

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 59

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

November 1969

The November Meeting

of the Association will be held on Monday evening, November 3, at 8 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. The speaker of the evening will be Dr. Charles Morrissey of Montpelier, Vermont who will talk on "The Value of Local Oral History." Dr. Morrissey is the Director of the Vermont Historical Society and editor of its quarterly, VERMONT HISTORY. An authority on oral history, he is currently conducting a seminar on the subject at the University of Vermont. The public is cordially invited.

GREAT OCTOBER EVENTS

Two events of considerable historical interest occurred in Plattsburgh during the last month. One was the annual banquet of the Association, attended by about 125 persons. They were treated to a witty and informative talk by Dr. Frederick Rath, Vice Director of the New York State Historical Association, and witnessed the unveiling of the Association's 1812 portrait of General Benjamin Mooers. The portrait has just been admirably restored from near-disintegration by Mrs. Alice Dibble of Shoreham, Vermont, who also donated the handsome frame to the Association.

The other event was the stirring reenactment of the battle of Valcour on October 11th. Together with the informed commentary by Harrison Bird, the action of the sailboats on the water gave an impression that no printed words can convey of the vast maneuvering and close-range firing which accompanied early naval battles. The heroes of the day were the local owners of the sailing craft, who volunteered their time and boats and handled them with great skill on a very rough lake, at the same time firing great quantities of gunpowder.

A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF CHAZY

Mrs. Benjamin F. Sullivan and Mr. David K. Martin are pleased to announce the publication of their **History of the Town of Chazy**. The book will be an indexed, hard covered volume of approximately 400 pages, illustrated with over fifty pictures and maps. It covers the history of greater Chazy including the villages of Chazy, West Chazy, Chazy Landing, Sciota, Ingraham, and the early history of Altona. The book is offered at a pre-publication price of \$12 until March 1st 1970, after which it will be \$15 a copy. A suitable gift certificate for Christmas will be mailed upon request. Orders for the book may be placed with Mrs. B.F. Sullivan, Chazy, N. Y. 12921, or Mr. D. K. Martin, West Chazy, N. Y. 12992.

A Railroad Comes to Clinton County

One of the greatest drawbacks to the development of the towns of Clinton County in the early 19th century was their isolation from the great southern and eastern markets. During the summer season the facilities for transportation by water were excellent on Lake Champlain. But the fact that for several months of the year the Lake was closed by ice limited manufacturing and commercial enterprises. Although the county had roads, they were not good and there was still need for means of transportation which would be safe, dependable, fast and available at all times of the year. Railroads seemed to be the solution, for both passenger and freight traffic.

Following the completion of the Welland Canal in 1829, a large volume of traffic began to flow from Lake Erie into Lake Ontario. Agitation began for railroad connections to divert the traffic from going down-river to Montreal. This occurred at the time of a new mania. Just as canals had once been the craze, now everyone seemed to catch railroad fever. Small local roads proliferated, some never finished and others joined into the later through lines. Many of the more visionary schemes never left the drawing boards.

One of the more fantastic proposals was a covered railroad which eastern capitalists advocated in 1837 to connect Boston and Ogdensburg. Some of its proponents were convinced that a covered road was necessary into this frozen, snowy region. John McDuffie, civil engineer of Bradford, Vermont believed it would cost less than the Erie Canal: "Less than three millions will build the whole railway, and the income of it in three years will cover it the whole distance." He proposed transporting the cars across Lake Champlain on the ice, drawn by horses; or, if this proved unsatisfactory, keeping a channel for steamboats open with ice cutters.

But the actual pioneer of North Country railroads was the Northern Railroad, projected to run west from Lake Champlain to Ogdensburg. It would capture the commerce of Ontario and, by way of the Welland Canal, of the other Great Lakes. Yet even before Boston businessmen started to promote the idea, the people of the north had begun to realize the possibilities of such a line. It began to be discussed as early as 1829. Citizens of Montpelier, Vermont met on February 17, 1830 to promote it; they thought that on the east side of the lake it could be made to connect with the new Central Vermont road, then being built. The advocates of the plan declared that trains might be operated over the proposed line at fifteen miles an hour and that the entire journey from Boston to Ogdensburg might be accomplished in 35 hours. Although many people believed it was a rash idea, many others were fascinated by it. In March a promotional meeting was held in Ogdensburg and a year later another at Malone.

The idea grew very slowly. Money was not easily raised. Many men were indifferent to the new idea of railroads. Not until fourteen years later did the New York legislature authorize David C. Judson and Joseph Barnes of St. Lawrence County, S. C. Wead of Franklin County and others as Commissioners to distribute stock for the Northern Railroad. Two million dollars worth of stock were sold at fifty dollars a share. The date of the formal incorporation of the road was May 14, 1845. It had its first meeting at Ogdensburg in June 1845, at which time the officers were elected. Actual construction was begun in March 1848 at the deep cut just east of Ogdensburg.

While the Northern was being projected along the northern tier of the state, the citizens of Plattsburgh zealously worked to make their town the terminus on Lake Champlain. Their aspirations were initially encouraged by the capitalists of Boston, who were the prime movers in the enterprise. They took care that no point was designated for the eastern terminus on Lake Champlain. They even planned the line with a deep dip southward into Altona, as if it were headed for Plattsburgh. Consequently, Plattsburgh leaders subscribed \$50,000 in stock to the Northern Railroad, only to have the terminus at Rouses Point instead of their own town. In the long run the capitalists feared that a main line crossing from Cumberland Head to Grand Isle and Burlington would encourage a railroad southward on the east shore of the lake, thus diverting a part of the trade in the direction of New York City rather than Boston.

At the same time that work was started at the west end of the road, grading and the laying of rail was begun at the Rouses Point end, so that in the fall of 1848 trains were in regular operation between Rouses Point and Centerville (Mooers Forks). A year later the road had been extended to Ellenburg and in June 1850 to Chateaugay. On October 1, 1850, trains ran into Malone. A month later the line was finished and open for its entire length of 117 miles. The first stations upon that road, in Clinton

County, were Churubusco, Ellenburg Depot, Wood's Falls, Centerville (Mooers Forks), Mooers Junction, Champlain and Rouses Point. As towns grew up along its right of way, stations were opened at Clinton Mills, Dannemora Station, Forest, Irona and Aaronsburgh (Altona). Its original cost, including its equipment and fixtures, was placed at \$5,022,121.31.

In building the railroad, new achievements were reached in railroad engineering. The surface of the country is mostly level, but the Chateaugay, Salmon and other rivers, in their descent to the St. Lawrence, had worn deep and narrow valleys which afforded picturesque scenery, but which created obstacles of great magnitude in the construction of the railroad at such places as Chateaugay. To overcome the difficulty, it was decided to fill in the valley with earth, so as to create a level crossing for the railroad. To insure a channel for the river such that the embankment would not be washed away, a tunnel 300 feet long was made through the solid rock which bordered the valley, and permanent walls were erected to direct the stream through its new channel. The entire undertaking was completed after two years at a cost of \$130,000. The tunnel was begun in August 1848 and completed in five months. It was 25 feet wide and 22 feet high, while the retaining walls were fifty feet high. The embankment was more than 800 feet long and the top was 160 feet above the level of the river. It contained 500,000 cubic yards of earth.

This railroad faced many handicaps. First, there was the dispute over building a bridge across the lake. This was of concern not only to the Northern Railroad, but also to the companies trying to open a line up the west side of the lake. The New York companies opposed construction of the bridge, feeling that without it their future line would secure more traffic. They also argued that it would interfere with lake navigation. On the other hand, the New England builders of the Northern were very anxious to build a bridge, for it would give them direct connection with the Great Lakes. They believed this route could compete successfully with the railroads and Erie Canal of central New York for freight from the west.

While the controversy over the bridge was going on, a powerful boat called the **Ethan Allen** was transporting passengers and freight between Alburg and Rouses Point. This boat had been built at Shelburne Harbor in 1847, at a cost of \$36,000. After running between Whitehall and Rouses Point for two years, it was sold to the Vermont Central Railroad Company to shuttle between the railroad terminals at Alburg and Rouses Point.

(To be Continued)

Mrs. Josie Treggett, Ellenburg

ASPECTS OF THE WAR OF 1812

Clinton County lay athwart one of the main warpaths of the War of 1812. Across it the opposing forces marched and countermarched, and its residents lived through some exciting if dangerous days. For example, Plattsburgh was a center for intelligence activities by both sides. The British made use of Joel Ackley, who had moved from Canada in the winter before the war. At the time of Murray's raid on Plattsburgh in the summer of 1813 he was arrested for treason. A plan of the town of Burlington dropped from Murray's pocket in what local citizens believed was Ackley's handwriting. He spent nine months in jail without being indicted and was eventually released under a writ of habeas corpus. Three months later he guided Brisbane's brigade in its advance on Plattsburgh, for which he was warmly praised by the General. After the war, friends petitioned the British government in his behalf and the Governor General was ordered to pay Ackley £500.

Poor supplies were a complaint at all the fronts, and Plattsburgh was no exception. Colonel Zebulon Pike vainly protested to Washington about the blankets he was receiving for his men. Each man was allowed one, but it was thin and only four feet long by three feet, grossly inadequate for a northern winter. In exasperation Pike finally sent one of them to the War Department, but there is no record that he received any satisfaction.

Pike was also distressed over the illegal trade with the enemy which he saw out of Plattsburgh. He wrote to Washington about the "thirst for gain" among the citizenry so that even if a smuggler was caught with tobacco or leather heading into Canada, "I can find no court who will take cognizance of the transaction or person concerned."

A year later Generals Izard and Macomb were also dismayed over this traffic. Izard graphically described it in the summer of 1814:

From the St. Lawrence to the ocean an open disregard prevails for the laws prohibiting intercourse with the enemy. The road to St. Regis is covered with droves of cattle, and the river with rafts destined for the enemy. The revenue officers see these things, but acknowledge their inability to put a stop to such outrageous proceedings. On the eastern side of Lake Champlain, the high roads are found insufficient for the supplies of cattle which are pouring into Canada; like herds of buffalo they press through the forest making paths for themselves. Were it not for these supplies the British forces in Canada would soon be suffering from famine, or their government subjected to enormous expense for their maintenance.

Many military leaders on both sides issued proclamations to subvert or frighten their opponents. One of the latter kind was made to the citizens of Champlain in October 1813 by Major Perrault at Lacolle;

Citizens of Champlain! I am happy that humanity should still have so much power over me so as to inform you that should any of the militia of Champlain be found hovering this side of the line, I will let loose upon your village and inhabitants the Canadian and Indian force under my command. You are probably aware that it has been with greatest difficulty I have till now withheld them. But your cowardly attack at midnight of a small picket of ours has torn asunder the veil which hid you from them. So beware!

In the following year Governor General Prevost, as he was about to launch his Plattsburgh campaign, issued a proclamation by which he hoped to detach some New Yorkers from their old loyalties. He promised the "peaceable and unoffending inhabitants" that they could expect "kind usage and generous treatment." Then he denounced his real enemy: "It is against the government of the United States, by whom this unjust and unprovoked war has been declared, and against those who support it, either openly or secretly, that the arms of his majesty are directed." The North Country did not come out to welcome him, but neither did it give him any trouble until he was about to march into Plattsburgh.

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