

# Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

July 2002, Issue 133

Walt Ingalls Interview, Pt. 2

It was a pleasant July 8 evening that awaited us – the Monday night music at the Gazebo, the long evening light and twilight so many of us look forward to (especially from January's perspective), and a break from the stifling heat from the 4<sup>th</sup>. In attendance were Walt Ingalls, Stephanie Ingalls, Larry & Dot Hesel, Connie Teator, Harriett Rasmussen, Martha Turon, Ron Golden, Mimi Weeks, Kathie Williams, Pat Lambe, Alice Roe, Dot Blenis, Rosemary Lambert, and Don Teator. The only thing out of the ordinary was our meeting place – the small meeting room, which brought back a few memories from when it was our usual meeting place.

We started with a Greene County News article about the Utter and Tripp families of Oak Hill. Because Harriett had a hand in the article, she was asked to read it for the group, providing a long-ago perspective of these two families. A copy of the article, a bit cut up, is enclosed in this newsletter.

Dot Blenis brought in a Surprise Post Office letterhead, a Stevens hardware store bill, and a menu from the Parthenon (Mary's, when it was managed by the Pantilieris family).

And then, we got to the program. Walt Ingalls agreed to come back for Part 2 of our interview. We ran the gamut of school day memories (teachers, classmates, the principal, favorite (or not) subjects, sports, after-school activities), marriage, helping out with the family business, and a retrospective of his adult life (GNH life, economic forces, lumber business, service to community, etc.). Although this short paragraph does not do justice to the influence Walt has had in our area, suffice it to say that any history of 2002 Town of Greenville would be sorely remiss without a mention of this gentleman who exemplifies the best of our area. Perhaps, some longer listing of the details of this meet-

ing and the May meeting can be compiled for a future newsletter.

The next meeting will be a share session – August 12.

One more note. I try to remind everyone about newsletter subscriptions twice a year, and this is one of those times. The expiration date is listed on the mailing label. If you wish to renew, send a check (\$5 per year) to Don Teator, 3979 Rt 67, Freehold, NY 12431.

*Don*

—The picture below goes with the article



Photo contributed by Harriett Rasmussen

**Judson Cleavland was the nephew of both Alfred and Maria Tripp. Today his portrait is in storage at the Bronck Museum. He was born in 1847 and died in 1910 at the age of 63.**

# The past comes vaulting into the present with portraits of Oak Hill family

27 June '02  
GR Co News

By Jessica Arabski

During the nineteenth century the Tripp and Utter families dominated local politics and business in Oak Hill. Today the grass grows tall and unruly over their graves in the Oak Hill Cemetery. Weeds and wildflowers are interspersed among the crooked tombstones and most of the inscriptions have worn away.

The families, connected by marriage in the 1830s, would have faded into obscurity if not for five portraits recently donated to the Bronck Museum by Helen Hilzinger, a descendant of the family and resident of Oak Hill. The portraits, completed in 1865 by artist Amos Hamlin, depict the Oak Hill storekeeper Alfred Tripp and his wife Maria Utter, as well as three of their family members.

Due to the condition of the portraits, only those of the Tripps are currently displayed in the main entrance of the Bronck house. The portraits hang alongside the paintings of three other well-known businessmen in Greene County: Isaac Pruyn, the first president of the Catskill National Bank, his brother Lucas, and also William Crosswell, whose family published the *Catskill Packet*, Greene County's first newspaper.

"The Tripps are in good company for right now," said Site Manager Shelby Mattice.

The other three paintings, currently in storage until they can be renovated, include Maria Tripp's brother and sister-in-law, Isaac and Mary Ann Utter, as well as Judson Cleavland, nephew of the Tripps.

"I certainly applaud Miss Hilzinger for doing this," said Mattice, who noted that the donated portraits captured an important aspect of early area commercial life. "For us, they certainly nailed down a piece of Greene County history and gave it a face."

## Family history and local ties

The marriage of the Tripp and Utter families resulted in a rich history. Today, many long-time residents of the Oak Hill area would most likely find their lineage somehow intertwined with the Tripp and Utter name.

According to Harriett Rasmussen, a member of the Greenville Local History Group, the history of the Utter family began in Oak Hill in the spring of 1783, when James Utter, a Revolutionary War hero from Saybrook, Connecticut, arrived in the area to clear land for a homestead. Utter spent that winter in Connecticut, later returning to Oak Hill the following spring with his young wife Hannah Spencer and their son James, Jr.

Although Hannah Spencer yearned for her home in Connecticut, the couple established a farm on Saybrook Hill, named after Utter's original hometown.

The farm, located on what is now called Makely Road, was where Utter's son James, Jr. spent most of his life. Upon adulthood, he wed Elizabeth Post.

The couple continued to reside on Saybrook Hill, where they raised six children, including Isaac, who was born in 1808, and Maria, born in 1815.

Isaac, the second eldest child, eventually married Mary Ann Niles; the portraits of Isaac and his wife are now part of Hilzinger's donation to the Bronck Museum.

Aside from Isaac and Maria, among the Utters' six children was also another daughter, Catharine, who married Lyman E. Cleavland. The two had a son, Judson, born in 1847. He is roughly 18 years old in

the portrait currently stored at the Bronck Museum.

Although they eventually achieved prominence as well, the Tripp name arrived in the Oak Hill area significantly later than the Utters. Alfred Tripp, originally from Dutchess County, initially established himself in Rensselaerville. According to Rasmussen, it is unclear what date he arrived in Oak Hill.

Today, Nick and Mary Lou Nahas operate the original Tripp store as an antique shop. Since purchasing the property in 1996, the Nahas have spent a great deal of time delving into the original tenants' family history.

According to the Nahas' research, in 1831, Tripp, who lived in Rensselaerville at the time, issued a poster offering the services of the thoroughbred stallion Gold Hunter at local stables. A census taken in 1855 also revealed to the Nahas that Tripp had been a resident of the Town of Durham for 20 years, which would have pinned his arrival in the town at approximately 1935.

Although it is uncertain when Tripp arrived in Oak Hill, the other events in his life are somewhat clearer. Historical records reveal that Tripp was married twice. His first wife Ezora Hopson died in childbirth at the age of 25, and her grave, marked 1838, can be found in the Stone Bridge Cemetery in East Durham.

Shortly after the death of his first wife, Tripp re-married, this time wedding Maria Utter. In addition to the daughter from Tripp's first marriage, the couple had 11 children, many of whom left a significant impact on Oak Hill and the surrounding area.

One of the better-known children of Alfred and Maria was Isaac Utter Tripp, commonly known as I.U. He was named after Maria's brother and born in 1858.

When his father died in 1881 in the brick house next to the store where the Nahas currently reside, I.U. took over operation of the family business.

The Tripp-Utter marriage created a bond between the two families which surfaces frequently when researching Oak Hill's tangled past. Another Tripp child was Helen, whose diary provided a fairly detailed account of daily life. After studying the diary, Rasmussen believed that it was no coincidence that the portraits of Cleavland, the Tripps, and Utters were grouped together, as the families seemed rather close.

According to Rasmussen, Helen often mentioned "Aunt Mary," or Mary Ann Niles Utter. Helen also appeared close to the Cleavland side of the family. Rasmussen noted that in an 1874 entry Helen recalled staying up with a neighbor to watch the body of Judson and his wife Victoria's baby, which died suddenly at the age of two months. During the nine-

teenth century, it was common practice for friends and family of the deceased to sit with up with the body in the nights prior to burial. Helen's diary entries detail further incidents hinting at the deep friendship between the families.

With so many children, the ties the Utter and Tripp families have to local individuals are extensive. According to records, aside from Helen and I.U., another child born to Maria and Alfred was Adelia Catharine. Adelia was Hilzinger's grandmother, making Hilzinger the great-granddaughter of Alfred and Maria Tripp.

Other Tripp children also included Harriett Irene and Carrie Clark. The Nahas' research reveals that the sisters were married in a joint ceremony to Byron Hall and Calvin Burnett at the Tripp home in 1900. The same year, Hall and Burnett took over the operation of I.U. Tripp & Co., which became known as Hall & Burnett, although I.U. maintained ownership over the property. Rasmussen herself became connected to the family after her aunt Elizabeth wed Alfred Tripp Burnett, the son of Calvin and Carrie Clark Burnett.

Rasmussen, who was born in 1925, still vividly recalls memories of her relatives, particularly of the old-fashioned Studebaker that belonged to I.U., or "Uncle Ike." She also mentioned spending time with her aunt and uncle, Elizabeth and Alfred.

According to Rasmussen, I.U., who married but never had children, was somewhat distant to her and her sister growing up. She said that as girls they spent more time with Hall and Burnett.

"Hall and Burnett - Uncle Byron and Uncle Cal - they were there more when I was a kid," she said. "We were more attached to them."

Tripp family ownership of the business continued until July 7, 1958 when Burnett sold the property to Raymond and Sarah Robelen, thus ending a family tradition.

**Portraits and social class**

In her portrait, Maria Tripp appears stern and unwavering. She wears a black dress with a stiff lace collar and only the faintest smile graces her sharp features. Her hair is pulled back tightly, making her appear much older than her 50 years.

Tripp's portrait hangs besides that of his wife, looking equally as grim. Although his features are virtually hidden by a thick beard, his eyes appear serious and harsh. Like Maria, his clothing is dark and formal.

"It's not what I would call a flattering view," noted Mattice.

As she explained, however, such solemn portraits were typical during the nineteenth century. In a time before photographs, images of people served different functions, largely due to their scarcity. Whereas photos today are mostly sentimental, said Mattice, portraits such as those capturing the Tripps, Uters, and Judson Cleaveland were intended to convey social status and class.

"Images of yourself just did not exist," she said. "It was a kind of advertising in a way. Social advertising."

Status was typically conveyed in photographs and portraits in several different ways, including the display of dark clothing. According to Mattice, in the nineteenth century, the most expensive material available to country people was typically dark in color.

Since the year the portraits were painted, Mattice noted that tastes have changed considerably, and that today, most women would not be pleased to be portrayed in the way Maria Tripp appears in her portrait. Mattice added that Tripp appeared "solid" in a way that most modern women would find unflattering. This, however, she said, simply reflected a taste of the time period.

"I'm sure she must have been reasonably pleased with it," she added, pointing out that considerable money had most likely been commissioned to Hamlin in order to create the portraits.

**Restoration and repair**

All five of the portraits of the Uters and Tripps are currently in

need of restoration. According to Mattice, while the actual images on the canvas are unharmed, the paintings must be remounted, re-varnished, and backed properly.

Particularly of concern to the museum is the condition of the stretchers, the part of the canvas pulled over the portrait's wooden supports. As Mattice explained, the stretcher on Isaac Utter's portrait is beginning to pull, while the stretcher on his wife's portrait has completely torn from the canvas. The other portraits are in need of work as well.

Aside from repairs to the stretchers, Mattice added that it was imperative for the paintings to be cleaned professionally.

"People tended to hang these types of paintings over mantles," said Mattice, explaining that such display often exposed the paintings to dirt and ash over a course of many years.

According to Mattice, a popular method of the past was to brighten old portraits with varnish. The consequence of this was that dirt was sealed against the surface of the canvas. Today, as part of the fixing process, conservators must chemically remove this varnish and clean the canvas, re-applying varnish to the treated surface.

Mattice said that although museum officials could offer guesses as to the condition of the portraits, there were certain things they could not know. She gave the example of mold infestations, which are often found on old paintings but are typically invisible to the naked eye. For this and other reasons, she explained, the portraits would need to be sent to a conservator.

A conservator would also be able to solve other mysteries as well. Currently the paintings are in gilt frames. According to Mattice, often in the nineteenth century genuine gold was used in such frames, with gold leaf applied directly. Although she believes this was the case with the Tripp and Utter portraits, Mattice said the museum could not be certain until a professional examined the paintings.

The Bronck Museum has a limited amount of funding to allot to conservation. As Mattice explained, current resources are being used to remount and reframe a series of historic samplers. According to Mattice, to fix a sampler of 20 by 20 inches cost approximately \$1,500. The portraits of the Tripps and Uters are approximately 28 by 33 inches.

"It will be costly without question," she said, referring to the restoration process the portraits must undergo.

A fund has currently been set up to cover expenses related to the restoration of the paintings. Hilzinger, who was honored at the annual meeting of the Greene County Historical Society on June 9, made the first donation. Anyone interested in contributing to the fund can contact Mattice at the Bronck Museum at 731-6490.

**Gone but not forgotten**

While the graves of the Tripps and Uters may be overgrown, relatives and history enthusiasts ensure that memories of the families continue to thrive.

"I'm glad to see them where they can at least be on public view," said Nick Nahas. "I hope it will call more attention to Oak Hill."

For the Nahas, the Tripps have become very much a part of their lives. The family not only operates the former Tripp store, but also lives in what was once the Tripp home, where many members of the family were born, lived, and died.

Perhaps because their own lives were so intimately connected with those of the Tripps, the Nahas always felt that history seemed to have brushed over the Tripp and Utter family. With Hilzinger's donation of the portraits to the Bronck Museum, however, this has changed.

"I think they're well-deserved," Nick added, noting that the area finally seemed to have received the recognition it had earned. "If it also puts [the families] in with prominent local businessmen, that's another good thing for Oak Hill."

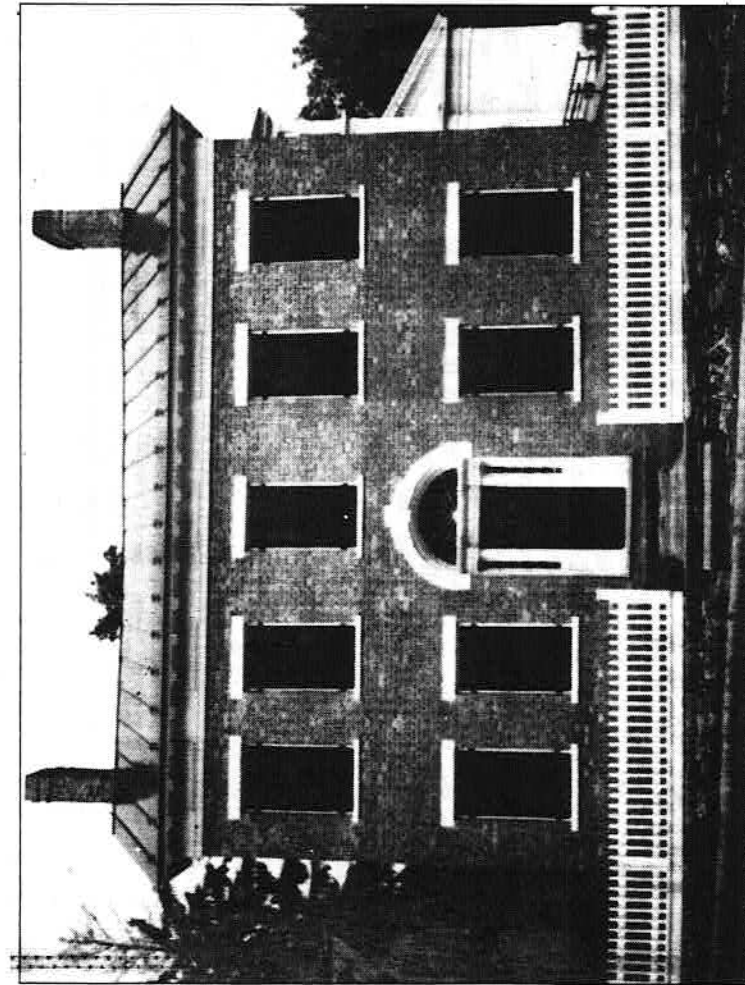
His wife, Mary Lou, had similar sentiments. She added that the Tripp and Utter families left a large impact on Greene County, both through their

interactions with commercial life, as well as through the many relatives and family connections they left behind.

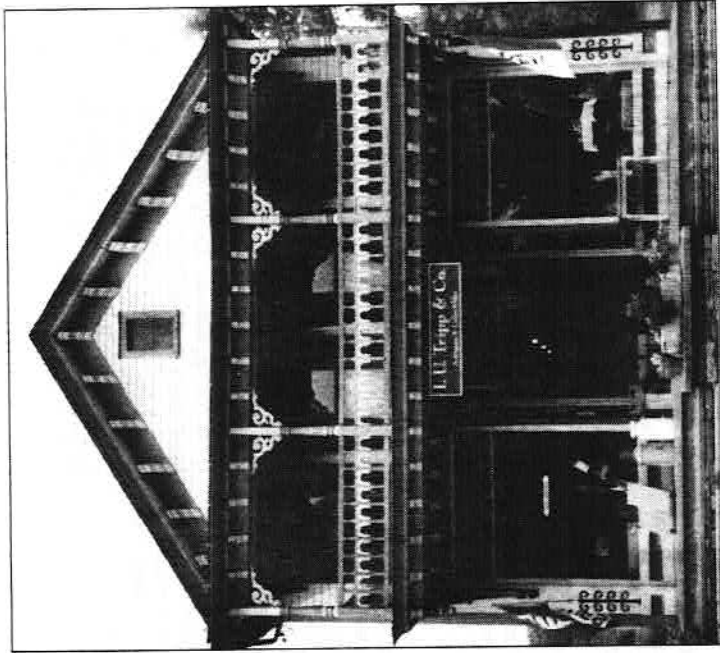
For Rasmussen, exploring the Tripp and Utter past has been a way to both explore her own past, as well as the history of the surrounding area, one of her personal hobbies.

"I like the connection between people," she said, adding that it was highly important to maintain ties to the past so to ensure that it was not lost for future generations.

The grown over graves of the Tripps and Uters may make their existence seem forgotten, but Hilzinger's donation, as well as the efforts of local historians and interested residents, have preserved their memory. Today the public can see the same faces that waited behind the counter of the Tripp store over 100 years ago.



Jessica Arabski/Hudson Valley Newspapers  
**Nick and Mary Lou Nahas currently reside in the brick house adjacent to the former Tripp store. The house, home of the Tripp family, was where Alfred Tripp died in 1881.**



Jessica Arabski/Hudson Valley Newspapers  
**The Tripp store still stands today on Route 81 in Oak Hill. The store, which now houses the antique shop I.U. Tripp & Co., is operated by Nick and Mary Lou Nahas of New Jersey. The couple purchased the property in 1996.**



Photo contributed by Harriett Rasmussen  
**Mary Ann Niles was the wife of Isaac Utter. She died at the age of 87 in 1906. Her portrait was among those donated to the Bronx Museum.**



Photo contributed by Harriett Rasmussen  
**Isaac Utter, brother of Maria Tripp, was born in 1808 and died in 1871. His portrait is now among the Bronx Museum collection.**



**Alfred Tripp, originally from Dutchess County, moved to the Oak Hill area in the 1930s. He operated a general store, which was passed down through his family until 1958.**