

# Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

April 2004, Issue 147

Share Session

Greetings to all, and welcome to the 2004 season of the Greenville Local History Group. A pleasant early April evening welcomed the night's score of participants – Phyllis Beechert, Connie Teator, Joe Mangold, Barbara Baron, Dot Blenis, Betty Vaughn, Jeanne Bear, Harriett Rasmussen, Ron Golden, Roger Teator, Mimi Weeks, Kathie Williams, Dot and Larry Hesel, Judy and David Rundell, Walt Ingalls, Stephanie Ingalls, Krista Haushalter, and Don Teator.

Tonight was a share session, although many also came to see how everyone survived another cold, initially-snowy winter. It is with regret that, since our November meeting, we note the passing of Gerald Boomhower. Gerald had an excellent memory of stories and legends of days yore, and was especially helpful when I first started duplicating old photos and post cards of the Greenville area more than a dozen years ago.

Phyllis brought in for the files a copy of the American Legion Post 291 September 11 Commemoration "Patriot Day" booklet, as well as the The Press's community handbook. These are the paper "things" that should be saved, and I appreciate those of you who

check to see if I have seen items of interest.

While I'm on the topic of items of interest, a recent inquiry reminded me to put out my list of GCS yearbooks that I don't have – 1946, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1990 (and anything pre-1939, if yearbooks existed before then). I'd appreciate any referrals.

I brought in a handful of items to peruse. One was the Shandaken 2004 Calendar, consisting of a color cover and a month's photo for each of the twelve areas of that town (Phoenicia, Chichester, Big Indian, etc.). I'm not above using someone else's good idea, although I think the Greenville calendar stands up well to most other historical calendars that use black and white.

I reminded people of the revisions being planned to Greenville's zoning plan and comprehensive plan. Although we clearly are not a political group, these revisions might affect historic preservation, as well as the character of the town. If you can lend your voice to support those provisions that preserve our history, please do so. I had available copies of the changes, as well as maps of before and after the proposed changes. You can get a copy at the town hall.

I reminded people that menus from local eateries are a welcome addition to the files. I brought a copy of Ruby's Hotel menu from last year. If you can get a copy of any other menu in the local area, please add it to the files. We commented on the change of eatery places in the last several decades.

I passed around a dozen or so copies of articles of Greenville news and politics, most of them from the Catskill Daily Mail (usually written by Jessica Arabski, who is writing some of the most informative and detailed articles in quite a while). Topics ranged from assessments to vocal town board meetings to new businesses. Anyone who has kept track of this winter's news is half-fascinated, half-embarrassed by the nature of public civility (or, maybe, lack thereof) in Greenville.

A side trip to the records room showed everyone two new items. One is the finish of the sorting of the cards of Doris Hempstead's genealogy cards. Much credit goes to Mimi Weeks who alphabetized nearly 90% of the cards. So, those of you who want to check the cards, give me a call (518-634-2397) or email (don@dteator.com). I will let the library know you're coming in case I can't make it.

The second item in the records room was an addition of twelve storage/photo albums. These albums, which I have been storing in my house since 1990, are the over-550 pages of negatives of all the photographs Deb and I have shot since 1989. Each photograph in the collection has a number that indicates a page number and a frame number. So, for example, if you see a photograph that has a number of 138.17, you

could find the negative on the 138<sup>th</sup> page, and then find the frame numbered 17. Although I worry a little about having the photographs and the negatives in the same room (in case of an accident – fire, etc.), I have decided that the best long-term interests make the records room a better choice than my house.

The next meeting is May 10<sup>th</sup>. The program will be an interview of one of our community members – Eliot Dalton who runs the Greenville Arms with his wife Tish. Come with questions, or just come to listen.

A reminder: any address changes should be sent to me so I can make sure the newsletter gets to you. Also, the top line of the address label has your expiration date. I'll be reminding you again this summer.

Just in: the updated Ingalls genealogy is out. It looks great! Contact Stephanie or Paige if you are interested (sorry, Stephanie and Paige for being so presumptuous, but I couldn't think of two better people to contact!).

That's it for now. It was good to see so many familiar faces at this meeting. If you have ideas for programs, let me know.

Attached is a copy of a newspaper article in the Times-Union about the Hill Towns of Albany County. Although Greenville is not included, much of what is said, because these towns are our neighbors, is relevant for us too.

Till then, take care,



P.S. JOSEPHINE BLAKESLEE, FROM GREENE CO. HIST. SOCIETY, IS LOOKING FOR A GREENVILLE REP TO SIT ON THE HISTORIC HOUSE SELECTION COMMITTEE. IT MEETS EVERY OTHER MONTH. CALL ME IF YOU ARE INTERESTED, OR CAN THINK OF SOMEONE.

# The Hilltowns

## plain and simple

BY KATE GURNETT  
STAFF WRITER

3-7-04  
ATU

Kevin Crosier steers his truck past icy fields in a cold, desolate sunshine in the heart of the Hilltowns. Flatlanders have built new homes here in the summer, only to flee before winter is out.

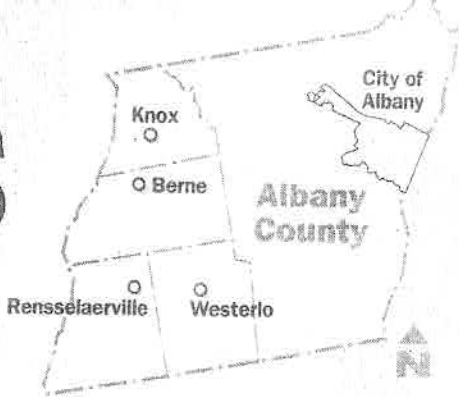
"It's hard to live out here," says Crosier, who wears a green John Deere cap, collects antique farm equipment and is the town supervisor. "You've got to have a truck. You've got to have a snowplow. You've got to have a generator."

Pluck alone won't do. Hilltowners also rely on each other. In the 1840s, they launched the Anti-Rent Wars, tossing off the yoke of the Dutch patroon Stephen Van Rensselaer IV. The 40-year fight carved a flinty independence that still thrives amid the rocky soil and raw winter winds.

Today, pickups idle in front of country stores, doors unlocked. Names on gravestones still match names in the telephone book.

Perched on the Helderberg escarpment, the Hilltowns stretch north-south from Schenectady to Greene counties. They boast no four-lane roads, no

Please see **HILLTOWNS A4**

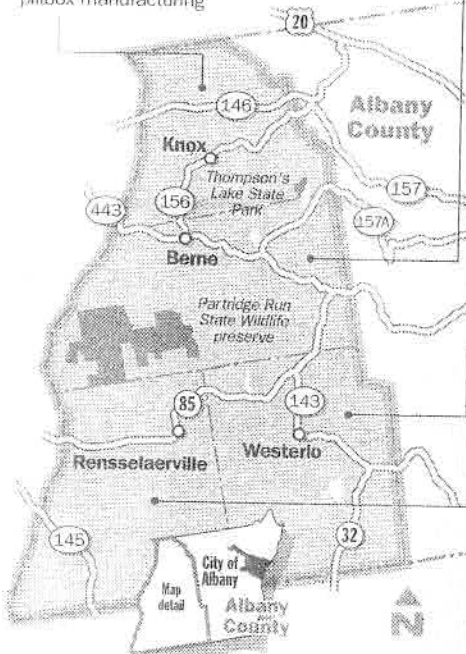


**KEVIN CROSIER**, supervisor of the town of Berne, stands in a field on Sickie Hill Road in Berne. He wants future development not to destroy the rural character of the town.

## Rural life

### Knox

- Population: 2,647
- Highest elevation in town: 1,600 feet
- Known for: Caves, Thompson's Lake State Park (with Berne) and 19th-century pillbox manufacturing



### Berne

- Population: 2,846
- Highest elevation in town: 2,300 feet
- Known for: Warner's Lake, Partridge Run State Wildlife preserve and 19th-century ax and cheese factories

### Westerlo

- Population: 3,466
- Highest elevation in town: 1,300 feet
- Hamlets: Westerlo, South Westerlo and Domansville
- Known for: Hannay Reels manufacturing and 19th-century potash making

### Rensselaerville

- Population: 1,915
- Highest elevation in town: 2,160 feet
- Known for: Rensselaerville Institute, The Edmund Niles Huyck Preserve and its former felt and grist mills

- Percentage of Hilltown residents: living at the poverty level: **5 percent**
- Percentage living as working poor or below: **19 percent**
- Number of Berne-Knox-Westerlo students who get lunch subsidies: **25 percent**
- Number of Bethlehem students who get lunch subsidies: **4 percent**
- Homes built in the Hilltowns from 1995 to 2000: **252**
- Homes built in Guilderland from 1995 to 2000: **1,043**

Source: U.S. Census, New York State Education Department



large grocery stores and only four gas stations for 10,874 residents. Just 252 new homes went up across four towns from 1995 to 2000, one fourth the number built in neighboring Guilderland.

**But this land** is a much different place than that tilled by Palatine immigrants 10 generations ago.

These days, the Hilltowns have more single mothers than farms. The local food pantry serves as many as 200 families. A quarter of the students at Berne-Knox-Westerlo school get lunch subsidies, compared to 4 percent in the adjacent

**“We want an orderly growth, that’s what the population has said many times over. It’s quiet here. The people are friendly. The air is clean.”**

MICHAEL HAMMOND  
Knox supervisor

Berne, Knox, Westerlo and Rensselaerville — like much of rural America — seesaw between an agricultural past and an uncertain future.

“What you have here is an economy in transition,” says Bill Benson, a restaurateur in Rensselaerville, the southernmost Hilltown. “The farms are pretty much gone. There’s pressure on real estate coming up through the Hudson Valley. If agriculture continues to decline in the area, it creates an economic vacuum. Families with generational ties to large tracts of land are under pressure to sell and subdivide.”

In the 1990s, Americans migrated to rural areas, seeking natural settings and recreation and sparking a 6 percent population spike in nonmetro counties by 1996, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Interest peaked again after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Growing pains are evident. Some “flatlanders,” as hill residents call outsiders, don’t like farm noise. Or farm smells. Or stray livestock.

“They’re not really aware that

when you move in next to a farm, if it’s time to chop your corn, people may work through the night,” says Albany County Legislator Sandy Gordon, a grass-fed beef cattle and hay farmer from Knox. “You get the week of the harvest moon and ... sometimes we’ll cut hay at midnight. It’s just an education process. People are coming to the area because they are so enthralled with the scenic aspects of it. They want the agriculture. But they have to understand that it (needs to) sustain itself.”

To make ends meet, some Hilltowners take second and third jobs. Crosier runs a maple sugar business and commutes to Albany, where he is a paramedic/firefighter. His wife, Barb, is a lobbyist.

Farmers “definitely need off-farm income to help sustain the farm,” said Gordon, a hay farmer who is also a county legislator and transportation supervisor at Schalmont Central Schools. “There are a lot of people up here putting in some very long hours.”

Part of the problem is that farmers are “way under-leveraged,” said Tom Dorr, senior adviser on rural development issues to the secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. American farmland is worth roughly \$1.2 trillion, with less than 14 percent of debt against it, Dorr said. That leaves owners land rich and cash poor. And the notion that rural America will survive forever is also unrealistic, he says. “That’s why we have archaeologists, because every community couldn’t survive.”

“You don’t fix those problems easily,” he said.

The modern Hilltown is a sparsely populated bedroom community. The median income here in 2000 was \$48,428, according to U.S. Census figures, right between Bethlehem (\$63,170) and Watervliet (\$32,910).

“Most of the people who live on the hill go off the hill to jobs,” says Knox Supervisor Michael Hammond. “A lot of people work for the state, a lot of people work in education and a lot of people go to work at businesses off the hill.”

**Most residents** agree on this: They don’t want strip malls, gas stations and Burger Kings lining four-lane roads.

“We want an orderly growth, that’s what the population has said many times over,” says Hammond, standing by a bonfire at the town’s Jan. 31 winter festival. Behind him, kids tube

downhill into the biting wind blowing east from the Schoharie Valley. “It’s quiet here. The people are friendly. The air is clean.”

About 15 to 18 new houses go up a year in Knox, which has a 3-acre zoning limit.

Slow-growth proponents have a friend in the area’s karst geology. Bedded on limestone and underground caverns, the Hilltowns are not conducive to water or sewer systems. Most residents use wells and septic tanks.

Westerlo has seen the bulk of the housing growth, with 109 new homes built from 1995 to 2000. It is the largest town, with 3,466 people and has the Hilltowns’ only industry: Hannay Reels. The largest manufacturer of hose reels in the world, Hannay Reels employs 140 and stays in Westerlo because the owners like the setting, said CEO Roger Hannay, whose grandfather founded the business in 1933.

While Westerlo is launching a \$1.7 million water system, it will serve just 100 people in the hamlet, not the entire town, Supervisor Dick Rapp said.

Even if the Hilltowns did get water, says Assemblyman John J. McEneny, D-Albany, the roads aren’t built to handle suburban traffic. “They’re more likely to get McMansions. Not a street going down a cul-de-sac with 25 houses.”

Still, sprawl is on the rise, a recent Brookings Institution study shows. Upstate New York’s population grew 2.6 percent from 1982 to 1997. Urbanized land jumped 30 percent, according to Rolf Pendall, associate professor of city and regional planning at Cornell University. Pendall authored the study “Sprawl Without Growth: The Upstate Paradox” last fall.

The result? Houses and

businesses spread out, squeezing wildlife and threatening the environment. Rolling farmland disappears. Towns raise taxes to support more roads, more sewers and police and fire protection.

Driving through Berne, Crosier points to a patchwork of fields and pine trees. “Find me a house over there,” Crosier says. None in sight. “That’s what we need to protect. Yes, we’re going to have some growth. But we need to do smart growth. If we follow our (existing) zoning, we’re going to look like Colonie.”

**Town leaders** think they have the answer: controlled growth and small business.

Take agriculture. Gordon, the cattle and hay farmer, suggests having farmers convert to a

rotation of grazed pork, beef and free-range poultry.

Another option: Renewable energy. Rural experts are turning to wind and solar power as a potential cash crop for farmers. Gordon is exploring whether Albany County can turn to renewable energy — possibly produced in the Hilltowns — to meet some of its electricity needs.

The ideas are endless, argues Crosier, the Berne supervisor. City folks could lease a struggling farmer’s land to hunt, fish or ski. Town leaders could promote smaller crops like venison or honey. Planners could strengthen zoning and seek low-impact businesses.

Last fall, Berne officials launched a “junk car amnesty” and cleared 100 rusted wrecks from yards and fields.

This spring, the Rigpa Buddhist retreat center will take over a 350-acre hilltop on Game Farm Road. Rigpa organizers say they hope to buy local produce, furniture and woolsens. The center has low-impact lights that won’t glare across residents’ beloved night skies.

Berne and Rensselaerville also give tax incentives for barn restorations if the structures house agriculture-related cottage industries, the first towns in the state to do so.

**At Palmer House Cafe in Rensselaerville**, Bill Benson uses locally grown organic greens, cheese and game. “If I buy my onions down the road they’re going to be a lot better.”

Please see **HILLTOWNS A5** ▶

# HILLTOWNS: Look for means to save farms

▼ CONTINUED FROM A4

The industry standard is vegetables travel something like 1,700 miles. So why not get it locally if you can? You control it from the farm to the plate and you can't ask for better than that. And you support the local economy."

Rensselaerville is home to 47 percent of the county's second-home owners, including columnist Andy Rooney and nationally known food writer Molly O'Neill. The hamlet launched a weekend market, where millionaires and struggling farmers rub elbows.

In Westerlo, Kathleen Speck, who heads Catholic Charities' Hilltowns Community Resource Center, is organizing Fair Shares. The time-bank program lets anyone who donates an hour of work, from baby-sitting to lawyering, to collect an hour of work, such as gardening or driving or tutoring.

Certainly, rural America boasts several pockets of once-struggling regions that mix business with schools and recreation to create a thriving community, says Dorr. Like Kalispell, Mo., Ames, Iowa. Or Montpelier, Vt.

**Driving through Berne,** Crosier waves at a passing truck. It's Westerlo's highway superintendent. With so little traffic up here, he recognizes other drivers. Where some see loss and poverty, Crosier sees opportunity.

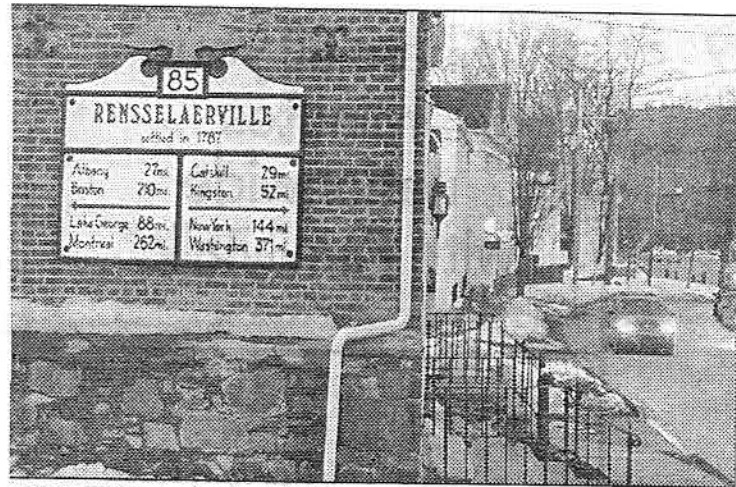
On Main Street in East Berne, Crosier passes two abandoned

restaurants. The Maple Inn and Rest Seekers Inn lean downhill toward Fox Creek. Crosier grew up on this street, sitting on the counter of his parents' Star Supermarket, chatting with customers.

A generation later, America is burned out on crowded interstates, mass media and the impersonal atmosphere of suburbs, he says. "They want to move here because rural settings offer a safe haven of small hometown life. ... It's not those big-box stores, but the small business that makes your community. The small little grocery store, the little gas station, the little repair shop, the farmer who grows pumpkins, the guy who produces sweet corn. That's what we're trying to strive for."

If all else fails, Hilltowners have their history, their craggy limestone rocks and their community. Last year, ninth-grader Christine Sikule won the Berne Heritage Days contest with an essay on the Anti-Rent Wars. During those rough times, she wrote, people pulled together. "Even though almost everyone was eventually homeless and landless, the community effort was amazing."

Adds Rapp, Westerlo's supervisor: "I don't think you're going to have to worry about (sprawl) for awhile," he says. "A lot of people don't like the winters we have."



**SIGN** on the main street in Rensselaerville offers the distance between the hamlet and anywhere else.

# Harsh winters, low pay, hard work a way of life

*Many Hilltowners face countless day-to-day struggles, but they can live with that*

**By KATE GURNETT**  
Staff writer

Sean Peck is no slacker. Like many Hilltowners, the 14-year-old gets up at 6 a.m. to water his animals. Over the years, he's had goats, pigs, cows, chickens, pigeons, pheasants and a peacock. The family tried two emus, but the swift-running birds fled into neighbors' fields. After school, he rebuilds transmissions with his father, Ron, outside their Westerlo house.

Like 19 percent of all residents in Berne, Knox, Westerlo and Rensselaerville, the Pecks classify as poor or working poor. They earn lower wages, get fewer health benefits and work less stable jobs than middle-class families. When the holidays arrive, they gather with about 200 others to get free gifts and groceries from the county sheriff and food pantry to fill out their stockings.

"It's a savior, let me tell you," said Sean's mother, Sandra Peck, a nurse who is now at home caring for her disabled daughter Kaitlin, 10.

"One year we got a tree," Sean added.

People don't always see rural poverty.

"You drive out to this beautiful countryside, you think, 'Oh, everything's great. You've got these beautiful old farmhouses,'" said Kay Quinto, a Head Start teacher in East Berne. "Well, some of those old farm houses might have six apartments with families in them."

Besides the vanishing farm economy and minimum-wage work, low-income families here face another foe, isolation.

"A lot of the services that people need are in Albany," said Kathleen Speck, program coordinator for



**KATHLEEN SPECK**, program coordinator of the Hilltowns Community Resource Center of Catholic Charities, sorts donated cans of food at the agency's site in Westerlo.

the Hilltowns Community Resource Center in Westerlo, part of Catholic Charities of Albany and Rensselaer counties. Like food stamps or medical care or nutrition counseling. "If you don't have transportation and you don't drive, it's difficult."

Berne, Knox, Westerlo and Rensselaerville have 2,036 poor or low-income residents — those earning less than \$36,800 for a family of four, which is 200 percent of the poverty level, according to the U.S. Census. There are 205 single mothers, many of whom earn less than \$18,000.

Twenty-five percent of students at Berne-Knox-Westerlo school get free or reduced-price lunches, compared to 4 percent in the adjacent Bethlehem district.

Those who want to work have trouble finding jobs close to home, Speck said. Mothers going from welfare to work may be advised to move to Albany. They'd rather not. The hills are home.

To balance the lack of cash, Speck is organizing Fair Shares, a time-bank based on social capital. Modeled after programs from England to Japan, Fair Shares recruits residents to "deposit" an

hour or more of service, from accounting to ironing. For each hour they deposit, members can "withdraw" other services, like gardening or legal advice.

"It's a real equalizer" for a community, Speck said. "Everyone's time is as valuable as everyone else's."

The plan fits with the area's long-standing communal outlook, she said. People who have lived here all their lives are used to cold weather, a shorter growing season and low incomes. Many don't see themselves as poverty-stricken.

"The families try their best," said Quinto, who serves 12 families with a morning preschool three days a week and monthly home visits. "They work very hard with what they have. Nobody is looking for a hand-out in the Hilltowns."

Rural life teaches kids to survive, said Sean Peck's father, Ron Peck, who shelves heavy merchandise at Best Buy in Crossgates Mall. "Up here you have to work for it."

That's fine with Sean, who said he plans to spend his life in the country. "If you placed me out in the city, I wouldn't really know what to do."