

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED OCCASIONALLY BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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No. 54

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McClellan, Editors

April, 1969

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## *The April Meeting*

*of the Historical Association will be held Monday evening, April 7, at 8 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. A talk will be given by Dr. Allan Everest, professor of history at the College, whose topic will be "Rum Along the Border." This will deal with the prohibition years in northern New York, a subject that Dr. Everest has been investigating in the newspapers of the period and through taped interviews with some of the participants. The public is cordially invited.*

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## RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Old riddle: The 20th century Presidents who visited Clinton County while they were in office were Theodore Roosevelt, Taft and Franklin Roosevelt. Harding stayed at the Witherill Hotel, but not during his presidency.

New riddle: what was the sequence of county names by which the present area of Clinton County was known?

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## BOOK TO BE PUBLISHED

The manuscript of **The Journal of David S. Kellogg—Memoirs of a Small-Town Doctor**, edited by Allan Everest, has just been accepted for publication by the Stephen Greene Press of Brattleboro, Vermont. This company has a long list of high-quality publications on its list, many of them of a regional character. The book is to be published later this year and will be fully illustrated with pictures of life in Clinton County at the turn of the century.

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## BOOTLEGGERS' VENGEANCE

Vengeance was dealt out by local bootleggers in April 1930 on two Customs Inspectors who prevented the delivery of a load of ale. Two Lincoln touring cars were signalled to stop by Horace L. Wood and R. A. Thompson at the border in Champlain. The drivers refused and the chase led onto Margaret Street in Plattsburgh, where the Lincolns were deserted at Trombley's gas station. The inspectors left their own car to take the Lincolns and their loads back to Champlain. When they returned to Plattsburgh, "a sudden and sad change had come over their car." The tires were in ribbons, the spark plugs were smashed, the distributor was twisted out of shape and the motor was clogged with sugar.

## The Prohibition Experiment

Elsewhere in this issue will be found some of the drinking beliefs and practices of other years. One hundred fifty years ago alcoholic beverages occupied a prominent place in most homes. But 25 years later a temperance movement was under way that changed the drinking habits of many people. Interrupted by the Civil War, this movement was resumed late in the century, and in it Mrs. Frances Hall played a locally prominent part. Nationally it culminated in the Eighteenth Amendment.

Even before national prohibition, Plattsburgh had partial prohibition under a wartime law which forbade prostitution and alcohol in the environs of a military installation. The local citizenry supported this law as a protection for the "boys at the Barracks."

Protection of the soldiers was one thing, but "protection" of the whole citizenry, when it came with the Volstead Act, was another thing altogether. President Hoover called it "an experiment noble in purpose." Attorney General Sargent condemned the ordinary, respectable citizen, who bribed others to violate the Volstead Act by being willing to pay their high prices. But locally, one former customs officer calls it a "bum law" and another believes that 90% of the people opposed it. A prominent Plattsburgh attorney asserts that the prohibition act made mob rule possible and that it put money and power into the hands of the wrong people.

In any case the Champlain Valley once again became a highway of illegal traffic with Canada, and Rouses Point, Champlain, Mooers and Plattsburgh became centers of this activity. It is sometimes forgotten that considerable illegal smuggling of goods into Canada took place, for rumrunners liked to have loads in both directions. But the problem on this side of the border was the smuggling of beer, wines and hard liquors into northern New York, most of it headed for the metropolitan population to the south. The so-called "rum trail" followed modern routes 9 or 9B from the border to Albany. Along its length, for fourteen years, almost daily searches and pursuits pitted border patrolmen and troopers against bootleggers.

For example, there was the cow that perambulated back and forth across the border. Whenever she came into the States she was bolstered on each side with a bale of hay. Finally a customs officer realized that he had seen the same cow too often. An examination revealed a case of liquor concealed inside each bale. Or the Mooers undertaker who used his hearse to smuggle forbidden goods until he too aroused the suspicion of a patrolman, who wondered where all the bodies were coming from. The casket proved to be full of liquor. Or the car that had a flat tire at a border customs house. Two nuns got out and a customs officer overheard one say to the other in a deep voice: "Ain't this a hell of a place to have a flat tire!" Of course the "nuns" proved to be wolves in sheeps' clothing, and the car full of liquor.

But these quaint and humorous doings at the border were the exception rather than the rule. It may have been a game to some bootleggers, but to others and to the law-enforcement agents it was a serious and sometimes deadly business. Concealment and speed were the tactics employed by the smugglers, search and pursuit by patrolmen. Pursuits at high speed meant terrible accidents; guns in the hands of pursuer and pursued meant furious gunfire, with frequent injuries and occasional deaths. Clinton County became notorious for the lawlessness along its highways, a reputation that the local papers did their best to refute.

The prohibition era has for some people mellowed into the "good old days" of interesting and exciting events; but others hope they will never need to live through a similar period again.

### SALOONS OFFER MORE THAN DRINK

*(Sarah W. Moore to Mrs. Frances Hall, October 7, 1906, after the death of her husband, suggesting that his Peristrome Church be made a memorial to the Rev. Hall as:)*

"'a neighborhood house' where the little children could sometimes come for a treat and mothers find good advice, patterns and a sewing machine and learn their science of home-making; where there would always be warmth and a welcome for any poor wayfaring man—the man of any race or color, the soldier from the Barracks, who now has a choice between shelter in a saloon or—the street. What that would mean for temperance!!! a lounging place with chess and backgammon and newspapers and a free toilet. Men are forced into saloons on account of the toilet nowhere else provided. Then one room should be for the G. A. R.'s, should hold their relics, old flags, old Journals of the Civil War, photos, etc."

## "FOR MEDICINAL PURPOSES!"

*(Mrs. Betsy Delord Swetland to her granddaughter, Frances Delord Webb, later Mrs. Francis Hall—  
—from the Kent-Delord Papers at Feinberg Library)*

Plattsburgh, Feb. 14, 1853

"I am better but I cant say how long I shall remain so. I can hardly think it is neuralogy. It has not been so extremely painful as it has sore, to move or touch—until my last attack. It seems a kind of flying rheumatism. As the Doct remedies did not cure me I have in this last attack tried one prescribed by Mrs. Hascall, mother of Peter Palmer's wife—that is, to a quart of good gin put a pint of sunflower seeds made fine and take half a glass three times a day. I took a quart of the mixture in a fortnight since which I am entirely relieved from the soreness and pain. More free for the last few weeks than I have been for a year—since which time I have heard of several cures by the same remedy. I took the third dose as I went to bed. It generally put me in a perspiration."

\* \* \* \* \*

Plattsburgh, July 3, 1854

"I have had two ill turns of the same character as the other tho not so severe. As they generally attack me at night I did not call a Physician, but called up Kitty (Mrs. S's servant girl—Ed.) and took 30 drops of Mun's Elixir in hot water, with a little brandy."

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Plattsburgh, Apr. 10, 1862

"The boil is improving and I trust and believe the Porter will strengthen me up. I opened a bottle yesterday and it is indeed tip top. I never tasted any so fine. Bark and wine did not agree with me."

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## WHICH SHALL IT BE?

ELLEN M. PALMER

A tidy little home for Betsy and me,  
With just enough room for one, two, three;  
Or a tumble-down but with a broken gate,  
And a sad-eyed woman toiling early and late;  
Which shall it be  
For mine and me?

A five-cent glass of beer for me,  
Or a five-cent loaf for all of us three?  
Beer or baby—wine or wife,  
Which do I hold more precious than life?  
Which shall it be  
For mine and me?

Potatoes and salt with a crust of bread  
For the best little woman the Lord ever made,  
While the rumseller's wife feeds on turkey and wine,  
Bought with my money—if I so incline,  
This shall it be  
For mine and me?

Tatters and rags for my little one,  
My fair, comely baby, my own darling son,  
While the rumseller's children go warm and well clad  
On my earnings, wrested from my bonny lad;  
This shall it be  
For mine and me?

Well, man, d'ye think me a mole-eyed fool,  
Blindly to serve as the rumseller's tool?  
Ah! how can I hesitate which to choose,  
When it's all to gain—or all to lose;  
For mine and me,  
For mine and me?

## THE FEAR OF CHOLERA

(To Henry L. Webb from John Chester, manager of the Webb store in Detroit—from the Kent-Delord Papers)

Dec. 19, 1834

"The contents of your letter by Smith surprised me; in reply to your question—in the old store I believe there was some brandy at two several times—in the new store there never has been anything of the sort. When I had brandy in the old store it was in cholera times when physicians entreated & advised every person to abstain entirely from clear water. At the same time I purchased a dozen pint bottles of porter, which I drank with Mr. Douglas & Mr. Hewson instead of water. During the prevalence of the cholera I drank, much against my wishes, as did everybody else, brandy & water or porter & doubt not that if I had pursued an opposite plan I should now have been in my grave."

\* \* \* \* \*

Aug. 5, 1835

"On Sunday a poor drunkard, after swallowing a pint of ice water & taking a dose of E. salts, died with some of the cholera symptoms. On the authority of the **Quack** who attended him our Catholic Priest announced from the pulpit that the 'cholera has again commenced its ravages' which has created a panic through the country. Today a similar case occurred, which is much talked of. Drs. Rice & Houghton, the only two good physicians here, state that the city **never** has been as healthy & that there is nothing here which **can** be cholera."

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### RENUMBERING OF THE "NOTES"

The June 1968 issue of the "Notes" bore the number 46. By error the August 1968 issue was numbered 30. The numbering has remained incorrect ever since. We hereby reestablish the numbering sequence, with April 1969 becoming number 54.

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Issued by the

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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David K. Martin, Secretary  
West Chazy, New York

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