

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED OCCASIONALLY BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 39

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

October, 1967

## *The October Meeting*

*of the Historical Association will be held on October 2nd and will feature an address by Dr. Louis L. Tucker, Assistant Commissioner for State History. Dr. Tucker assumed this position, previously known as the State Historian, on May 1, 1966. The meeting will begin at 8 o'clock in the Association rooms over the Public Library. The public is cordially invited.*

*Dr. Tucker came to Albany from Cincinnati, where for six years he was the director of the Cincinnati Historical Society. At the same time he taught at the University of Cincinnati, and previously at the College of William and Mary and the University of California. He is the author of "Puritan Protagonist -- President Thomas Clap of Yale College"; "Cincinnati During the Civil War" and "Cincinnati's Civic Crusaders", plus numerous articles and reviews for scholarly journals.*

## *Riddle of the Month*

The September riddle was not answered correctly by any one. Mr. Halsey Shields submitted the question, together with the answer: the "Royal Savage" was captured from the British and rechristened the "Yankee", but was always referred to by its original name.

New riddle: what are the sources of the names of Dannemora and Ellenburg?

## *Travel Hazards On Lake Champlain*

(Letter to Henry Delord of Plattsburgh)

Albany, Oct. 17, 1808

My Dear Friend,

You have no doubt been much surprized in not hearing from me before this, but your Wonder may very soon cease when I relate all my Adventures since I left your hospitable Abode.

On leaving you at the Fordway, I walked to the Forge at Willsborough and from thence to the Town of Willsborough, where I arrived about 4 P.M. Unfortunately all the Sloops had sailed, and the last of them not more than an hour previous to my Arrival. Of course I determined to cross the Ferry and proceed by Vergennes, but I found the joint of my left knee so stiff as scarcely to be able to bend it. I remained at McNiel's that Night, and in the Morning I was under the Necessity of proceeding on my careworn way towards Vergennes, for I could hire no horse or Carriage at McNiel's. Having with no little difficulty walked 10 Miles, I luckily espied a Carriage behind me with two old Quaker Gentlemen in it. Seeing a Seat vacant I requested them to let me fill it, which was immediately

granted, and on conversing with these Men I found one of them to be the Father of Mr. John Keese of Peru.

After arriving at Vergennes I could find no Conveyance direct to Skenesborough, but at last concluded to go in the Stage to Middlebury and Rutland and from thence I hired horses to go to Skenesborough, where I arrived on Thursday, 6th October, in a violent Storm of Wind and Rain.

To my great Confusion and Astonishment, my Trunk was not there which I had put on board the Franklin, Capt. Ferris, at the Camp Meeting. However, Mr. Bell arrived the same Evening in Capt. Nichols' Sloop and assured me the Franklin sailed in company with Capt. Nichols as far as Crown Point, intending taking a load of Ore in and Proceeding direct to Whitehall. However, I was determined not to go on further South before I saw my Trunk. Bell's Trunk was in the same Situation, but he went on, begging me to bring his Trunk with mine.

After waiting three days at Whitehall, I determined to go in search of the Sloop, feeling no small apprehension for your Muff, etc., and my own things. Sunday I went on in a Canoe as far down as Tyconderoga, heard nothing of the Sloop. Determined to find the Trunk, I hired another Canoe from Tye to go to Crown Point. I went about 3 Miles beyond Chimney Point and the Swells were so boisterous and the Canoe so light that we were in danger of upsetting every minute. We made shore as quick as possible and landed at the Foot of a very steep Cliff a little to the South of the Ore Bed on the West side of the Lake.

We had scarcely landed (the Boatman and myself) before we discovered several Rattle Snakes under our Feet. Killed four and worked our way through the Wood until we found the Road. We then walked, partly in the Night, as far as North West Bay<sup>2</sup>. Found that the Franklin was engaged carrying ore to Vergennes. Went and took out my Trunk and after many detentions arrived with Bell's and my Trunk safe at Skenesboro. Met a Clerk of Mr. Astor's with a Quantity of fur from Montreal. Hired a Waggon in company with him to Troy and arrived on Saturday Evening last in this City. In  $\frac{1}{2}$  an hour I am to sail in a Sloop as the Steam Boat does not sail until Wednesday. . . .

Yours Sincerely,

Thos. Price

1. The fording place of the AuSable River near the present Northway bridge.
2. Present-day Westport.

(From the Kent-Delord archives deposited at the Feinberg Library)

## *The Plattsburgh Trolley Line*

Until 1896 the village of Plattsburgh had no public transportation. On January 18th of that year, the Board of Trustees convened a public meeting to obtain citizen reaction to a franchise for the Plattsburgh Traction Company to operate a street railway. Sentiment was highly favorable but before a franchise could be adopted the use of the Bridge Street bridge had to be discussed with the highway commissioner, W. H. Brewster. This was necessary because the bridge was owned by the town and not just by the village.

On January 20th the franchise was granted by the Board of Trustees. It set a limit of 25 years and established standards of wiring and of laying the track. At least one car must run every hour daily. The line was to run from the southern boundary of the village on Peru Street to Charlotte, Bridge, Margaret, Cornelia, Broad and Platt Streets. The trustees retained the right to require not more than three percent of gross receipts after ten years.

The trolley was running on part of its route by the 4th of July weekend. During that weekend the system first suffered from malicious mischief. A pile of stones caused a derailment opposite Elizabeth Street on the Bluff Point run. No one on the crowded car was injured, and enthusiasm mounted for the new convenience. In August the entire system was in operation.

At this time four cars were in use. These summer cars were open to the elements but contained heavy curtains which could be drawn during bad weather. Four more closed cars were on order for winter use. Each car could accommodate 40 people but 133 were reported to have made one trip. The cars ran at 15-minute intervals and could make 20 miles an hour. Fares depended on the length of the trip, but were usually five cents, with special rates for children. For two

dollars a traveller could buy a book of tickets which were good for 50 rides.

During its first winter the company ran into many problems. The worst was the care of the tracks in cold weather. When the tracks iced up the trolley would not run. It took time to learn that sand gave the cars traction.

For years the company offered dependable and apparently profitable service. But in August 1929 the company offered cut-rate weekly tickets as a means of increasing its income and of encouraging people to shop in area stores instead of through mail order catalogs. Rumors began to circulate about the financial difficulties of the company because of lack of patronage. Car trips were made at 30-minute intervals instead of the former 20 minutes.

In October Mayor McGaulley proposed that the city take over the system. At a public hearing on the issue a resolution was adopted to conduct a referendum on election day, November 5. Meanwhile the Mayor appointed a three-man committee to investigate the financial condition of the Traction Company. The committee learned that the company business had been decreasing for four years and that it was operating at an average yearly loss of \$1000. The members recommended against the city's taking over the operation and the Mayor advised the voters to defeat the proposition. F. E. Reifschneider, manager of the company reported that during the week of November 1st, the company did not make enough money to pay for its power bill, and that he was supplying some of the necessary funds out of his own pocket.

The voters decided against the city's acquisition of the traction company, and on November 9th the company announced that it would run its last car on November 11th. After 33 years of service, the trolley system was finished. It had begun with wooden cars equipped with hand brakes, and needed two men to operate them. Before the end, one-man steel cars were being used which were equipped with air brakes. Despite great progress, the system could not continue without patronage. The family car was taking its place.

Gerri L. Ross, SUC

## *William B. Weaver, Diviner of Oil*

After the first discovery of oil in New York State at Seneca Springs, many attempts were made to locate oil in other parts of the state. Men claiming to have special abilities tried to find oil with such unscientific devices as divining rods. The rod was a simple forked branch, about four feet in length, freshly cut from a hazel, peach, willow or wild plum tree. A "diviner" held the two prongs of the rod in his hands and slowly walked with it pointing away from him. If the end of the rod tipped downward, oil could be expected below.

As time passed, the divining rod gave way to other forms of wizardry. Such methods as swinging bottles filled with a secret mixture from a catgut string, or suspending balls of wax from seven hairs of the tail of a black stallion came to be considered more reliable means of locating oil.

William B. Weaver, a man of comfortable means who owned a starch factory in Morrisonville and had inherited much of the Weaver family money, professed to be able to locate oil. By the use of a wax ball on a string he located what he thought to be a large oil deposit. With financial aid from his brother-in-law, Fred Pierce, Weaver secured the services of the Tyler family to drill the well. The site they selected was on the left bank of the Saranac River on the farm of L. Nathaniel Vaughn in the town of Morrisonville. It is not clear where the Tylers came from, for they were not residents of the Morrisonville area. It is probable that they came from Pennsylvania for the sole purpose of drilling Weaver's well.

The **Plattsburgh Republican** of April 23, 1898 reported: "We are waiting now to see the machinery put in place for the oil works. The derrick went up like a mushroom, not quite in a night but in a few days." The awaited machinery arrived and on the afternoon of May 4, the boring began. By May 11 the drillers had reached a depth of 65 feet, drilling through solid rock and a small vein of iron ore. From this point on the operations moved at a slower pace. Drill and shaft breakdowns occurred more often at this depth. Finally the Tyler Company was forced to shut down altogether and wait for a shipment of new parts.

On November 16, 1898 the Weaver well suffered another setback when a fire starting around the smoke stack burned the derrick to the ground. No one was present at the time, for operations were still shut down. By December 14 the

derrick and other losses had been replaced, but drilling could not be resumed because the replacement parts for the motor had been lost in shipment.

On January 3, 1899 the parts were installed and drilling began anew. A show of oil resulted in the proprietors being offered a thousand dollars for the well. A short time later work again stopped while the Tyler Company waited once again for more replacements. By the first of June drilling had been resumed and by the twenty-seventh the men were working day and night.

Few records remain concerning the Pierce-Weaver oil well after this period. Suddenly the Tylers stopped drilling and left town. It was believed by the inhabitants that the oil found in the well was not of natural origin, but that it was poured in by the Tylers when Weaver and Pierce began to be discouraged. Probably because of the high cost of the venture, the Weavers were forced to sell their large home and move to a smaller one. Shortly afterward the starch factory was also sold. And so ended the chief effort to find oil in Clinton County.

Anne L. Papineau, SUC

#### PLACE NAMES

**Treadwell's Mills**—after Nathaniel Treadwell, surveyor-brother of Judge Thomas Treadwell. Nathaniel lived in a house on the south side of the river, but the site is now washed away. A saw mill stood below the house.

**Port Jackson**—so called from President Andrew Jackson, who was inaugurated about the time of the building of the dock there.

**Hopper Corners**—the old name for Pickett's Corners, Saranac. Named for Bis Hopper, who lived in the vicinity.

**Devil's Half Acre**—the early name of Saranac Hollow. Hall, Hopper and Baker built the first forge there.

**Bartonville**—now also called Lapham's Mills, though really a little farther down the stream. It is on the Little Ausable in the town of Peru and was named for Caleb Barton, who ran a forge with Mr. Peabody of Keeseville.

**Fourth Town**—an old name for Saranac.

**Hackstaff's Mills and Cochran's Mills**—early names for Peru village.

**Goshen**—a mill settlement on the Little Ausable River a mile above Peru village.

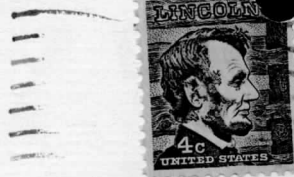
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