Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

August 2006, Issue 168

Share Session

A warm-ish evening (the first in a week, but after a torrid July, no one was complaining) that needed a little air conditioning greeted August's share session: Harriett Rasmussen, Dot Blenis, Ron Golden, Carol Bryant, Mimi Weeks, Stephanie Ingalls, Walter Ingalls, Krista Haushalter, and Don Teator.

Krista and Walter had something large and something wrapped in plastic, which turned out to a donation of an enlarged reproduction of Ingalls' deeds mentioned a few meetings ago. When Don asked if either could summarize what the deeds were, Harriett just happened to have a copy of Ray Beecher's recent write-up of the deeds. These deeds noted James, Joseph and Jacob Ingalls, all in the Westerlo, Lambs Corners, and Norton Hill area in the early 1790s. One trivia piece was a reference to their residence of Freehold, Albany County which, at first glance, seems contradictory. However, our collective memory righted that "wrong" because Greene County was formed in 1800, and this area was Albany County. Freehold was also the name of the town that covered this area at that time.

In 1803, Greenfield is formed, its name changed to Freehold in 1808, and a year later to Greenville. So, the current day Freehold, a tiny hamlet on the southern edge of the Town of Greenville often has a identity crisis if someone is looking for information about Freehold in the very late 1700s and very early 1800s.

Thank you, Walter and Krista, for your presentation.

Carol offered a copy of the Summer 1990 edition of the Greene County Historical Journal, the one whose cover article (Ray Beecher author) gave a history of Greenville, in preparation for the Greene County Home Tour that year. Don noted a few selections from the article: the early settlers, Lottsania (a possible name for the town), turnpikes, the new school building in 1906, the new telephone, a possible trolley, and the first car in town. It's a very worthy history, noting that Ray had only six pages in which to cram so much information. It's already another piece in our Greenville reference list that is a must-read.

Don noted the 30th anniversary 2006 Greene County Home Tour in Catskill, another enjoyable viewing of houses.

One of the items picked up on the tour was a Self Guided Walking Tour of Main Street, a double-long, foldout sheet of some of the historical sites in Catskill. It's a good idea for a Greenville project.

Don bought a copy of "Village: A Bicentennial Celebration of the Village of Catskill," edited by Richard Philp of Catskill, and whose house was on the tour. It is another worthy publication that will become a reference to keep.

A genealogical twist, that Harriett is a key player in, started with a request for information about Richard E. Taylor. Unfortunately, there were two well-known Richard E. Taylors in Greenville, and Harriett has more information about the one who kept the diary of his life when he lived on Sunset Road, Norton Hill, and Wright Street, Freehold. Without fail, the person

who wants information about the diary-keeper finds out there is no connection.

Except this time! The info-seeker turns out to be a grandson of Richard, and a son of Howard, who, at age 19, leaves the area for the west, an event that Richard notes acerbically in his diary, and hardly ever mentions his son again in his diary. So many questions begged to be answered but there were only dead-ends. Harriett received copies of three letters from Howard to his youngest sister, depicting a tough life in Wisconsin. Also, Harriett was aware that various branches of the family seemed to have extra children in one census. At some point, Howard's wife dies, leaving young children behind, and some arrangement is made for the family back East to take care of them. I'm sure there will be more info as Harriett continues her correspondence.

Other notes included:
A reminder about us writing our memories. Don reminded the group about Thelma Bell's "Reflections" that was written several years ago, with no long chapters, just details about memories written in subsections.

Don has had a couple of requests for information about the Canajoharie – Catskill Railroad that existed in the 1830's. Vernon Haskins wrote a booklet in 1967, and the Durham Center Museum had a center table display about the railroad.

Although not present, Phyllis Beechert passed along two photographs of the Morfesi barn being razed in preparation of the Schembri housing project adjoining her property.

Don brought in one article about the investigation into the alleged harassment charges in Freehold.

Don has had a couple of requests of the folk artist Mary Ann Willson, dug out a couple of older articles about the topic, and presented Carolyn Bennett's recent article in The Catskill Guide. (The article is reproduced in this newsletter.) This is one of those apparently minor stories that, in reality, is one of the handful of national links to Greenville.

A recent fourth grade local history project, led by teacher Christine Evola, resulted in Christine leaving a copy of the buildings in Greenville that have applied for or have been granted National Register status in NYS. The ones I knew had been accepted were the Botsford House, the Prevost Manor, and the Presbyterian Church complex (church, library, Legion Hall). References were made to a store on the corner on Rt 67 and Hempstead Lane, as well as farms in the King family on King Hill, and also the King Cemetery, and I will have to investigate further about their status.

Rumors about GCS celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2007 are circulating. It could be a big event, so let's keep an eye out for that.

Also in the newsletter is reproduced an article about the closing of the Game Farm and another article (NY Daily News) about Legs Diamond (thank you to Nick DiBrino for sharing this one).

The next meeting is September 11th. We'll save room for Harriett's continuation of the Howard Taylor story, just in case. And, then, let's start a "what's not there anymore" program. Bring a list, mental or physical, of five to ten items that just aren't there anymore. The items can be building or events or ideas, of great or small import. Try to think of a couple that you suspect would not be on anybody else's list. We'll probably discuss what importance, if any, the "disappearance" has.

Take care,

GREENE COUNTY FOLK ARTIST MARY ANN WILLSON

A Myth Sleeping in a Myth

By Carolyn Bennett

Left to right, all paintings by Mary Ann Willson:
"Young Woman Wearing a Turban," scene from "The Prodigal Son," "Marimaid"

She 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 Ann Willson unless you are interested in early American primitives. Art historians have long regarded Willson as one of the earliest, most original folk painters discovered to date. Her discovery can be credited to the Harry Stone Gallery of New York City, which in 1941 came across a portfolio of 20 primitive 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 Catskill Mountains. Rambling through Greenville, De Lisser probably learned of Willson's story from Theodore Prevost, grandson of Augustine Prevost, original patentee of the westernmost 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 uncompromising originality. (Theodore was artist Thomas Cole's son and owner of the two Willson watercolors used by De Lisser in his book.)

Let's let De Lisser tell 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 wildflowers and terns, and in painting watercolor pictures which they sold among the neighboring settlers, for small sums, the highest price being asked was twenty-five cents. These paintings...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 Lisser 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 reads: "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 of 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 no favors for my friends (for 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, provost settled down in 1786 to marry Anna Bogardus, his second wife, the daughter of a Catskill merchant, and to develop his Greenville lands.

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.

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 at 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, D.C. "Marimaid," a 13- x 15 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 Leave 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.

"Marimaid" 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 a 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 ambuscade." I wonder if this is how Willson felt as she created one colorful "picter" 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 also feel as if she were an outsider in 19th-century America? Had she, like her Prodigal, been banished for her "sins" from her English home (assuming she was born in England), and did the young folk artist yet dream, then, of a possible home-coming 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 never heard of again.

DIAMOND IN THE CATSKILLS ROUGH

7-30-06
NY
DN

ACRA, N.Y. — They say Legs Diamond came to this hamlet in the northern lap of the Catskills for the cool mountain air, the pure water and the abundant apples.

BY DAVID J. KRAJICEK
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

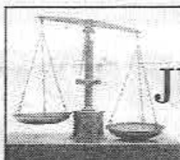
Sure, the clean air was swell.

But the water and the fruit made a very potable hooch — applejack, the cheap brandy that quenched thirsts from Lake George to Coney Island during Prohibition.

It's been more than 75 years since the slender Irish-American gangster decamped to Acra from New York, where he had life-threatening issues with gangland cronies.

He spent most of three years here, from 1929 to 1931, before finally succumbing to an overdose of gunshot ventilation in Albany.

But all these years later, the memory of Diamond clings to sleepy Acra like the morning dew. And this Irish Alps corner of the Catskills has kept his secrets well.



THE JUSTICE STORY

"Only recently have people felt comfortable in coming forward to say that their parents or grandparents worked with Jack Diamond," said Robert Uzzilia, the Cairo town historian. "He was a kind of anti-hero . . . But at the time no one wanted to admit they were assisting a gangster."

Gang war raged

Diamond knew the region through summer visits to Guthrie's, a saloon on Green Lake near Catskill, and the Gypsy Point House in nearby Leeds.

In 1929, as a gang war raged in New York, he turned up at the Acra boardinghouse of Margaret and William Kelly.

Diamond used the alias Jack Schiffer, but everyone here knew his mug from the newspapers.

"Grandma considered him to be one of the nicest people she'd ever met," said Robert Cummings, 62, Margaret Kelly's grandson. She developed a cordial relationship with Diamond, supplying him with Irish soda bread that he said reminded him of his childhood in Philadelphia.

Diamond rented a small group of houses on Route 23, the old Mohican Trail, at the base of a 1,000-foot winding climb up the mountain to Windham, now a ski village. Diamond's house stands today, opposite the Cairo-Durham Elks Lodge.

He brought money to this rural outpost and hired local men during the Great Depression. According to legend, he paid off the mortgage of a farm that was about to go under, helped build St. Edmund's Chapel in Acra, and ordered Thanksgiving groceries from the Cairo A&P for needy families.

"He was like God," said Cummings, "but he didn't want recognition. He didn't need to make an impression on anyone."

Cummings keeps a 5-gallon copper still at his home in Acra, a miniature memento of the 150-gallon applejack boilers that sprouted like forest mushrooms after Diamond arrived.

Many Greene County residents were resolutely "wet." Brandy provided spare cash for farmers with leftover apples, and they resented Prohibition.

Then as now, summer guests from the city helped keep the mountain economy afloat. Vacationers beat a path up the Storm King Highway or aboard the Hudson River Day Line.

Many expected cooling libations when they got to the Catskills, and the wide-open dance halls that lined the Mohican Trail from Cairo to East Windham did their best to serve guests what they wanted, the 18th Amendment be damned.

Legs Diamond was proprietor of countless stills in mountain nooks and cloves. Many boiled nonstop, serviced by local men but supervised by Diamond's Greene County aide-de-crime, Paul Quatrocchi.

Uzzilia, the local historian, said it is impossible to estimate just how much applejack flowed out of Acra.

But Diamond kept a fleet of bootlegging trucks busy with backroad midnight runs north to Albany and south to Kingston and New York. His operation was a key cog in the syndicate that provided booze up and down the East Coast.

Local lawmen and the state police took an ax to one of Diamond's stills now and again, often under pressure from the proper ladies of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

Chicken and Tommy guns

But Diamond seemed to have a winking relationship with the law.

He lived a fairly public life in the mountains, although he traveled with a Tommy gun entourage.

He was a regular for chicken dinner at the Traveler's Rest on Main St. in Cairo, and he often turned up — sometimes with luminary pals like hulking prizefighter Primo Carnera — at Sherman's Dance Hall in East Windham or the Ritz outside Cairo.

But his home base was Cairo's Aratoga Inn. He used the joint as a liquor depot, and every schoolboy in the area knew you could get a glimpse of Legs Diamond if you waited there long enough.

Mugs got wise to the same idea, and on April 27, 1931, a carload of men opened fire on Diamond outside the Aratoga. He survived the shooting — his fourth — despite being hit with nearly 100 shotgun pellets.

He spent a month in the hospital, then declared himself bulletproof.

His gangland foe, Dutch Schultz, is said to have remarked, "Ain't there nobody what can shoot this guy so he don't bounce back?"

Diamond had cultivated a ledger's worth of enemies and a list of underworld allies that wouldn't fill a cocktail napkin. To boot, he was charged with bootlegging and kidnapping after the Aratoga ambush.

A week before Christmas 1931, Diamond was staying on Dove St. in Albany during his kidnapping trial. He was acquitted on Dec. 17 and celebrated by painting the town red.

But before dawn the next morning, the grim reaper caught up with him. Diamond was shot in the head by parties unknown who had stolen into his room.

Many have been fingered in the murder — from Schultz to local hoodlums to the Albany police and political boss Dan O'Connell.

But no killer was ever brought to justice.

There were more newsmen than mourners on hand when John T. Diamond was lowered into a grave at Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Queens.

But somewhere in the Catskills woods, a group of grateful men stood around an applejack still and doffed their caps to the man who had become Acra's favorite adopted son.

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Farm's exit a furry loss felt by all

ATU 8.8.06

Our Capital Region without a Catskill Game Farm is hard to imagine; it's been so much part of us.

For about 40 years of its 73-year existence — from the mid-1950s to the mid-'90s — there was scarcely a family among us with or without young children who didn't make the annual trek between spring and fall to the game farm between Cairo and Palenville.

FRED LeBRUN
COMMENTARY

Mostly so the kids, or childlike among us, could cuddle up to the baby deer and the other nursery animals.

It was hot, it was smelly and it wasn't cheap, but it was family fun before family fun had to be rated to qualify.

But now we're told it's over. No more baby llamas trying to pick your pockets, or enigmatic giraffes staring way down at the endless passersby coming in the main gate. This will be the last season. In mid-October, the equipment will be auctioned and so will all those exotic animals.

And with it, the late Roland Lindemann's dream, his lifelong obsession, will drift away to nothing.

"I'm tired of working this hard," Roland's daughter Kathie told a reporter. Kathie and her husband, Jurgen, bought the game farm from her parents decades ago. Who can blame her; she just turned 65 and has been working the farm for 52 years.

Times change, tastes change, and so do circumstances. In the 1960s, 400,000 people visited the Catskill Game Farm. Now it is down to 100,000 a year. Jurgen and Kathie had a bitter divorce in the 1990s. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Prices went up, yet the place became increasingly shopworn and chintzy because there still wasn't enough coming in to buff it up. Consequently, fewer customers came through the door.

Roland Lindemann arrived in New York from Germany when he was 17, studied finance and made a killing in banking just before the Great Depression. He hated banking, but he loved animals and harboring them.

The son of a zoology professor at the University of Berlin, he put $5.5 million of his own money into creating a personal zoo on his Catskills estate between 1933 and 1940. He later opened it to the public because upkeep and acquisition costs were astronomical, even for a millionaire.

Even at that, in a candid moment, Lindemann admitted that running the largest privately owned zoo in the East was not a money-making venture. Although the successful breeding of exotic animals in captivity, of which he was a pioneer in this country, was lucrative. He sold the offspring to other zoos and attractions.

As early as 1952, Roland Lindemann was threatening to shut down the game farm because of escalating insurance and feed costs. Ultimately, his daughter cited the same reasons for actually pulling the plug a half century later.

Still, there are many warm memories associated with family outings to the farm for those of us who were annual customers. And Lindemann lived his dream to the day he died. He observed years ago that if the farm didn't survive, it still had accomplished a great deal. The introduction of petting and nursery zoos was largely his idea, and was later copied by bigger zoos everywhere. The farm was also instrumental in helping save several endangered species, particularly the Russian wild horse, Przewalski's horse.

Soon, all this slips into the past tense, though. The Catskill Game Farm joins the Albany Senators, the upstairs cafeteria at the Montgomery Ward building in Menands, sitting on Santa's knee at the North Pole and a host of others you can fill in yourself.

Yesterday's news, when news was gentler, kinder, and so was life.

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