

# Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

November 2000, Issue 120

Share Session

**T**he last meeting of the year brought most of the tribe out – Kathie Williams, Connie Teator, Ron Golden, Gerald Boomhower, Phyllis Beechert, Harriett Rasmussen, Dot Blenis, Rosemary Lambert, Jeanne Bear, David & Judy Rundell, Toot & Betty Vaughn, Cris Ketcham, Alice Roe, and Don Teator.

Phyllis donated a copy of the Rotary booklet, Man of the Year, featuring Lee Cunningham.

Dot Blenis had a couple folders of goodies, one of them being the first edition of the Gargoyle, the front page of which is reproduced for you (first page has hole). Note the name of the school and the date, a topic of debate among us a few months ago. The formation of the central school happens in 1930.

Harriett and Don read aloud the article about Brundage and Wilson written by Carolyn Bennett in the latest edition of Kaatskill Life. Carolyn did a program for the GLHG several years ago about female artists. The article is reproduced.

Most of the rest of the evening was spent coming up with our final version of the top events/trends of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century in Greenville. The only change from before was the combining of the two entries about the resort industry into one entry.

Most of this time was spent explaining some of events, and we all agreed it would be helpful for someone or some people to start explaining some of these events. We tried to put dates on the decline of agriculture, the changing of the resort business, emergency care in Greenville, and the various stages of operation of the movie theater. In addition, we dared to define "declining morality."

Thus, we faded into the late autumn evening, awaiting the next meeting in April, or possibly the potluck dinner in March if the usual forces make it happen one more time.

With a few months off, we have some time to ponder some ideas for meetings next year, and to work on a project or two. The annual issue should be out in February.

Wishing everyone a healthy winter,



## Top Events Of Greenville's 20th Century

1. automobile
2. WWII
3. Great Depression
4. GCS centralization – 1930
5. decline of agriculture
6. rise and change of resort industry
7. Country Square supermarket & shopping center / Main Street decline
8. better transportation / Rt. 32 a state road / NYS Thruway / Erwin Road Plan
9. greater affluence / greater comforts (TV, AC, radio, etc.) / credit cards / better retirement years
10. greater dependence on cities (e.g., Albany)
11. new HS – 1968
12. computerization
13. women's role in work
14. declining morality (church, divorce, language, media, dress, lifestyles, etc)
15. better emergency care / fire & rescue / closing of Greene County hospital
16. Glenn murder case – 1935
17. Movie theater – different stages and closing
18. influenza / polio scare / tuberculosis
19. weather events (blizzard of 1957-58, drought of early '60s, etc.)

\*\*\* A brief explanation for each one above, from a paragraph to a couple of pages, would be a worthwhile project. In addition, writing about an event/trend you consider worthwhile but not on the list above would be welcome also.

# The Greenville Gargoyle

Volume 1

Greenville Free Academy, November, 1929

Number 1

## The Staff

Twenty-three promising candidates comprise the present newspaper staff. As soon as the first issue is out, the newspaper staff will be organized with an editor-in-chief, associate editors and reporters. Business managers and art staff officers will also be appointed. There is still time for any student who desires to sign up on one of these staffs. Enroll with Miss Gabel.

The editorial staff consists of Margaret Woodruff, '32; Miss Verona Brown, '32; Annella Dinnel, '31; Helen Potter, '32; Bertha Hubbard, '30; Gladys Gransbury, '30; Carl Ratsch, '30; Ruth Mackey, '33; Marjorie Boomhower, Mrs. Mabie's room, and William McMichael, Miss Bate's room.

The business staff consists of: Eloise Roe, '32; Gladys Beecher, '32; Charlotte Story, '30, and Paul Augustein, '33.

The art staff is composed of: Edith Palmer, '32; Robert McMichael, '32; Robert Shaw, '33; Reinhold Schermer, '33; Margaret Story, '33; Margaret Knowles, '33; Dorothy Joy, '32.

The sport editors are: Gerald Ingalls, '29, and Kenneth Lawyer, '31.

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## Class Notes

### Senior Class Notes

The Class of 1930 of Greenville High School held its first meeting in the South room, October 4.

Lawrence Felter, Editor, and Bertha Hubbard, Vice-President, put out a school paper now, and agreed to have it published every two weeks, especially if the girls want it. God help us if they do! It will be an "The Old Women's Sewing Circle" and "The Women's Gazette," combined.

The girls are going to be, especially if the girls want it. God help us if they do! It will be an "The Old Women's Sewing Circle" and "The Women's Gazette," combined.

Thursday afternoon, November 7.

The roll was called and the minutes read by the Secretary.

The question of the disposal of the dues was discussed but no final decision has yet been reached. No other business was transacted and the meeting adjourned.

### Junior Class Notes

The Class of 1931 of the Greenville Free Academy held a special meeting Tuesday, October 29, for the purpose of electing officers.

The following officers were elected: President, Helen Potter; Vice-President, Kenneth Lawyer; Treasurer, Clarice Palmer; Secretary, Leland Cunningham.

Other class business was taken up. The regular meetings are to be held every two weeks on Thursday at three-fifteen o'clock.

Miss Duntz and Miss Stone are planning to organize their home rooms into Freshmen and Sophomore classes.

"I think it is a good idea to have the Freshmen and Sophomores organize just as Seniors and Juniors organize. If the Freshmen and Sophomores begin electing class officers and collecting dues, by the time they are juniors and seniors they will understand class procedure and they will have a good financial start. From social contact they acquire poise and a co-operative spirit," said Miss Stone, instructor of French and Latin at the Academy.

### SS ROOM ACTIVITIES

ness. ... periods. ... the Sophomore Class in English, a portion of "The Tale of Two Cities" in Assembly.

Gerald: That's a piece immensely but they Helen: There you go; other classes. it in.

**S**he wasn't famous then, and she's not famous now, which can be said about many women's lives even today. That's the way it was at the dawn of the 19th century regarding Mary Ann Willson and her companion, Miss Brundage, whose first name has also disappeared into the mists of history along with the scant facts of her life. What is known about both women could fill a thimble: for example, that Willson and Brundage were probably born in England and migrated to Connecticut, as did many others, after the American Revolution. They lived at a time when women's lives were even more "anonymous" than our own.

Both women were old enough to embark on the mass migration from Connecticut to the mountainous region of upstate New York following the War of the Revolution. It was an unsettled but also exciting time. People were poor and uncertain, but they were free. Free to move from one end of this vast, then untamed continent to another and to make what they would of their new Edenic lives; free to be who and what they wanted to be...at least for a little while. It was in this atmosphere that many a Connecticut Yankee, Willson and Brundage among them, made the difficult journey to sweet forest solitude and their new-found home.

If you live in Greene County, New York, chances are you've never heard of Mary Anne Willson unless you are interested in early American primitives. Art historians have long regarded Willson as one of the earliest, most original American folk painters discovered to date. Her discovery can be credited to the Harry Stone Gallery of New York, which in 1941 came across a portfolio of 20 primi-

# The Folk Artist the Farmer- Maid

by Carolyn Bennett

tive watercolors by Willson and subsequently offered them for sale. Simple and direct, her folk drawings were painted with colors derived from berry juice, brick dust, vegetable dyes and, occasionally, some "boughten" paint.

Who were Willson and Brundage?

Like pieces of an old treasure map, hints of their lives are hidden throughout Greene County's history. The detective-reader may find the first clues in Lionel De Lisser's *Picturesque Catskills*, written in 1893 while the author was exploring the now comfortably settled Catskills. Rambling through Greenville, De Lisser probably learned of Willson's story from Theodore Prevost, grandson of Augustine Prevost, original patentee of the western-most part of what is now the Town of Greenville. Or the author may have heard from Theodore Cole of the primitive painter who, together with her faithful farmer-maid companion, had struck out on her own to live a life of uncompromised originality. (Theodore was artist Thomas Cole's son and owner of the two Willson watercolors used by De Lisser in his book.)

De Lisser tells the story as he first heard it:

*About two miles below Greenville, on the road to Freehold, there lived, early in the present century, two old maids. They owned a little log hut there, and a small piece of property surrounding it, in common. They were supposed to be sisters, but in fact they were not related by the ties of blood in any way. They had both of them in their younger days, experienced a romance that had drawn the two close to each other in womanly sympathy. Together they had come from the old country to Connecticut and from there to this place seeking peace and forgetfulness in the wilderness. They never told their story, or anything in fact, relating to themselves, that*

could serve as a clue to their identity or past life. They spent their time in the necessary work about the log-house and garden which was filled with wild flowers and ferns, and in painting water-color pictures which they sold among the neighboring settlers, for small sums, the highest price being asked was twenty-five cents. These paintings, two of which we reproduce, are unique in the extreme, showing a great originality in conception, drawing and color, as well as in the medium employed for their production. The subjects were generally selected from the Bible or profane history, in which they seem to have been well versed.

De Lissier was wrong about their way of life. Not unlike the Ladies of Langolyn, Willson and Brundage were more than just friends: they were life companions who had a "romantic attachment" for each other and who made no excuses for their way of life. Miss Brundage farmed their few wilderness acres as best she could, often with the help of neighbors and friends, while her beloved Mary Ann made pictures which she sold to these same neighbors as "rare and unique works of art." All we know of the life story of these two brave and bold women is contained in the following letter from an "Admirer of Art," written ca. 1850, fifty years after the letter writer's acquaintance with them. A century-and-a-half later, this secret "admirer" remains a secret although he is believed by art historian Jean Lippman to be either Augustine Prevost of Greenville or Theodore Cole. It is possible that the ardent "admirer" of Willson's art may be Augustine Prevost; it is not possible, however, that it was Theodore Cole who was born in 1838, more than a decade after Willson is believed to have left Greene County for "parts unknown."

The letter read: *The artist, Miss Willson and her friend, Miss*

*Brundage, came from one of the eastern States and made their home in the town of Greenville, Greene County, New York. They bought a few acres and built, or found their house, made of logs, on the land. Where they resided many years. One was the farmer (Miss Brundage) and cultivated the land by the aid of neighbors, occasionally doing some ploughing for them. This one planted, gathered in, and reaped, while the other (Mary Ann Willson) made pictures which she sold to the farmers and others as rare and unique 'works of art.' -Their paints, or colours, were of the simplest kind, berries, bricks, and occasional 'store paint' made up their wants for these elegant designs.*

*These two maids left their home in the East with a romantic attachment for each other and which continued until the death of the 'farmer maid.' The artist was inconsolable, and after a brief time, removed to parts unknown.*

*The writer of this often visited them, and takes great pleasure in testifying to their great simplicity and originality of character-their unqualified belief that these 'picters' were very beautiful...(they certainly were), boasting how greatly they were in demand. "Why! They go way to Canada and clear to Mobile!"*

*The reader of this will bear in mind that nearly fifty years have passed since these rare exhibits were produced...and now, asking nō favors for my friends, (as friends they were), let all imperfections be buried in their graves and shield these and them from other than kindly criticism.*

Who was Augustine Prevost and how likely is it that he is the one who played Boswell to Willson's Johnson?

Prevost was a professional soldier and an early settler of the wilderness territory west of the Hudson. The first wave of emigration from Connecticut to what is today known as the Town of

Greenville brought with it a rugged group of frontiersmen and their families. They were tough men who cleared the land, erected primitive log houses and who tried to eke out a meager living from the stubborn clay soil. Major Prevost, whose land they'd settled on, was a British officer, much hated by the settlers of his own ill-gotten acreage, which had been bestowed on him as part of the Royal patents. Although his Tory stigma plagued him throughout his life, Prevost settled down in 1786 to marry Anna Bogardus, his second wife, the daughter of a Catskill merchant, and to develop his Greenville lands.

Willson and Brundage are believed to have settled in Greenville around 1800. It's probable that they were acquainted with Augustine Prevost through business, as he had developed a local sawmill, gristmill, and tanning bark mill in the area by that time. Here, the "facts" of Willson's life end, and anything else we might know about her must be learned through her art.

It is known that from 1800 to 1824 Willson produced approximately 20 watercolors, many of which are now part of the M. & M. Karolik Collection of American Water Colors & Drawings 1800-1875 at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. A few others are in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. *Marimaid*, a 13x15-1/2-inch watercolor, is owned by the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown; another watercolor, *Pelican*, is owned by the Rhode Island School of Design. These works are now believed to be among the earliest primitives of their kind to have been produced in America. Willson's main theme is "Prodigal" as evidenced by their titles, e.g. *The Leaving Taking* and *Prodigal Son Reclaimed*.

Like her paintings, Willson was bold, original and powerful. Her artistic style was totally "naïve" (intuitive).

In her era, the only way a woman could "learn" to be an artist was to receive instruction from a male relative. Willson, like other women artists, was forbidden to attend the all-male art schools or to strike out on her own; nevertheless, she chose the latter. She captured her distorted images, an unintentional foreshadowing of Fauvist and Cubist art, on bits of paper with her crude paints made from materials close at hand.

*Mermaid* is one of Willson's most interesting artworks. Like Willson and Brundage, the mermaid is an outsider; neither woman nor fish, she is almost always made to feel as if she were "other." The opposite side of this axiom is that because she is branded as "other," she is sometimes endowed with special powers, powers that she herself is somewhat at a loss to comprehend. According to Bronson Alcott, teacher and transcendentalist, father of writer Louisa May Alcott, *Woman is an allegory; a myth sleeping in a myth; a sheathed goddess and a blazonry; a Sphinx's riddle, devouring and devoured; an ambush*

*and retirement, a nimbleness, a curiosity, a veil behind a veil, and a peeping forth from behind veils; a crypt of coyness, a goal of surprises, and a ambushade.* I wonder if this is how Willson felt as she created one colorful "pictur" after another?

Was Willson, like many artists before and after her, trying to tell us something about her life through the imagery of her art, and yet to tell it "slant" so as to avoid "condemnation," much like another of her 19th-century artistic sisters, the poet Emily Dickinson? Like Dickinson, did Willson feel as if she were an outsider in 18th-century America? Had she, like her Prodigal, been banished for her "sins" from her English home (assuming that she was born in England), and did the young folk artist yet dream, then, of a possible homecoming through the medium of her art?

In 1969, Willson's life was the subject of the novel *Patience and Sarah* written by Alma Rautsong under the pseudonym Isabel Miller. In it, Willson's life in Greene County ends

happily. The real story ended a little less happily when, ca.1824, Miss Brundage died, leaving Willson bereft and without anchor. That year, Willson left Greenville for parts unknown and was not heard of since.

*Author's note:* My own research leads me to believe that the ardent "admirer" of Willson's art may have been Sarah Cole, sister of artist Thomas Cole. Born in England in 1805, Sarah eventually lived and died in Catskill, New York, in 1857. She was also an artist, who frequently accompanied her famous brother on sketching trips. A comparison of Sarah's handwriting with that of the "admirer" shows many similarities. Sarah Cole and Mary Ann Willson were nearly neighbors, within a half-hour carriage ride from one another. Also, the Bartows, Thomas Cole's in-laws, and the Bogarduses had family both in Catskill and Greenville during Willson's lifetime. 🍷

*Carolyn Bennett is director of development, The Catskill Mountain Foundation, Inc., and co-owner of Terra Books in Prattsville, NY.*