plattsburgh's City Hall is well under way and we hope to have it open soon. But it will require help from the Association, both physical and financial, to make it a success.

To facilitate our museum program we should consider employing a paid director. While the volunteer help we have had over the years has been outstanding, it is very difficult for those of us who must work 40 hours a week for a living to volunteer enough time to fill all the needs of our Association. A paid director could do these things for us. But if we are to have one, even part time, we must start immediately to seek new financial resources.

Our membership roster has declined substantially over the last few years. We need to make a special effort to gain new members and also to regain the many former members who have, often unintentionally, failed to renew their memberships.

I could go on at length citing other needs of our Association, but I'm sure you are aware of them too. It is discouraging that as we start a new year we've not been able to find anyone who is willing to undertake the duties of President. Hopefully by the time you receive these "Notes" we will have someone. We need the strong leadership of the very people who tell us they are too busy with other things.

And we need all of you, in this crucial year. I urge you, if you want the Clinton County Historical Association to continue its work, to consider what you can do to help.

Richard Ward

## *The Establishment of Clinton Prison*

Clinton Prison at Dannemora, New York grew out of a decade of agitation by the skilled trade associations in the middle 1830's and early 1840's for the abolition of competitive convict labor. The idea was seized upon by the artisans of the day as a way to employ convicts usefully without hurting their own livelihoods in the process.

A resident of Keeseville urged Governor Seward in 1841 to consider the possibility of using inmate labor in Clinton and Essex Counties' iron mines. Assemblyman George Weir was appointed chairman of the Assembly committee on state prisons in 1842. One of its recommendations was for the state to go into the business of mining and smelting metal ores. Another part asserted that geological surveys showed an inexhaustible supply of ore in the Adirondack area. The penal labor law of 1842 authorized further study of the matter and a Saratoga County inventor and jack-of-all-trades named Ransom Cook was given the task of exploring the possibilities in the Adirondacks.

Cook examined ore mines in Newcomb and Clintonville and then the mines owned by Saily, Averill and Skinner in the town of Beekmantown. He gave decided preference to the latter. His report stated that the ore was of the very best quality, easily worked and inexhaustible. He thought the mines could be used for a century before pumps would be needed to keep the water level down. The report also mentioned that the mines at Dannemora were surrounded by a rich farming country, where an abundant supply of provisions could be had at a cheap rate.

Cook estimated that a gang of one hundred convicts might be immediately and profitably employed there. Temporary cells could be erected at a trifling expense from the stone quarry on the spot and ultimate accommodations and profitable employment for 500 men could be provided with an outlay of about \$170,000 for the mine and the new cells.

Averill, Skinner and Saily offered to sell their mines with two hundred acres of land and valuable water privileges on the Saranac for \$70,000. Skinner had already named Dannemora after the well-known iron center in Sweden.

The ironmaking project attracted widespread support. The Assembly committee on prisons endorsed Cook's proposals. Labor groups added their influence, for few of the state's artisans at the time were engaged in iron production, and in the words of one legislative document, the use of convicts in such activity would remove them from competition with free workers "as effectively as if they were transported to Russia or Sweden".

The **Plattsburgh Republican**, representing such important Democratic leaders as Azariah Flagg, was active in promoting the project, and various legislators from the northern part of the state fought for it as a potential benefit to the area. Flagg was a member of the "Albany Regency" and at one time comptroller of the state. J. C. Hubbell, Assemblyman of Chazy, was one of the champions of the bill. Meanwhile the venture enlisted the backing of such Whig organs as the **New York Tribune**. Despite opposition from critics who pointed out that the growing use of anthracite and coke for smelting was driving down the price of charcoal-produced iron, and that the remoteness of the Plattsburgh area from major markets boded ill for the success of the project, a measure to establish an ironmaking penitentiary in Clinton County made steady headway in the legislature, aided by constant pressure from labor organizations and their supporters. When the bill passed the State Assembly in March 1844, a large rally of workers in New York City hailed the event enthusiastically and dispatched a memorial with 4,500 signatures to the Senate urging similar action. In April 1844 the upper house put its seal of approval on the project and the measure became law with a \$75,000 appropriation.

The prison was to be located north of a line drawn east and west of the city of Albany. It was specified that only the manufacture of iron should be undertaken in the prison, no contracts should be made for other labor by the prisoners, and as far as practicable the prison was to be built by the prisoners themselves.

Cook was named the first agent or warden and in January 1845, with snow five feet deep on the ground, the stockading of the prison yard was begun which eventually enclosed an area of approximately fifteen acres. This work was completed in May 1845. On June 3rd, fifty convicts began the long journey from Sing Sing prison and 44 more soon followed from Auburn.

A reporter's account of the building of the prison in the summer of 1845 is revealing. A stream of one-horse carts passed back and forth through the gate of the palis-

ade, conveying the earth from the quarry and the mine to a ravine on the outside. "Within the yard," he commented, "all is alive with industry". He described gangs of men working at different tasks. One gang was employed in filling carts from the earth that covered the quarry; another in blasting stone for the building; a third in cutting and preparing the stone for laying, and so on for a total of ten gangs.

A foundation was sunk for the cell block which was five feet deep, 55 feet wide and 300 feet long. When completed, the cell block was to hold 126 cells. It was Cook's desire to complete it and erect outer walls enclosing the whole block before winter.

Cook seemed a wise choice for warden because of the mechanical aptitudes he brought to a novel industrial experiment. Two pieces of machinery used at the new institution, a steam-powered forge and an electro-magnetic ore separator, were of his own design. He was a skillful administrator who used the lash sparingly, took pains to establish a prison library, lectured to the convicts on scientific subjects, and allowed inmates such indulgences as chewing tobacco.

In the spring of 1847 a sawmill was erected, a mine opened, and the prison completed. During the first ten years of its operation no iron ore was processed; it was raised and sold at Saranac Hollow, Cadyville and elsewhere. In 1853 E. and J. P. Kingsland and Company of Keeseville contracted to build an extensive iron works for the state at the prison, including a forge, rolling mill, nail factory, and an immense blast furnace. The furnace cost nearly \$200,000, but was soon destroyed by fire. The work was run under the contract system.

The ore was raised from the mine, conveyed to the forge, wrought into blooms, passed into the rolling mill, rolled into plates, passed into the nail factory where it was cut into nails and then put into kegs ready for market. The whole operation took place in the prison yard, and the raw ore was turned into finished nails within a period of 24 hours. The 44 nail machines could turn out 225 kegs a day at maximum production.

Charcoal for the forges and blast furnace was obtained from a large tract of woodland belonging to the state on the opposite side of Johnson Mountain (Dannemora Mountain today). The tract contained nearly 15,000 acres and at one time 25 kilns were in operation to make charcoal for the iron-making process. Kingsland was superseded by A. Williams and Company in 1862. In 1866 the state assumed the management of the iron works and purchased the nail machines.

From a promising beginning the penitentiary never fulfilled the hopes of those who fought to establish it. It was remote from major centers of population and connected to the outside world by only the poorest of roads. These two handicaps made it impossible for the institution to market its products effectively. Another disadvantage was the fact that it was expensive to provision with food and supplies. In addition, the Adirondack iron industry was in a depressed condition during the late 1840's and early 1850's, and the prison shared the difficulty. Finally, the original estimates of the iron ore contained in the penitentiary tract were overly optimistic. By 1852 the supply had given out, and the state was forced to pay heavy rates to private interests for the privilege of working adjacent lands.

As deficits mounted, critics demanded that the entire project be given up. A number of convicts were actually transferred to Auburn and Sing Sing prisons in anticipation of the prison's abandonment. The final step was not taken. Other prisons in the state were too overcrowded to absorb all of Clinton's inmates. In addition, labor groups were fiercely opposed to the termination of the project, and various legislators were unwilling to write off the extensive investment which had been made in the physical plant and equipment.

In 1860 Governor Morgan told the legislature that the "disproportionate cost of maintaining the prison at Dannemora shows that its original design and location there was in error". The **Albany Daily Knickerbocker** agreed, reflecting the thinking of many citizens in stating that the institution was "too inaccessible — too much surrounded by intense cold and snow storms to ever be other than a losing concern". It went on to assert that the prison operation was an "extravagant folly, tolerated for the sole purpose of proving that there were men in the world sufficiently empty-handed to spend 12 shillings every time they make a dollar".

In the 1870's L. P. Pillsbury, Superintendent of Prisons, presented a report of his investigation into the financial status of Clinton Prison. It showed that heavy financial losses were being incurred by the state from the mining operations. As a result, the project was abandoned and the manufacture of felt hats begun. Thus the experiment of the 1840's came to an ignominious end and today few people in the North Country are aware that the prison was originally established to mine and smelt iron ore with convict labor.

## HOW BENJAMIN MOOERS ACQUIRED HIS LANDS

(From the Kent-Delord Collection at the Feinberg Library.)

31 March 1798

I hereby Certify that the Warrant for the military Bounty Land, given by the United States, for Services during the late War, to Michael Arbour (or Harbor) was issued to Benjamin Moore (or Mooers) of New York, who claimed the same by virtue of a power of Attorney signed by sundry persons, of whom the above Michael Arbour, is one: which power is dated the 7th Jany 1792. The Witness to the signing by the respective persons, is Louis Marney. The above land Warrant issued Feb. 20th 1792.

Given under my hand and the Seal of  
the War Office of the United States  
this thirty first day of March 1798.

Samuel Lewis Senr.  
Clk. War Office

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### RIDDLE of the MONTH

Old riddle: In 1897 and 1899, President McKinley and staff vacationed at Hotel Champlain, in Plattsburgh. The Spanish War probably prevented him from doing so in 1898. During his sojourns, a steady stream of political leaders visited the President, so that Plattsburgh could be truthfully called the "summer White House."

New riddle: What were the inclusive dates of the Catholic Summer School in Plattsburgh?

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Issued by the

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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