

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

July 2008, Issue 187

Lost Catskill — Ted Hilscher

Columbus Day Weekend, sometimes a cool and wet weekend, instead came in this year as one of those spectacular mid-October weekends. Maybe, we can freeze the calendar and have weather like this all year. OK, back to reality.

I probably forgot someone but it was crowded, and I was somewhat busy, so I'll apologize now. Remind me if you were at the meeting and not mentioned. Attending were: Dot Blenis, Larry & Dot Hesel, Connie Teator, Phyllis Beechert, Bob & Marie Shaw, Walter Ingalls, Christine Mickelsen, Allyn and Mary Shaw, David & Judy Rundell, Stephanie Ingalls, Edna Huffman (from Hawaii!), David and Harriet Gumpert, Lori Blair, Jeannette Rose, Don Teator, and another almost fifteen from outside the community. And, of course, Ted Hilscher. About 35 for a final count!

We did our usual introductions, which took a bit longer than usual but it was still interesting to see where people came from. I think all the valley towns (Greene County, that is) were represented.

Don and Ted noted Ray Beecher's passing, his impact on local history, his time in Greenville, etc. A copy of the obituary comes later.

Don introduced Ted, who has been one of our program guests a time or two before. Ted owns an old farmhouse and barn in New Baltimore, works in Catskill, has renovated (still working on it, he says) the old county courthouse as his office, diligently volunteers for the Greene County Historical So-

ciety, and shares his local history interests openly with the community (which led him to Greenville this evening).

And, so, Ted started his slide show — Lost Catskill, starting at the Hudson River and the Point, and working his way up Main Street and its alleyways, and then Bridge Street and West Main Street, and finally onto 9W. The slides duplicated photos from the 1800s but most showed Catskill at early 20th century and especially the 1960s. Ted noted the sleuthing it took to identify the location of some buildings and to document the changes in chronological order. Especially noted was the influence of the tourist trade, the old hotels (and the parking lots they became), and we enjoyed the people stories along the way. In the audience this evening were a couple of Catskill residents who had spent much time collecting history and info, bringing along a big notebook of documents, photographs, and notes.

Most of us are familiar with Catskill, and Ted's slide show not only acquainted us with Catskill's history just beyond the reach of our living memory but also refreshed what we thought we knew. Ted, thank you for one of the Greenville Local History Group's highlights of the year!

The calendars were ready, just in the nick in time. (Actually, the printer did a rush job for half the order so we'd have them for the evening.) The 2009 calendar, I hear (and think) looks excellent, and we'll spend more time analyzing and looking at it at next month's share session. They are available at

Bryant's (courtesy desk) and at the library. Thank them for carrying the calendar, if you have a chance.

A big thank you goes to Phyllis for making sure we had refreshments for the evening. I saw several dozen cookies (I think I sampled a half-dozen!), and Phyllis also prepared for coffee and hot water. Stephanie and Christine also contributed, and thank you.

Next month will be our last meeting of the year, and it will be a share session. Here are some things to think about. I will start putting together a calendar for 2010, just in case there is a sponsor. I will use some of the suggestions for photos.

I'd like to re-start the recognition of community members, if we can find room. Our list of recognitions (living) have been: Stanley Maltzman (1996), Orloff & Jeanne Bear (1997), Chris McDonald (1998), Leland & Curt Cunningham (1999), Ossie & Bunny Gundersen (2000), Fred & Leona Flack (2001), Harry & Cris Ketcham (2002), George Story (2005), and the Nicholzen family (2005).

Our list of deceased recognitions have been: Al Bryant, Sr (1999), Dr. Bott (1999), John Ver Planck (1999), Harry Ketcham (2000), Rev. Chas. Rice (2000), Gerald Ingalls (2000), Edna Ingalls (2001), Scott Ellis (2001), Rev. Richard Clark (2001), Capt. Leslie Gumpport (2002), William Vaughn (2002), and Arnold Nicholzen (2002),

So, who do you recommend for the next ones, if we have space? I'll share the last list (of potential selections) we had but feel free to suggest additions. (The sponsor page is where we traditionally put these recognitions, so we may need to be creative to make it happen.)

Battini, Dave
Baumann, Ron
Baumann, Tom & Joann
Becker, Lou & Betty
Bryant/family
Campbell, Ed & Ronnie
Carney, Tom
Elsbree, Dave & Pat
Heisinger, Bob & Mary
Ingalls, Walt
Macko, Andy
Quackenbush family (or individuals)
Schreiber, Rich & Carol
Tiberi, Frank
VonAtzingen, Bill
Williams, Kathie

We also could continue our recognitions of those deceased. I will need some names for that, if we decide that to go that route.

Also, I like to recognize current efforts to make Greenville a better place and a more historically minded place, whether through renovation of house or a community effort. (My own nominee would be the former Phil Ellis house on which Aileen and husband have worked so diligently.) Any other nominations?

Bring ideas to the meeting, or contact me by mail or email.

On a side note, this year closes soon, and with it I realize that my twentieth year as historian is drawing to a close. My introduction to Frank Tiberi (town supervisor, at the time) and Phil Ellis (shooter of pictures of anything that moved) seems like just a short time ago. With your help, we have kept pieces of our history alive.

Take care,



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2008

Obituaries

Raymond V. Beecher

*Teacher, historian
and author*

COXSACKIE — Raymond V. Beecher, 91, of Cocksackie, died at his residence Oct. 9, 2008.

Raymond was born in New York City, March 8, 1917, and was the son of the late Maude R. (Baxter) and Valentine Beecher.

Besides his parents, Raymond was predeceased by his wife, Catharine S. (Shaffer) Beecher, in 1995, and his sister Gladys Lesson.

Relatives and friends are cordially invited to attend calling hours at the W.C. Brady's Sons Inc. Funeral Home, 97 Mansion St., Cocksackie on Sunday, Oct. 12, 2008 from 2-4 and 6-9 p.m. The Cocksackie Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 10986, of which he was a member, will hold services in his memory Sunday evening at the funeral home at 7.

Funeral services will take place on Monday, Oct. 13, 2008 at 10 a.m. at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 50 William St., Catskill with Father Sutcliffe and the Right Rev. David S. Ball officiating.

Private cremation will take place at the Albany Rural Crematorium in Menands.

Interment of his cremains will take place at a later date in the family plot of the Riverside Cemetery in Cocksackie.

Survivors include his brother Arthur and his wife Gertrude Beecher of Cocksackie; his nieces and nephews Carolyn Fletcher of South Glens Falls, Fred Curtis of Newtonville, Stephen Beecher of Cocksackie, Timothy Beecher of Harrisburg, Pa. and Joel Beecher of Earleton.

Raymond graduated from Greenville Central School and he earned a bachelor of science degree from Hartwick College and master's of science degree from Boston University. Post-graduate at State University of Albany earned additional teaching and administrative certifications. He followed a teaching career, first at Oneonta High School and then as an assistant professor at Hartwick College. In later years after returning to Cocksackie, he was employed at the New York Vocational Institution as guidance supervisor until his retirement.

During World War II Raymond Beecher served in America's armed forces in the U.S. Army, first in the Asiatic-Pacific Theater of Operations where he earned a special commendation and was subsequently in the European Theater of Operations until

the close of the war. He was discharged with the rank of technical sergeant.

Mr. Beecher gave generously of his time and substance to a wide variety of charitable and educational causes. He was a president of the Hartwick College Alumni Association, receiving its highest Meritorious Service Award. He twice served as president of the Greene County Historical Society and more recently as chairman of its board of trustees. He was trustee of Friends of Olana, serving as its treasurer. The Vedder Research Library was of particular interest to him; he filled the unsalaried position of librarian. Several terms of service were given as the official historian of Greene County and the Town of Cocksackie. Local history was of special interest to Mr. Beecher, especially that of Greene County. During the nation's

American Revolution Bicentennial Celebration, he served as chairman of the Greene County American Revolution Bicentennial Committee. Later he coordinated the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the Greene County Courthouse. In 2000 he chaired the county's 200th Birthday Celebration.

Mr. Beecher wrote and published extensively. He was the author of four books, and he established and served as the first editor of the Greene County Historical Journal. His weekly Greene Gleanings column was widely read.

On Aug. 29, 1996, in recognition of a lifetime of scholarly achievement of his alma mater, Hartwick College awarded Raymond Beecher the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. Earlier that year, the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, On-ti-Ora Chapter, presented him with their national Gold Medal of Honor for service to the state of the nation. The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development awarded him the prestigious Alf Evers Award in 2007. He was earlier honored with the first Greene Treasure Award by the Greene County Legislature on April 6, 2002.

Mr. Beecher was single handedly the driving force and benefactor in saving the Cedar Grove — the Thomas Cole House — when it was available for purchase, and shepherded it into the ownership of the Greene County Historical Society in 1998.

Contributions in his memory may be made to the Greene County Historical Society, P.O. Box 44, Cocksackie, N.Y. 12051 or to the Cocksackie VFW Post 10986, Cocksackie, N.Y. 12051.

Greene County man leaves many 'remarkable' legacies

Beecher, 91, assembled impressive archives, pushed for preservation

By **PAUL GRONDAHL**
Staff writer

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COXSACKIE — Greene County historian Raymond Beecher, a prolific author of Catskill history and an ardent preservationist who helped save Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole's house from destruction, died Thursday. He was 91.

His sensibility came from a bygone era and was marked by a stately durability. He lived in a 19th-century mansion along the Hudson, used a black rotary telephone and submitted book manuscripts written in longhand.

"He drove historical preservation in Greene County for more than 50 years in a remarkable way," said Deborah Allen, his publisher at Black Dome Press for the past two decades. Beecher had just completed a history of Greene County river towns, which she hopes to publish in 2009.

Beecher assembled an impressive collection at the Greene County Historical Society in Coxsackie, where he was a guiding force since the 1950s.

"Historians come from all over the world to use that archives, which is pretty remarkable for a rural county," Allen said.

In addition to six books of local history that he wrote or edited, Beecher's most lasting accomplishment was putting up \$100,000 of



PAUL BUCKOWSKI/TIMES UNION ARCHIVE

RAYMOND BEECHER, who died Thursday, spent decades working on Greene County's history. Here he looks over the Hudson River in 1998.

his own money to buy and preserve Cedar Grove, artist Cole's Catskill home.

"He led the charge to save this place and it would not have happened without him. He's been our inspiration," said Elizabeth Jacks, executive director of Cedar Grove, a National Historic Site run under the auspices of the Greene County Historical Society. Jacks and her staff are planning a permanent memorial to Beecher at Cedar Grove and they'll continue to pursue his dream of reconstructing the artist's studio, which was torn down in the 1970s.

Beecher received numerous honors, including a Capital Region Jefferson Award last year and an

honorary doctorate in 1996 from Hartwick College, his alma mater. In 2002, the Greene County Legislature proclaimed Beecher a "Greene County treasure."

Beecher and his late wife had no children.

Calling hours will be 2 to 4 p.m. and 6 to 9 p.m. Sunday at WC Bradys Sons Funeral Home in Coxsackie. The funeral is Monday at St. Luke's Church, Catskill.

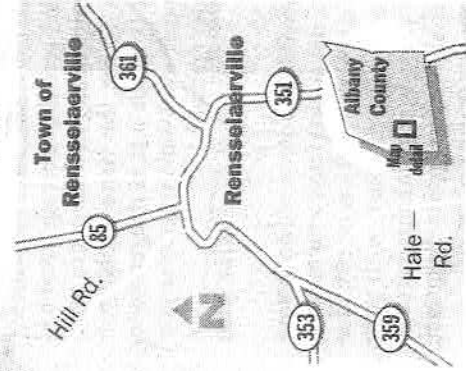
It was Beecher's wish that in lieu of flowers, donations be made in his name to the Greene County Historical Society or the Cole House.

► Paul Grondahl can be reached at 454-5623 or by e-mail at pgrondahl@timesunion.com.

A Spielberg kind of town

Rensselaerville is a community
blessed with residents dedicated
to keeping it special

BY TOM KEYSER
STAFF WRITER



TYSWAN STEWART/TIMES UNION

8.3.08 ATU

If the cameras were going to focus on this hill town, they might start rolling as Edith Kuhar finishes Sunday coffee at the Palmer House Cafe. A resident here since 1942 and vice president of the historical society, she says: "If you don't want to participate in the community, then you shouldn't live in Rensselaerville."

As she speaks, three young women scurry about the restaurant, providing living proof of Kuhar's statement. They're trying to save the Palmer House — the popular meeting place on Main Street that's for sale — by turning it into a community-supported enterprise in which residents buy shares in return for discounted meals.

This unusual arrangement would be unthinkable in many communities, but in Rensselaerville, with its diverse but supportive group of year-round and summer residents, it just might work. Some are artists transplanted from New York City. Others are state workers laboring in Albany. But they share a notion of what their community, their neighborhood, should be.

"This little town has been captured in time," says Cynthia Nicholson, who moved here in 2001 from New York, where she was food editor for "Country Living" magazine, and now conducts cooking classes in her home. "It has no Stewart's. It has no fast-food joints, no streetlight. I think people want to keep it that way, so they have to become involved."

Nestled in hilly southwest Albany County, Rensselaerville resembles a New England village; its dominant landmark is the white Presbyterian Church with its tall steeple. It's so quiet that residents — about 200 year-round,

about 300 during the warm months — turn to look when a car drives by.

But the placid facade belies the determination of many residents to preserve their full, old-fashioned existence. They seem to be forever holding fundraisers to support a local cause. And they have not only come together to save and restore an old church called Conkling Hall as the community center, but also to enrich the village with art, music and entertainment.

"It can get downright confusing, there's so much going on," Nicholson says. "The fire hall might be having a pancake breakfast or barbecue. Then there might be a wildflower walk at the nature preserve. Then there might be an art-gallery opening you don't want to miss, or a concert at Conkling Hall you don't want to miss. And then the Palmer House might be having one of its special dinners."

The Palmer House has anchored the village for 21 years, since its owners moved up from Manhattan. Susan Lenane, who sold computer-consulting services, and her husband, Bill Bensen, an engineer, opened the Palmer House restaurant and tavern and eventually turned it into a "Cheers"-like meeting place where everybody knows your name.

Residents so cherish the holiday parties, themed dinners and memories of special dinners — not to mention the innovative menu that features locally grown food — that they make a point to eat there once a week during the slow winter season, Nicholson says, just to keep it going. Plus, she says, when you're running short on firewood, you're likely to find your supplier eating there, too. The nearest restaurant serving dinner is 12 miles away.

When Lenane and Bensen decided to sell, but couldn't find a buyer, three young people, two of whom grew up in Rensselaerville and all

Please see **RENSELAEVILLE G6** ▶

RENSELAERVILLE: Out here, 'something magical happens'

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of whom had worked at the restaurant, formed a partnership to save it.

"It's too special to let it close," says Jerrine Wyman, 26, who started as a dishwasher there when she was 15.

Wyman and her partners Becca Patel, 24, and Rochelle Rowles, 32, have completed an extensive business plan and are now searching for investors. Lenane and Bensen would likely hold the mortgage and serve as consultants, passing the Palmer House to a new generation.

Lenane believes it will work, she says. After word got out that she and her husband were selling, she says, about six residents quietly offered \$10,000 or more each to help keep it open.

This wouldn't be the first time residents pulled together to save a landmark. Nine years ago, they teamed with the Presbyterian Church to raise about \$150,000 to buy Conkling Hall for a community center. Since then, they've

luncheon. A Labor Day dinner and dance, featuring the local band Captain Squeeze and the Zydeco Moshers, benefits the 2,000-acre Huyck Preserve, home of the spectacular Rensselaerville Falls. A progressive dinner in the fall pays for sheet music for the Village Voices, a local choir.

"I can't imagine leaving here," says Len Prince, a celebrity photographer who moved to Rensselaerville from New York two years ago and is now curator of Way Out art gallery. "There's such a great mix of people, all kinds of people, and they've all ended up here. People go for a ride and drive through Rensselaerville, and something magical happens, something sort of plucks them out of their car. It's kismet, a town of kismet."

"It's a living film," he says. "It's as if Spielberg filmed a movie about a village, a village of very happy people."

► Tom Keyser can be reached at 454-5448 or by e-mail at tkeyser@timesunion.com.

The village of Rensselaerville was a "boomtown" that bust, never burned down, says Ken Storms, a former member of the town Planning Board.

Founded by New Englanders and Revolutionary War veterans in the late 1700s, Rensselaerville by 1870 was a boomtown of water-powered mills on Ten Mile Creek with 25 businesses on Main Street. It went bust when the mills moved closer to Albany. The last one closed in 1947 and now houses the Rensselaerville Historical Society.

Rensselaerville has no business center and few businesses. It's a place to live, not shop.

Founded in 1963, the Rensselaerville Institute is hidden among the trees off Route 85 coming into the village. Dubbed the "think tank with muddy boots" by The Wall Street Journal, it is a nonprofit education center that conducts seminars and advises a diverse collection of clients, including schools, foundations and community organizations.

Among the prominent residents living here at least part of the year are Andy Rooney, writer and commentator on "60 Minutes"; artist Richard Prince; movie director and writer Katherine Dieckmann; writers Molly O'Neill and Dan Hofstadter, and photographers David McCabe, Victor Schragger and Dudley Reed.

"We've got a lot of sort of crazy artists from New York City," says Nicole LaGrone, an 18-year-old resident of Rensselaerville. "They make for an interesting dynamic."

"I like them all. In fact, I like all the people here. But this isn't a great place to be a teenager. After a while, you feel cooped up. You know what they say: It's a great place for newlyweds or the nearly dead, and for raising toddlers."