

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 72

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

February, 1971

The February Meeting

of the Association will be held on Monday evening, February 1st at 8 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. The speaker, Harry MacDougall of Elizabethtown, will talk on "Adirondack Stories." Mr. MacDougall has spoken entertainingly to the Association on a prior occasion. Columnist and publisher of pamphlets, he has for years collected stories about life in the North Country.

You're Getting On If You Remember When

Your greatest treat was going to the show with an adult and bringing your own bag of popcorn.

The film projector was at the end of the aisle and was hand-controlled.

Autumn evenings were spent stringing slices of apples, apricots and peaches for pies during the winter, and were hung to dry in the barn loft.

Each winter there was a store of vegetables down cellar; a crock of pickles and of salt pork in brine and one of sauerkraut; and incidentally two barrels of cider tenderly treated with brown sugar, yeast and raisins (made from your own grapes) from which one glass made parents and all others happy although red-faced.

You knew how fast you could button your high shoes with a long hairpin.

The men stood on the corners to watch the women in hobble skirts get on the trolley cars.

You used kerosene lamps, home-made soap, home-made clothes, and your drawers (made from flour bags) always managed to have imprinted on the seat, "Eventually, why not now?"

The hay rides summer and winter down to the creek, in the summer to swim, winter to skate or watch the ice-cutting.

People kept their yards as clean as their homes and each week one of the men on the block volunteered to sweep the streets (did you ever hear of a horse waiting till he got home?) for that week.

Cock fights were held in the old quarry—illegal, of course, but never found out.

Streets were made of bricks and the fire company swished them off on Saturday afternoons.

The most prosperous man in the block read the newspaper aloud, as if he were giving a speech. You got up especially to hear him.

There was a column of gossip in the paper called "Guess Who" which the children were never allowed to hear about unless they listened in when the mothers talked over the back fence, or when the fathers talked in the barber shop.

The hand-cranked phonographs used either the round disk or later the thick, flat Edison records. Sir Harry Lauder was the most popular singer from overseas.

The policemen were always the first to inspect the saloon in the morning.

The kids at supertime ran through the back door of the saloon to get a dinner pail of suds for 5 cents.

You followed the ice wagon to get the small pieces of ice to nibble on. Fifteen cents filled the top of the ice box, which was high-priced because your father was drawing only \$1 a day for a ten-hour day.

There was a spring in the park in the center of town.

The bootleggers speeded down the streets, and the hijackers sneaked in the big bar next door in the dark of night.

Mrs. Shirley Fritz, Plattsburgh.

The Election of 1896 in Clinton County

One of the most dramatic, exciting and tension-packed elections in the history of the country was the election of 1896. This was the contest which pitted the "Boy Orator", William Jennings Bryan, against the undramatic and rather colorless William McKinley. Bryan roared with the West while McKinley represented the department of the Eastern drawing-room.

The Republicans had expected to win the presidency in 1896 with a quiet, slow-moving campaign. All that was needed was to point out the failures of Cleveland's administration, avoid untimely statements, and quietly let the voters defeat the Democrats. The Republicans were relishing their good fortune. But out of the turmoil of the Democratic convention emerged Bryan, and the battle was on.

Ever since the great western agricultural and real estate boom of the decade from 1876 to 1886 had "busted" and turned to dust in the drought, the farmers had been seeking relief and recovery. Surely the Devil must be at work. And who were the Devil's agents? The farmer soon discovered that they were the railroads, the Eastern banking houses and the Wall Street financial interests. These agents by controlling politics had captured the government and turned it to their special purpose to the detriment of the farmer.

If the farmers were to survive, the devils, the plutocrats, must be cast out of the temple of government. They discovered that for years the silver-mining interests had lobbied for the government to resume the coining of silver at 16 to 1. One of their chief agents was the young William Jennings Bryan, public speaker and Congressman from Nebraska. The farmers and the silver interests were each looking for a political ally to help them attain their goals, and a wedding of these two groups was a logical conclusion. By 1896 this coalition was ready to attempt to gain control of the Democratic party.

Although the local newspaper war between **Sentinel** (Republican) and **Republican** (Democrat) was waged "hot and heavy", it is not there that we note the important events of the campaign in the county area. By the middle of September the Republicans were organizing clubs for McKinley and Hobart in all of the major centers of the county. Plattsburgh, Rouses Point and Peru had clubs in operation and hearing speakers on "sound-money" issues by the end of the month. "Sound-money" speeches were heard in October at clubs in Morrisonville, Mooers and Champlain. One of the meetings at Mooers reported standing room only, and ladies in attendance. During the last three weeks of the campaign these clubs met at least once a week and sometimes twice.

During this period the **Republican** carried very few announcements of Democratic club meetings. The editor said that since the Democrats represented the people, they did not have the great sums of money necessary for hiring meeting places and bringing in important speakers. This is hardly a satisfactory explanation in view of the party's great activity in 1892. Part of the answer was the action of three Democrats who hoped to organize Gold Democrat support in the area. The struggle within the party when it selected delegates to the State convention was evidence of division, and yet another split came out in the open. Two good old Democratic war horses, J. W. Havens and R. Heaton, fell out over Bryan. Heaton accused Havens of not having the courage to bolt the party as they did once before. Havens, who was chairman of the county Democrats, retorted that any big party must compromise and yield to the majority, and that he was for silver and not the "idle holders of idle capital."

The big blow to Democratic hopes came from another source. It was Smith M. Weed. Weed said that the farmer would vote for McKinley and that Clinton County, which normally went Republican by 300-400 votes, would be Republican by 3,000-4,000 votes. He denounced third-party movements as useless and said that he did not consider Bryan a Democrat, and therefore he had no qualms about voting for McKinley. He said, "The old Democratic veterans, the real Democrats, will not waste their votes. They will step up and cast them for McKinley and Hobart."

Throughout the ensuing campaign the **Republican** rarely mentioned Weed. The **Sentinel**, on the other hand, played up his comments with a picture of him and a full account of his statements. Without Weed the **Republican** and Chairman Havens could do very little except rattle the sabre, and Weed left it that way until the very end of the campaign. Then on October 27th a great sound-money rally was held in Plattsburgh. It was the only big rally, and the Theatre was filled to overflowing. The meeting was opened by Hiram Walworth, the Gold Democrat, and the chief speaker was none other than Smith M. Weed. He claimed that silver was a Southern conspiracy, that it would cheat labor of its just wages, that it was only another in the long list of "isms" the popocrats were proposing, and that it would ruin property values.

Plattsburgh evidently did not completely escape some of the seamier side of the campaign. There had been nationwide reports that businessmen had used threats of loss of jobs as a club to force labor to vote for McKinley, and that threats of foreclosures of mortgages were used by banks to encourage people to vote right. This was not always crudely done. There was only one charge of bank activity in Plattsburgh, and that was not followed up. On October 9th a notice appeared in the *Sentinel* in which one of the local banks announced that "All persons having interest to pay on loan mortgages must do so on or before October 29, 1896." The following day the *Republican* stated that around town charges had been made that Clinton County bankers were threatening foreclosure of mortgages on suspected silver men and that some debtor farmers had already been sold out. The paper threatened that this kind of activity would only increase Bryan's support. It must be admitted that the action and timing of the bank and the juxtaposition of the two articles at least arouse suspicions.

Following the election some interesting announcements were to appear in the *Sentinel*. It ran a report that new works in North Tonawanda were opened the day after the election. The same article reported that the Pennsylvania Railroad (not in Plattsburgh) had put back to work 800 men and that similar announcements would be coming from Plattsburgh manufacturers. The same issue carried another article announcing that the Chateaugay Coal and Iron Company resumed operations at Lyon Mountain after having been closed for two months. The paper added that as soon as McKinley won, the operators had decided to open the mines. Also in the same issue was the announcement that the Plattsburgh Shirt Company was starting up again with enough work for all "hands" for the next three weeks. The *Sentinel* developed these articles to show that the election of McKinley meant the "full dinner pail" and that the business community had confidence in his presidency. The juxtaposition of these events and the manner of reporting them are enough to arouse one's curiosity.

When election day arrived, the voters found only two parties on the ballot, whereas in 1892 there had been five. They were thus given an opportunity to make a clear choice between two candidates and their programs. When the votes were counted the result was almost as Weed had predicted. They were: McKinley 6,005 and Bryan 3,022.

We must conclude that the split in the Democratic ranks left them powerless. Without the support of Smith M. Weed the party foundered badly, and although J. W. Havens seems to have continued as chairman of the county party, the real power seemed to rest with Gold Democrats who refused to help organize a Bryan campaign which resulted in the isolation of Havens and the *Republican*. It is doubtful that many Democrats voted for McKinley. Yet the Democratic Congressional candidate received 3,000 votes more than Bryan, indicating a refusal of many Democrats to vote for either candidate.

(This is a part of an address given to the Association by former Prof. David Fuller of SUO on May 6, 1963.)

1890

Optimism over the economic future of Plattsburgh continued undiminished during 1890, despite the shaky economy of the rest of the country. The village trustees began to plan for the opening of several new streets, while the Plattsburgh Land Company developed a large plot of land at the north end of the village, where lots were available for \$250 to \$850. The new Hotel Champlain opened in June and the Normal School in September.

Although Plattsburgh gained modestly in population by the new census, Clinton County lost about ten percent of its people. The beginning of the end of the famous Plank Road west of town was signalled by a court case over refusals to pay the toll because of the poor condition of the road. Plattsburgh's civic pride suffered from the demise of its City Band. And it failed to get a new charter from the legislature.

New Farmers' Leagues enlisted the enthusiasm of the county's farmers in their efforts to express themselves politically. Baseball emerged as the central feature of civic affairs, and tournaments began to be arranged among town and business-sponsored teams.

A mild burst of reform in the state legislature had an impact upon the North Country. Youthful smokers in public could now be fined. The state assumed responsibility for the insane and feeble-minded, and ordered their removal from the county poorhouse. Insane and feeble-minded women must have female attendants en route to institutions. Schoolhouses of more than two stories must for the first time have fire escapes. The Adirondack Park was created with a modest appropriation for expanding it. Ballot reform, including the first registration of voters, became a state law.

ASSOCIATION OFFICERS FOR 1971

President—Richard W. Ward
Vice President—Daniel M. Shea
Secretary—David Martin
Treasurer—John A. Caramia
Curator—Ruth Hecht

GIFTS TO THE MUSEUM

Recent gifts to the Association's Museum, presented by Miss Emily McMasters, former Curator, include seven charming paintings of local scenes by local artists. There are three watercolors: Gunboat Rock by Mrs. A. L. Percy; the Cosgrove House by Miss E. L. Rogers; and a Peru scene by Martha H. Bosworth. The four oil paintings include East Beekmantown Church by John Rea; the Bailey House by Miss Helen Smith; Birth Tree on the Road to Plattsburgh by Isobel Stevens and Mouth of the Saranac River by S. Broskley.

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Old riddle: In 1824 the state Assembly's Canal Committee recommended a canal between Plattsburgh and Ogdensburg, following the Saranac and St. Regis Rivers. The Legislature voted \$1,500 to survey the proposed route but never implemented the findings.

New riddle: What was the first organized professional group in Clinton County?

No. 72 - Feb. 1971

★ NORTH COUNTRY NOTES ★

Issued by the

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

U. S. Postage PAID Plattsburgh, N. Y. PERMIT NO. 13

David K. Martin, Secretary
West Chazy, New York

MRS. CHARLES W. MCLELLAN
CHAMPLAIN, NEW YORK 12901