

SOME SMITHVILLE ABC'S

By Christine E. Buck

A is for articles. To celebrate Smithville's bicentennial year, volunteers are researching and writing a series of articles telling the town's history. Last week, Greene Town Historian Peg Ross led off with her captivating story of Smithville's DeJager family. Thanks, Peg! "A" also represents the Agards, but more about that family another time.

Back in 1897, Thomas Kelley signed a contract to move the old Smithville Flats Presbyterian Church that stood north of today's post office. His work included building a foundation at the new site. Will Loomis, born in 1888, remembered watching Mr. Kelley move the church. He jacked it up, used logs as rollers, and with horses, moved it slowly and deliberately down the road, setting it where today's Presbyterian Church is. That early church, struck by lightning in 1937, burned down. It was rebuilt on the same site.

Can you believe it? In 1934 the *Chenango American* reported that H. J. Brown of Smithville had brought to the office a gnawed tree branch. It was identified as being the work of a beaver. This was front-page news! Beavers had not been seen in this part of the country for many years.

Decoration Day was first observed in Smithville on May 30, 1882. Civil War soldiers buried in today's Upper Cemetery were remembered, their graves decorated with flowers. At least six Civil War dead rested there. The Grand Army of the Republic had proclaimed this day of recognition in 1868, and New York State endorsed it in 1873.

E is for eighteen hundred ninety, a year that brought major flooding to the Genegantslet Valley. A heavy June rainfall caused the dam at McDonough to give way. Torrential water reached Smithville Flats at 10 pm, carrying Tanner's gristmill and all its equipment a mile downstream. At midnight the Long Pond dam failed, causing more misery. Stone, gravel, and trees buried farmland and meadows. Roads turned to gullies; bridges and sidewalks were swept away.

Fire destroyed the Starkey District #10 schoolhouse and its furnishings in 1902. It was an "ordinary country schoolhouse built several years ago." The school, with Miss Mary Hopkins as teacher, stood two miles west of Tyner (on today's County Road 3). The fire began in the wood room, where wood ashes were also stored.

Genegantslet Creek, with public fishing access, is the town's largest stream. It runs in a north-south direction just west of the town's center. Three of its tributaries originate in German: Red Creek (colored by hemlock or iron ore), Strong Creek (named for a family), and Five Stream Creek (named for five converging streams).

His for Tyner's hoe factory. This shop once made tools as famous as Norwich's Maydole hammers. Erastus Bolles converted a gristmill into a hoe factory in the 1830s. His sons succeeded him, erected a new building, and employed five or six men for ten years. The Bolles name on a hoe or edge tool was a guarantee of excellence. The plant moved to Oxford in 1853, then to South Oxford, and finally to Binghamton.

Inventor Walter A. Church was born in Smithville in 1854. He was a hod carrier (a mason's helper) in Smithville before he left the area. His interest in music, experiments with electricity, and acquaintance with Alexander Graham Bell led to several inventions. One was an early fax machine allowing a New York newspaper to be printed on a San Francisco printing press. His greatest invention was to be displayed at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Called the "Palace of Music," it was set up in a building seating 5,000 people. Played on a single keyboard and powered with electricity were 100 snare drums, 100 bass drums, twenty pianos, and numerous other musical instruments—all playing together.

Just north of Huttleston's Garage in Smithville Flats was a building that Mrs. Purdy sold in 1938. The buyer dismantled the building and trucked the lumber away. Through the years, it had been used as a harness shop, meat market, hardware store, feed store, Grange Hall, barbershop, courtroom, election location, and a place for town board meetings.

Kudos to contributors of Smithville photos and memorabilia to the historical society and the town historian. These materials allow study and interpretation of the town's past. Items for the collection are always welcomed.

Lake View on Cincinnatus Lake straddles the border of Smithville and Willet. Once a popular resort destination, cottagers and year-round residents make today's population. The first Rorapaugh family reunion in 1899 was held at Lake View. Attendees were descended from early Tyner settler Peter Rorapaugh. The reunion included four generations who enjoyed sharing memories and making new acquaintances. Tables overflowed with delicious food. Throughout the day, jokes and laughter, "characteristic of the family," rang out.

Maple Grove Cemetery, now known as Smithville Flats' Lower Cemetery, was privately built by H. D. Read. He advertised lots for sale in 1882. The *Chenango American* reported that Amos Hotchkiss made the first purchase. Eventually, the cemetery became part of the Smithville Flats Cemetery Association, Inc., who now manages and maintains it.

Next month, on June 14, Smithville Days will be held. It is the town's thirty-third annual celebration that began with the nation's bicentennial commemoration.

O represents oral history, the recording of memories. As a bicentennial project, the Smithville Historical Society is digitizing and transcribing interviews taped back in 1976 and 1986. The voices of Will Loomis, Henry Bottle, Ora Shapley, Amanda Hofmann, and others will come alive. This year, the Society will reinstate the recording of memories.

P is for physical geography. Smithville is hilly, with alternating ridges and narrow valleys. Its streams run from north to south and eventually reach the Chenango River. The town is rectangular, about 5-1/2 miles by 11 miles.

Q is for quarry. Beginning in the 1870s, Smithville became noted for its stone quarries that supplied sidewalk and building stone locally and to major cities. Commercial quarries were developed on Stone Quarry Hill Road, Winner Road, and at Buckley Hollow. The Elmira Penitentiary was built with Smithville stone. The excavation on the west end of Stone Quarry Hill Road has reopened.

Round Pond is a twenty-six acre glacial lake on State land 1-1/2 miles west of Smithville Flats. Access is suitable for canoe or kayak, and fishermen might catch pickerel or panfish. In August of 1876, four men from Stillwater caught a nice string of fish at the pond. They also picked blackberries—3-1/2 bushels of them. The pond was once an important source of ice for refrigeration, and its surrounding land provided timber.

S is for swan. In June of 1995, a single mute swan—the type with an orange beak—landed at Echo Lake. It spent a relaxing summer cruising the lake. The following year it came again. In mid-September it departed, never to return.

Telephone poles and lines to connect Smithville with Greene were installed by way of Genegantslet in 1883. The project continued to McDonough. Service was working in Genegantslet and McDonough by December that year, but Smithville's connection was on hold, waiting for \$250 "subscription money."

Underneath Smithville's soil may lie "black diamonds." Coal mine fever raged in Smithville in 1876. Men dug for coal on Mrs. Jane Grant's farm, where fifty years earlier a water-well driller had seen a vein of coal. The well was abandoned, but the

story of coal persisted half a century until investors were convinced to continue the search.

Volunteers are encouraged to join the Smithville Bicentennial Committee. This small group would welcome help researching the town's history, decorating a bicentennial parade float, planting flowers, and planning a celebration to honor pioneers. Town Historian Alison Owens' e-mail address is below. Financial contributions would also be appreciated. Checks may be sent to the Smithville Bicentennial Committee, PO Box 217, Smithville Flats, NY 13841.

Women were not well represented in the business world of 1870. But the Smithville Business Directory of 1869-1870 listed twenty-one women along with the 310 businessmen. Two were seamstresses, one a milliner, and one a combination dressmaker and milliner. An amazing fifteen women were farmers. Two women's occupations were not stated.

X marks the spot where three towns meet—Smithville, German, and McDonough. An old hand-carved monument marks this site where three early, substantial land tracts once met: the Chenango Triangle, Twenty Towns, and the Gore.

Yale vs. Dederer was a nineteenth century drawn-out lawsuit. Smithville farmer Ransom Yale was a drover and cattle dealer. He sold cows to Greene's Captain Dederer and took for payment a promissory note signed by the Captain's wife. Under the law of the time, a married woman was not liable on her note unless she pledged her separate estate for its payment. The issue was the validity of the note. The lawsuit ran through the courts for twenty years, going to the Court of Appeals three times. Before the case's settlement, the entire legal counsel representing both sides had died. Mr. Yale lost the suit, thus incurring expenses that ruined him financially. He died in 1900, having outlived all parties in the case.

Z is for Canon Zulu, an Episcopal minister from South Africa. A member of the Zulu clan, he visited Smithville in 1960. He took a side trip to the Onondaga Nation where he conferred with the Native Americans. The most memorable marvel of his visit was the Al Collyer farm in Smithville and seeing for the first time cows milked by machinery.

This ends my pursuit of Smithville's alphabetical trivia. You will notice that some of Smithville's best-known people and places were not mentioned. Watch for future stories. Next week's article will begin Milly Auwarter's two-part history of early Smithville. Included will be Smithville Flats, Smithville Center, and Tyner.

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