

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 60

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

December, 1969

The December Meeting

of the Association will be held on Monday evening, December 1, at 8 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. Mrs. Sally Baker will address the gathering on "The History of Saranac." Mrs. Baker has edited the records of the West Plattsburgh Baptist Church, and is the more recent author of an illustrated history of the town of Saranac. The public is cordially invited.

The Battle of Plattsburgh

(This eyewitness account of the battle of Plattsburgh is an important new discovery. It is a part of a letter from George Freleigh in Plattsburgh to his brother, Dr. Michael Freleigh, in Niskayuna (Watervliet). It is included in a recent gift of the Freleigh papers to the Feinberg Library at the State University College.)

Plattsburgh Sept. 20th, 1814

Dear Brother

I was in the village the morning the British came in and was every day in the cantonment during their stay. The first engagement commenced in Beekmantown, five miles from the Village. Our troops were driven in every direction, nor could they make a stand until they crossed the river. How the enemy stopped and it appears made no trial to cross over that day, although a continual fire was kept up between the two armies on the banks of the River. Many of our men were either killed or wounded by the enemy's musketry from the houses where they had taken shelter. And in consequence of this our General ordered hot shot to be thrown into the buildings and burn them down. My house has shared the fate of many others. The whole block of buildings where it stood has been swept away by a single clash. Mr. Griffin's house and store and outhouses, Mr. Wait's house and store and Mr. Barker's house, also on that street, were burnt by our shot. The number of buildings burnt are about 30, with the courthouse.¹ Such has been the conflagration and destruction of private property in this place caused by a fortification erected for the purpose of defending our frontier; and this is not all. The militia after the enemy retreated broke open stores and houses which the enemy left untouched and plundered them of everything that could be carried away. They even went so far as to pick up hooks, hinges, door latches and nails where buildings had been burnt. Mr. Green's house was set on fire twice and was extinguished by the enemy.

There was more or less fighting every day until the enemy retreated. Some have stated that the enemy, finding it impossible to hold their ground, was compelled to retreat. That is a mistake. They would have taken the forts if they had not imagined that the militia would have gotten between them and the lines and obstructed the roads with trees. This was evidently their greatest fear. As respects prisoners, we have made but few. Many deserters have come in since the enemy left the place. Their force, it is stated, amounted to about 12,000 effective men² and the Governor of Canada has been very much censured by his generals for not taking the forts. Two

of their principal generals have given up swords and declare that they will not serve in Canada so long as the present Governor has the command.

The morning the enemy made an attack on our fleet with theirs I was in the Village at my storehouse on the dock, getting away property. A few minutes before they made their appearance off the point of Cumberland Head I got into a bateau loaded with goods and hardly passed the point where our heavy artillery are stationed when the English ships hove in sight with her sails all standing, bearing down directly on the Commodore's ship, she being the headmost of their flotilla. The sight was truly sublime. In a few minutes our row galleys commenced a tremendous fire upon the enemy's ship, which did much execution. As she approached our fleet without firing a single gun, their object was very dubious—to lay herself alongside and carry our ship by boarding, which she would have effected had not her wheel been carried away and their Commodore killed in the commencement of the action. Thus disappointed, they commenced a terrible fire from their flotilla and for a while it was the opinion of many that our fleet would be lost; but good luck together with the skill and bravery of our Commodore, all the large vessels of the enemy were taken, while their gunboats made their way home as fast as possible.

Happy for our army here that their fleet fell into our hands, for had their fleet succeeded in capturing ours, the reduction of our forts and the capture of the whole army would have followed in a few hours. Twelve hundred of their troops had crossed the River, and part of them drove our troops five miles before their fleet was conquered.

1. *The damage was largely confined to lower Broad and southern Margaret Streets.*

2. *The British in their own morning report accounted for 8,200 men in Plattsburgh, and 2,100 between there and the border.*

A Railroad Comes to Clinton County

Part II

The people in favor of the bridge were finally successful in obtaining a favorable decision from the federal courts. The **Ethan Allen** was then sold to the Champlain Transportation Company and later was transferred to the Northern Transportation Company of Whitehall. The first bridge across the lake seems to have had a sort of scowboat with tracks across the top, which acted as a draw. The boat would be swung out of the way when it was necessary to open the channel for the passage of boats. Some arrangement was made to prevent high water from interfering with the operation of this floating draw.

A second difficulty resulted from the over-ambitious plans of its promoters. The railroad was built for a large volume of traffic. The builders were so sure of business that they placed its track upon the side of the right-of-way, rather than in the middle of it, so that that it would not have to be moved when it came time to double-track the road. But the road was never double-tracked. For some years it prospered by providing a direct connection between the large lake steamers at Ogdensburg and the important port of Boston. The promoters built elaborate stone shops and a large covered depot at Malone. They also built 4,000 feet of wharfage and large warehouses upon the river bank at Ogdensburg.

Gradually the strength of the railroad began to fade. More direct and advantageous routes began to compete with it. Fewer and fewer steamers came to the Ogdensburg docks. The Northern Railroad underwent financial difficulties. It was reorganized several times. It became the Ogdensburg Railroad, then the Ogdensburg and Lake Champlain, then a branch of the Central Vermont and finally a branch of the Rutland Railroad.

The early trains in the North Country were varied and strange. There are records of some cars drawn by horses at the rate of nine miles an hour. Some of the cars were made up of three compartments, with a platform running the entire length on the outside; this was used by the conductor in collecting tickets while the train was in motion. The early locomotives usually proved to be more substantial than they looked. They all burned wood, menacing the cars, wooden bridges and passengers with sparks. Mr. Gerge McGregor, a leading lumberman of Ellenburg, had a contract with the railroad to supply wood for the engines from Centerville to Churubusco. There was a wood yard every few miles because the engines could not carry enough fuel

to last long. Mr. McGregor and his help sawed forty cords of four-foot wood a day for the railroad.

The most common of the early rails were made with timber, to which were nailed long strips of iron mortised together at the ends. Hurd gives a good description of them:

That was the day of strap rails, sometimes called the "Black Snake Rail," on account of its propensity to peel up from the wooden bed-piece to which it was nailed, and glide up the bottom of the car, propelled by the car-wheel, which would sometimes take a notion to run under instead of over it. So, in those days, it was no uncommon occurrence for a passenger to find this playful "Black-Snake Rail" crawling up his trousers leg as he sat in his seat in the car, or to feel it shooting through him longitudinally, impaling him like a fly on a pin.

Every train carried a sledgehammer to pound these rails back into place on the timbers. When this failed to loosen the "snakehead," the train had to be delayed until the iron could be sawed off. The Northern was built late enough to take advantage of modest improvements over the more primitive roadbeds. An inverted U-shaped rail was tried, but the common form assumed a T-shape. Bessemer's discovery of a process for making steel in the 1880's led to the use of steel rails. Not only did they prove cheaper, but they made possible the use of heavier, better-built cars. Improvement in the cars themselves was very slow in coming. When the companies were having difficulty securing capital for road construction and maintenance, they could not afford to spend money on elaborate cars. Very crude couplers were used, simply links of chain, or an odd assortment of iron bars and pins. Brakes were nearly as simple.

The construction of the Great Northern Railroad along the northern border of Clinton County was a vital factor in the growth and prosperity of many of the towns. It served for years as practically the only means of obtaining raw materials as well as marketing the manufactured goods and agricultural produce of the surrounding area. Most of the products of the northern tier were sold in the markets of eastern New England.

Potatoes had formerly brought about twenty cents a bushel at the starch factory, but with the opening of markets to the east the price increased, ranging from 25 to 50 cents a bushel. Dealers would compete with each other to get the potatoes. In the 1890's, about 4,000 bushels a day were being loaded into railroad cars for market at Ellenburg Depot alone. As many as four or five cars were shipped at a time. The farmers would have their potatoes loaded at home the night before, then start for the railroad station very early in the morning. By mid-forenoon wagonloads of potatoes might be lined up for a quarter of a mile, waiting their turn to unload. Often teams that left home before daylight could not get unloaded before noon.

The cars were carefully prepared to carry the potatoes safely to market. On the floor and sides of the car, two-by-fours were attached, to which boards were nailed. Over the boards tar paper was fastened. No extra boards were placed on the ceiling. A tiny stove in the center of each car kept the potatoes warm and in good condition for market. Air space was provided by the built-in floor and walls. One man was hired to attend the fires in the potato cars. He would ride with them to Boston, or whatever city they had been consigned to, and then ride back to Ellenburg Depot by railroad coach. Mr. Clifton McGregor had his potatoes loaded at Dannemora Crossing, one mile south of Ellenburg Depot. He personally went with his own produce, had them unloaded and delivered to the customers with whom he had contracted.

Butter was made at local butter plants and shipped once a week, on Mondays, to the markets. The butter plants had a large storage room which kept the butter in good condition. The ice would be cut each winter from the local millponds.

Lumbering was a big industry in the North Country. Large quantities of spruce were sold for pulp, much of which was shipped to a foundry in Swanton, Vermont. A local resident remembers that very often a captain of a Lake Champlain boat would come to Ellenburg to buy timber for masts. It might take several days to find a tree that was of the right dimensions. Some of them had to be fifty to seventy-five feet long. The mast would bring about a dollar a foot. It was loaded on a flat car at Dannemora Crossing. Often three cars were necessary to support one mast.

Dannemora Crossing was one mile south of Ellenburg Depot, and about ten miles from Dannemora. This station was of great importance to the prison at Dannemora. So inaccessible was it to the outside world that supplies were brought to Dannemora Crossing, then carried over a plank road to the prison. The iron ore and the nails manufactured at the prison were brought to the railroad for shipment. Local resi-

dents remember four-horse wagons loaded with food supplies being taken over the steep road to Dannemora.

Since the railroad was the chief link with the outside world, men of all ages would gather at the stations to watch the trains come in and see the incoming and outgoing passengers. There were six passenger trains a day. The mail train went west in the morning to Ogdensburg and returned to Alburg in the evening. The express train went east in the morning from Ogdensburg to Alburg and returned in the evening. The local train went from Malone to Alburg and returned in the afternoon. People from the small towns could take the morning train to Malone and return in the evening. Picnic excursions were often organized to Vermont. The train would take the people to St. Albans or Burlington in the morning and return them in the late evening. This was a big event for the inhabitants. For a long time the people in the northern tier used the hospitals at Burlington. It was much easier to get there by train than elsewhere by road. Later, many of them used the hospital at Ogdensburg. Even in the 1920's, it was not uncommon for people to go there to the hospital.

Several communities grew up around the station. Hotels, dwellings and stores were always close to the railroad. Local residents soon felt acquainted with the engineers, brakemen and other workers, who would wave as they went by. One lady had a hotel near the railroad at Ellenburg Depot. She had a reputation for baking excellent pastry. Some of the engineers would stop their trains nearby in order to run in for a pie or cake or whatever else was good.

A new track was completed to replace the old one in 1894, and its prosperous days lasted into the twentieth century. Thus for more than half a century it served the North Country well, until declining traffic forced it to be abandoned.

Mrs. Josie Treggett, Ellenburg

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