

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

November 2005, Issue 162

Share Session

A very November-ish, post-Daylight Savings Time evening awaited the fifteen who came out for the last meeting of this year: Harriett Rasmussen, Ron Golden, Orlie & Jeanne Bear, Connie Teator, Kathie Williams, Larry and Dot Hesel, Dot Blenis, Stephanie Ingalls, Phyllis Beechert, Mimi Weeks, David and Judy Rundell, and Don Teator.

Harriett read a piece she had created for her Uncle Burdette Griffin's 100th birthday celebration. It is reproduced on the back.

Harriett also related the diary she's been poring over to connect different family events (Tripp).

Phyllis brought in a copy of newspaper she received in the mail called *Old Times*.



This newspaper highlights several events of the last couple hundred years, making them appear to be current newspaper events, and providing for some interesting reading if you like history. It might be hokey for some, but a good way to spend a couple of interesting hours for others.

Phyllis also saved a copy of the Veteran's Day Service flier, a reminder of the social fabric of our community.

Jeanne Bear brought in a fine sketch of "Gus Baker's House," done by June Mead Daniels, and presented to the Local History Group. It needs to be framed, and then shown some place conspicuous enough for others to enjoy. (I'll work on that.) The house is known as the Botsford house, or, as most of call it, the June Clark house! (Who was June Clark anyway?)

Don read a clipping from a recent Sunday *Catskill Daily Mail*, a memoir by James Hubbard about a neighbor whose family had roots in the Round Top and Cairo area. Although not local, the piece was fun to read for the capturing of details of an area not unlike ours. So, I've reproduced the first segment. There have been two others since, and more likely to follow. Some of you have seen it already; if not, you may want to contact the Daily Mail.

Don also displayed a scrapbook of local papers' articles, spanning late 1999 – late 2001. Created by Floyd Tompkins, the scrapbook is a reminder of the major events of that two year period. Scrapbooks are an interesting way of recording history,

and even better if the scrapbook is kept in archival material.

Stephanie brought in a copy of a July 25, 1961 column in the *New York Times*, penned by Brooks Atkinson, about the good quality of the school in Greenville. I suspect I have used this article before in the newsletter, and may include it again some time in the future.

Also reproduced are copies of articles about local places you will recognize — Rensselaerville and Hannacroix — from the

Times Union. Another piece, perhaps a little dated, is an editorial by a Middleburgh resident writing about Oak Hill

The next issue will be the annual issue. If I don't see or hear from you before the holidays, have a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Take care,



Burdette Griffin The Firsts in His Life

1. He was the **First** son of Burdette & Rhue (Evans) Griffin – born October 25, 1905.
2. He already had three sisters older than he but the **First** time he had a baby sister or brother was when Myra Griffin was born December 30, 1906. He was 14 months old.
3. **First** time he experienced a loss was when his sister, Mabel, who was only 21 months older than he, died on April 7, 1911 at seven years of age. he was 5 ½ years old and now had four siblings younger than he.
4. **First** became an uncle when Betty (Abrams) was born on October 9, 1923. He would be 18 years old in 16 days.
5. **First** became a husband on December 25, 1927 hen he married Evangline Snyder. He was 22 years old.
6. **First** became a father when Ed Griffin was born November 6, 1928. He was 23 years old.
7. **First** became a Grandfather when Darcy Griffin was born on October 31, 1950. He was 45 years old.
8. **First** became a Great-Grandfather when Vangie Corriea was born on September 12, 1971. he was 66 years old.
9. **First** became a Great-Great-Grandfather when Alexandria VanAuken was born March 17, 1994. He was 89 yeas old.
10. Reaching 100 years of age is a great big **First** and on this year he got his fourth great-great-grandchild when Samuel Janes VanAuken was born on September 21, 2005.

NEIGHBORHOODS

Rensselaerville: A charming community

By **FRANCES INGRAHAM HEINS**
Staff writer

To live in one of Albany County's rural hill towns, you need a good set of brakes on your vehicle and a love of peace and quiet. The residents of Rensselaerville certainly have the later, if not the former.

Surrounded by bucolic hills, Rensselaerville is a charming hamlet of about 80 homes, many of which are pristine white Colonials lining the sidewalks of Main Street. Larger and grander Greek Revival homes are set back on large, treed lots fronted with stone walls or wooden fences.

"Many of the homes are second homes, and we've seen an even greater increase since 9/11," said Bill Bensen, who moved to the hamlet with his wife, Sue, in 1986

and opened the Palmer House restaurant at the site of a small market. "Second-home owners are also spending more time here.

"A number of people who grew up here and moved away for college or work, come back to live, because this is such a unique kind of place, where residents are proud of the hamlet, its architecture and history," said Bensen.

Bensen added that a number of residents who worked in the restaurant for him when they were younger wanted to stay in the area and are responsible for a number of starter homes that have cropped up around the immediate hamlet.

The hamlet of Rensselaerville in the town of the same name, is located in the southwest corner of Albany County in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains.

Less than 30 miles from downtown Albany, the hamlet can be reached from Albany by going straight out New Scotland Avenue (Route 85) or Delaware Avenue (Route 443) through Clarksville to Route 85. Rensselaerville also can be reached from the state Thruway from the exit for Catskill, Cox-sackie or Selkirk.

Only 2 1/2 hours from New York City, the privacy of Rensselaerville is a magnet community for professional photographers, artists and authors. Its most notable residents are Andy Rooney of "60 Minutes" and cookbook author and food writer Molly O'Neill.

Beyond the Rensselaerville Institute, which is known as "the think tank with muddy boots," there is a library, playground, post office, Hill Top Cafe, historical

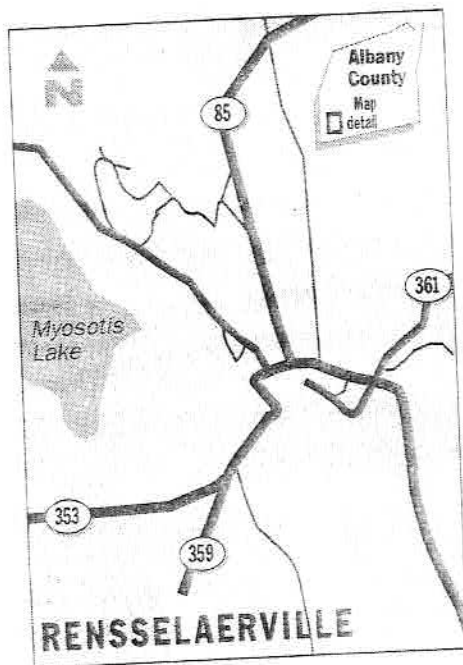
society, an art gallery, two churches, a community center, several B&Bs and several cottage industries. Art shows are also held at various venues in the hamlet.

Year-round residents are either self-employed, work in or around the hamlet or commute to Albany.

James Robert Lansing has lived in the hamlet since 1934 and, through the years, he has served as the justice of the peace and town supervisor.

"Rensselaerville is a private, reserved kind of place," says Lansing. "I wish we had a few more conveniences, from a few more places to eat and artisan shops to a gas station. Years ago, there used to be three gas stations here in the hamlet."

Sharon Costello Arrighi and her husband, John, who have lived in the region for 20 years and in the hamlet for more than a year, says she values the hamlet for its physical beauty and the Edmund Niles Huyck Preserve, which encom-



At a glance

- **Real estate values:** \$100,000 to \$400,000.
- **Schools:** Scott M. Ellis Elementary in Greenville and Greenville Middle-Senior High School.
- **Taxes:** Properties are assessed at 83 percent of the value. Residents pay \$11.93 per \$1,000 for town and county, \$26.0045 per \$1,000 for school and \$0.0704 per \$1,000 for library. A home worth \$200,000 would be taxed at \$166,000 resulting in annual taxes of about \$6,300.

passes almost 2,000 acres, including the Rensselaerville Falls, Lake Myosotis and Lincoln Pond.

"The hamlet is set away from everything," says Costello Arrighi, a fiber artist and owner of black Sheep Designs. "People don't

or are very lost. I also like the fact that you can walk down the street and see people you know."

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Burg splits over historic preservation

Oak Hill is a little burg in the town of Durham in Greene County. "If you blink, you'll miss it," says Assistant Town Clerk Patti Fetty.



**JON
FACKLER**

But if you don't blink, it's a charming place. Kids raking leaves in the fall, or sledding in the winter, look up and wave to you. There's still a coffee shop in what used to be the old general store. In many respects, Oak Hill is

a step back in time.

But how many more steps back should it take? Should Oak Hill's old houses be protected by a historic district law? According to Durham Town Supervisor Gary Hulbert, people have been lining up on both sides of the issue since last fall. The rancor is serious enough that the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation pulled back from Oak Hill's historic district application process as the chill of winter was setting in.

Historic district laws can be fairly breathtaking. A community elects to be governed by a set of laws covering groups of old houses. Usually, these laws list what property owners can — and can't — do with their houses, even with their outbuildings. European countries have had such laws for generations, but they are relatively new here. (New York's began in the early 1970s, when Schenectady's Stockade area was designated.) New York's historic district law is comparatively mild, but some local laws are borderline harsh. And the state's participation isn't necessary for a community to put a home-grown law in place.

The most extreme laws dictate the paint colors a homeowner may use, or indicate what a new garage must look like. Supporters feel these laws are needed to help keep old houses intact and to main-

tain the "look" of a neighborhood.

Maybe the wildest freelance historic district project involved a bequest to a little New England town. In 1972, New York investment banker Dean Mathey willed \$16 million to Grafton, Vt., if it would restore the town to what he remembered when he was a young man with a vacation house there. Everybody thought this was a great deal. It brought Grafton the equivalent of \$40,000 for each man, woman and child in town. They jumped at the money like a bunch of trout jumping at a fresh hatch of flies.

Before long, the trout were not happy. The restorations priced some houses out of reach of the locals, and these ended up being sold to rich people from New York and Connecticut. Residents were upset by the publicity, which included front-page coverage in *The Wall Street Journal*. Some residents started to feel foolish over the whole deal. Others felt they had been snookered by a dead man.

Truth be told, I'm more comfortable without historic district laws than with them — with an environment where individuals take care of their own houses, without their neighbors breathing down their necks. Law or no law, they'll have to take care of their places anyway. Certainly, no fairy godmother is going to fork over grant money to help them. This taking care will often be a costly, tedious endeavor.

Of course, owners can still apply to get their houses listed in the National Register of Historic Places, as some Oak Hill residents are doing.

But if you're determined to write hard-edged local laws governing what you and your neighbors can and cannot do with their old houses, then a historic district law may be your ticket. It's just not mine.

Whoever wins the battle of Oak Hill, getting there will be painful and unsettling for both sides. You're fighting with your neighbors. And the power balance can shift quickly in small towns. Even one addition to a side can make a big difference.

Is this already happening? As one opponent of historic district laws told me, "It's a different town now."

Jon Fackler owns an 1840 Greek Revival house in Middletown. His e-mail address is jfackler@nycap.ny.com.

By James Hubbard

Old river towns in the mid-Hudson Valley have one thing in common: The breath-taking view to the west of the Catskill Mountains.

Near the northern end of this picturesque range is the village of Cairo. Leading out of the village and down the valley is what once was a small farm-to-market road, state Route 32. Traveling south on this road, one comes to tiny Lawrenceville where a small country road crosses the highway. (It used to be gravel.) A signpost there reads Hearts Content Road. Turn right and almost immediately you cross over the roadbed of the old Catskill Mountain Railway, now only a small rise.

If you pause to admire the view, the heights of the Catskills rise before you in majestic abruptness. Directly in front of you is Blackhead Mountain, tallest of that undulating range of natural battlements and embrasures that slopes away to the south. In the foreground and running alongside the road, there used to be a hay field. It was there for a long time.

When the railroad was still running, the owners of the field would sometimes rise up in alarm as sparks from the locomotive would set fire to it. Then quick action and wet gunny sacks were called for.

Just on the far edge of the field there stood a low, one story farmhouse, weath-

ered an abiding silvery gray from years of exposure. The roof sloped down to cover the front porch and an outside staircase to the second floor loft. A stone lined wall stood off to the side, straddled by supports for the long pole of the well sweep. A bucket hung from one end directly over the well opening. A large stone attached to the other end acted as a counterweight so the bucket could easily be raised and lowered.

On a grassy mound behind the house was the family burial ground — the last resting place for members of the Timmerman family, early pioneers of the valley. One row of stones all has the same death date, the result of an unexpected visit by unfriendly Indians.

Between the house and the road stood another old-timer — a sturdy timber-framed barn with a hay mow above and stalls below, home to a couple of cows and old Kaiser, the horse. A cow pasture behind the barn extended for some distance, ending at a stream that runs down the valley and borders the farm. Tall cottonwoods and alders rose in the stream bed amid a low growth of wild cherry trees.

Beyond the farm, the little red dirt road wound through the valley between tall Blackhead and little Round Top and on to the hamlets of Round Top and Purling. Sometime before 1900, my mother's family bought property along the stream a

few miles beyond the Timmerman farm. Here the upper valley had never been cleared, and a thick pine forest covered most of the slopes.

On a low bluff overlooking a waterfall and pool, they built a summer home. It was always called "Heart's Content Camp" or just "The Camp."

When my mother was a young girl living in Catskill, she spent many summer days there, often by herself. My mother's name was Rose Majilton, but everybody called her Midge. She would take a horse from her father's livery stable on lower Main Street and ride out to camp. Usually she stopped at the farm to water her horse, have a drink from the well and chat with Dennis and Celia Timmerman. They became lifelong friends. Den and Celie were the last ones living on the farm the family homesteaded before the Revolution.

My own memories of the Timmermans are sharply divided into those of my childhood before World War II and those following a three-year stint in the Marines. As a youngster, before the war, I knew them as most children know their parents' friends — as slightly remote people to be observed with varying degrees of curiosity. The grown-up conversation flowed over our heads and meant very little to us.

We were most anxious to get to camp. There the smell of sun-roasted pine nee-

dles and the sound of the roaring waterfall filled an enchanted playground. So many rocks to hide behind. So many woody paths to tread. A place to fight bears and ambush Indians. The stop at the farm was an unwelcome delay.

There was, however, one story about the farm that really captured our imaginations. It was set during the French and Indian Wars. Raiding parties from Canada had attacked and burned several farms in the valley, but the Timmermans had fought them off. Staring at the house, we saw it all — the painted faces, the wild war whoops, the guns blazing from every window as the family fought off the frenzied war party.

I have only brief memories of Den and Celie from that time. Once Den was out by the road when Mom came by, the back seat packed with us four kids. It was during the early days of the war, before Pearl Harbor. The papers were full of Blitzkrieg, of German victories and Allied defeats. It was all "grown-up" talk as Den leaned in the car window. At the end, though, his voice rose and he finished by saying, "Yep, us Germans sure is bulldogs!"

I could sense the pride in his voice, and I could see the bulldog in his firm jaw. It made an instant picture in my mind, maybe the clearest I had of Den before the war.

As Mom drove off, Den shouted,

"Look out for bootleggers."

Just past the farm, the road rises then dips down into a hollow with a sharp turn at the bottom. Trees hid anything coming the other way. On one of our many trips to camp, we had just left Den along the road and were headed down the hollow, when an old Model T Ford burst from the woods. It was an open touring car, the roof long gone. Both cars jammed on the brakes with 10 feet between us. The lone driver rose in his seat, looked over his shoulder into the back seat and gave a very anguished shout. He knelt on the seat, his back to us, arms waving as he stared down despondently.

It seems several gallon jugs of moonshine has smashed, and corn whiskey was running through the cracks in the floor boards and onto the road.

Den came up to see what had happened.

"Hey, Stuart. What's up?"

Stuart was too broken hearted to be angry. Words failed him as he stared at the lady driver and the car full of kids. Den waved my mother on and said, "I'll take care of this."

We edged around the aromatic Ford and were on our way. From that time on the spot was "Bootlegger's Bend" for Mom and Dad. What Stuart called it was anybody's guess.

To be continued next week...

10-23-65

CPM

Tales of the Hills: Remembering Dan Timmerman, Part I

Hannacroix: Quiet hamlet of scenic fields

By **FRANCES INGRAM HEINS**
Staff writer
A-23 05
ATU

A gentle tinkling of bells can be heard in the air. But at 3 p.m., they are not coming from a church.

The soft melodic chimes are emanating from the necks of Alma Flegel's Dutch Belted Galloway cows as they saunter through the pasture to their barn for their nightly grain and bedding.

It's quiet in the hamlet of Hannacroix, around the intersection of Route 9W and routes 51 and 144 in the Greene County town of New Baltimore. This wooded bedroom community of mostly paved and dirt roads is about halfway between the villages of Ravena and Cossackie, west of the Thruway and Hudson River.

Around the corner and up another hill

from Flegel's is the bucolic Van Slyke farm, settled in the first half of the 1700s.

"It was all agricultural here in the town, but now it's mainly residential," says Alma Flegel, who lives on the family farm purchased by her parents in 1950, when they moved up from New York City. She shares the houses on the farm with her brother Ted and sister Karla.

"The Van Slyke farm is the last dairy farm in the town. The few farms that are left mainly grow hay, which is sold locally and to New York and Long Island for carriage horses and riding stables," Flegel says.

The Flegel farm dates to 1840, with the last renovation added in 1911.

Several of the homes in the hamlet have been added onto over the years, while others have slowly been built in the past 50

years. Beyond the large farms, individual homes are spread out, as zoning in the town calls for no less than 2-acre parcels.

The hamlet has many tree-lined roads and scenic fields. From a hilltop on the Van Slyke farm, you can see clear across the Hudson River to the water tower in the village of Valatie. Driving around, however, you also can see many houses with "for sale" signs.

And as farms come on the market, the uncertainty over plans for vast tracts of land is worrying buyers.

"We are in the process of updating our comprehensive plan for the town," says David Louis, town supervisor. "We will continue to be very sensitive as to how developing takes place and the concerns of

Please see **HANNACROIX H3** ▶

HANNACROIX: Vast tracts of land and zoning concerns for future

▼ **CONTINUED FROM H1**
residents. Retaining the rural character of the town is important, which is why people move here."

Flegel says this is a friendly community where people help each other.

However, wildlife helps itself, with many turkeys and coyotes.

Flegel, a retired research technician in analytical chemistry, says, "Mr. Van Slyke's nephew saw a mountain lion chase a deer into his pond two years ago.

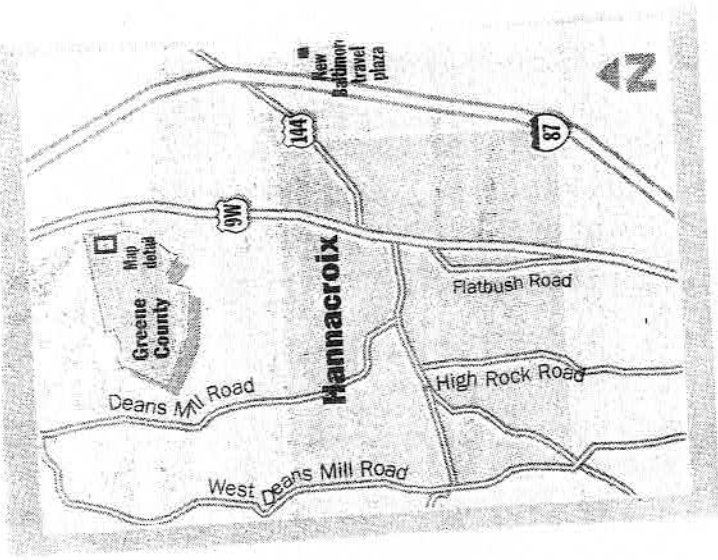
"Right now, several of us are being entertained by barred owls having a hooting conference day

more was created in 1811, the area was thriving with mills, dairy and fruit farms, ice harvesting and shipbuilding and repair.

Today, residents have an easy commute to jobs in Albany, CSX Rail and General Electric in Selkirk, the Cossackie Correctional Facility to the south, or local businesses from Ravena to Catskill.

Hannacroix, about 15 minutes from Albany, is easily reached from Thruway Exit 21B.

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At a glance

- **Approximate housing values:** \$112,000 to \$309,000
- **Schools:** Children attend Cossackie Elementary School for K-grade 4, Cossackie-Athens Middle School for grades 5-8 and Cossackie-Athens Senior High School for 9-12.
- **Taxes:** The town of New Baltimore is assessed at 87 percent of full value. Residents pay a rate of \$5.45 per \$1,000 of the assessed value for county, \$5.11 per \$1,000 of the assessed value for town and \$21.54 per \$1,000 of the assessed value for school. Taxes on a house assessed at \$155,000 would be approximately \$4,975.