

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

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Hay Press: Hilscher & Palmer

An early wet and cool June day awaited the audience that filled the extra twenty chairs borrowed from the smaller community room. Paul Augstein, Linda Berger, Frank Potter, Ted Hilscher, Stephanie Ingalls, Jonathan Palmer, Janet Nelson, Ron Teator, Jeff Pellerin, Chuck Heyer, Judy Starr, Tom Nevins, Elaine Nevins, Jake Low, Ed Volmar, Marie & Glenn Hardin, David

Tschinkel, Lew Knott, Jane Masterson & Stewart Wagner, John Earl, John Garofalo & Peter O'Hara, Johanna & Robert Titus, Flip Flach, Tom Sweeney, John G Snider, Jack Van Auken, Anita Orsini, Leanne & Charles Dietrich, Joyce Chase, Maryann Morrison, Sunnie Kim- & Liam Tiernan, Mary Lou Nahas, Debra & Don Teator and another half dozen who eluded my sheet and mental clasp.

The origins of the evening's program was my query to Ted Hilscher if he had an idea that he might share with the GLHG. The idea of the hay press and his new book sparked immediate interest.

Ted offered Jonathan Palmer's participation and the idea was off and running. How to organize this program was left to these well-known historians. And thus we came to program night.

Ted's book-in-progress is about the role of agriculture and rural culture in Greene County. It is a big topic and we Greenvillers are pleased someone is willing to write about it.

As a prelude, the Greenville Town Historian took five minutes to note that his transcription of the 1910 Federal and the 1925 NYS censuses showed the dominant influence of farms in those two listings. Thirty to fifty percent of homesteads were then involved in agriculture. No other occupation comes close in that time span.

Many of us sitting in the audience can recall the decline of agriculture in the local area in mid-century. Currently, only a handful of homesteads, and that may be generous, earn their major income from farming, much less dairy farming.

Ted discussed the major elements of his upcoming book, perhaps in time for a program next year. He related many activities needed for a farm's operation, from clearing the land, to adapting to Mother Nature, to arranging the sale/exchange of goods by which to earn a living, and to accepting a lifestyle that entails the constraints that farming demands.

One element of a successful farm life, even if minor, dealt with the hay press.

Ted wrote the following for this newsletter:

"In the 1800's and early 1900's, the most valuable export for many Hudson Valley farmers near the river or a railroad line was hay.

There were 130,000 horses in Manhattan in 1900. If each one ate 30 pounds of hay a day, 1650 tons of hay was needed daily.

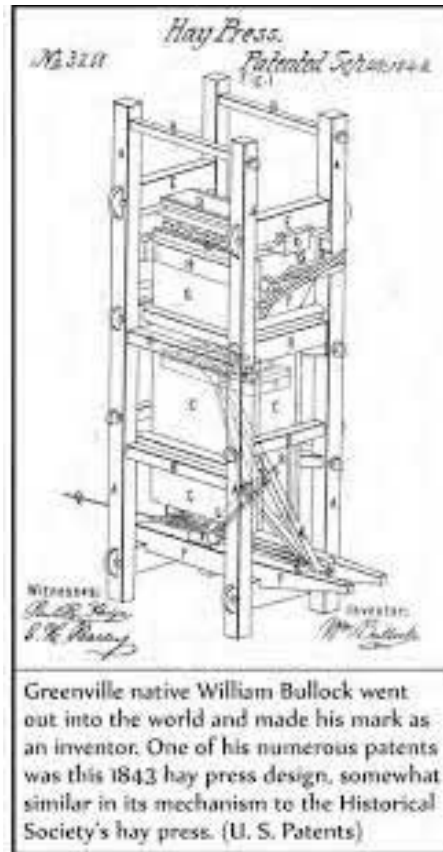
“In order to sell hay, farmers needed to be able to transport it, and in order to transport it, baled hay was highly preferred to loose hay. Before the modern hay baler, there was the hay press. An example of one of the best-selling hay presses of its day has been installed at the Bronck Museum in Cossack-
ie. It is shown here with Ted Hilscher and the hay press donor, Lynn Vanderzee Christie. Originally in use on the Vanderzee farm in New Baltimore, this press dates from about 1870, is 17 feet 11 inches high and made bales weighing 200 pounds. (dt: this might explain why Ted did not bring one to show this evening!)

“This press is powered by horse tethered to a capstan. As the horse walked in a circle, turning the capstan, a chain winds around the base of capstan. The other end of the chain is connected to a lever in the hay press. The hay is pressed from below. As the chain is shortened, pulling one end of the lever, the other end of the lever moves the floor of the hay chamber upwards, pressing the hay into a bale.” (see photo, contributed by Ted Hilscher)

At this point, Jonathan led the rest of the program with a PowerPoint. Although my lack of good notes will preclude an accurate and balanced representation of Jonathan’s talk, some of the major points can be supplied.

Jonathan noted the headstone of one Catskill resident whose epitaph noted the deceased’s accomplishment in hay press invention and sales. In the Catskill Village Cemetery lies “William C. Van Hoesen, b. 1802, d. 1878, original Inventor of the Lever Hay Press” (from Hasenkopf transcription). Jonathan reminded us to imagine what we would want on our headstone. WCVH boasted of that hay press. Later notes would reveal a hotbed of innovation and invention regionally and nationally.

Another interesting close-to-home historical footnote was that of William Bull-



ock. The photo will tell you most of that story.

Jonathan also noted that the production of goods was influenced by the ability to harness power beyond human limits. Although sailboats were fastest on the Hudson River for some time, the ability to make a steam engine to power river-craft allowed sailing time to shorten. And that trend was true for every part of everyday life, including the hay press.

As Ted pointed out, as long as there were horses in NYC, there was a need for hay. When machine powered contraptions, those pesky automobiles, came along, that demand dropped precipitously.

But, before that decline, many an upstate farmer, including many in Greene County and in Greenville, if their farm operations could handle it, would take in their loose hay in the summer and then use the animal powered hay press on an “indoor day,” often wintertime. (Many of you are correctly guessing



Lynn Vanderzee Christie, family hay press, Ted Hilscher

that the hay baler would supplant that in the early 20th century.)

Notes about the hay press, with some borrowing from Google:

The first hay presses were invented in the mid-19th century to compress hay into manageable bales for easier handling, storage, and transportation. These early presses were stationary, three-story structures powered by animals like horses or mules, utilizing a pulley system and a large screw to compress the hay. (much like Ted's account)

Other notes:

- Early hay presses were stationary:
- Unlike modern balers that move through the field, these early machines required hay to be brought to them.

—Animal power was common: Horses or mules were used to power the presses, often through a sweep or inclined treadmill belt.

—Large bales were the norm:

—Initial bales were quite large, often weighing over 300 pounds.

—Hay presses were crucial for making hay more manageable for storage and transportation, particularly for commercial hay production and export.

A last note: Had I thought to borrow Jonathan's notes, I would have supplied a more detailed and representative account. Should you ever see Jonathan Hay Press program advertised again, and if you were not in attendance, I urge you to see his program when you can.



The Stevens house, on Rt 26—see note below

Notes:

From the Alcove Preservation Society, Tom Sweeney shared a Channel 10 TV Off the Beaten Path spot about restoration of the Paper Mill/Chimney Top. The link:

<https://www.news10.com/off-the-beaten-path/paper-mill-chimney-top-landmark-being-restored/>

On my computer, a side box, somewhat small, labeled Off the Beaten Path, needs a click to start. A worthy two minute video follows. Thank you, Tom, and Flip, for sharing this local history, and a landmark that has many of us asking the questions asked in the video.

The 2025 Greene County Historical Society's Home Tour in Athens was a fine representation of homes of history and/or worthy of notice – this year, concentrated in the Village of Athens. A midday downpour slowed some down but Jonathan reported an excellent turnout.

Two passings this past month elicited sighs of memory.

Bob Shaw was one of my friendly Greenville Center faces, as well as a voice for the Four Corners of Greenville, and more.

Elsie Turon had been on my mailing list

for decades, with an occasional phone call about the Alcove Reservoir and the family farm, as well as her memories of Main Street in town.

Farewell to you both.

Thank you, Stephanie and Christine, for treating attendees the light refreshments that are promised. The culinary delight matches the socializing pleasure.

Of course, thank you, Ted & Jonathan, an off the beaten track topic but so enjoyable. Greenville always benefits with you two in town.

July 14 program: Flip Flach and Part V of An Extended Village Canvas. Previous programs (West, North) allowed Flip to present his memories of "ex-buildings, ex-businesses, ex-entrepreneurs" that graced and inhabited the roadways leading into Greenville's Four Corners. This program also allows for audience participation and memories. Flip will start on the town line on Rt 26 and arrive to the former Orrin Stevens house, head back to the town line on Rt 81 to arrive at Hill Street, and take turns at Highland and Rt 26A.