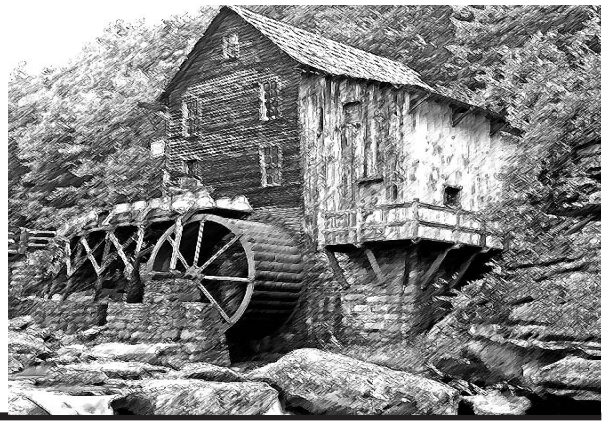
The Gristmill
Saratoga County History Journal
Preserving the History of Saratoga County
Fall 2018



Forming history society was part of community spirit

A Kid's Memories of the 1950's and 1960's

By John Cromie, Esq.

The village downtown bustled. Friday night, pay day, people converged on the grocery stores, especially the A&P and Grand Union. There was barely a parking place to be had. Farm families would come into town to buy feed and supplies from GLF or Noonan's. Bill Morrisey catered to them by carrying a large selection of seeds in the spring. Shopping included clothing for women at the Style Shop, and men and boys at Buchdahl's or Hannah's, hardware at Tracy's or Ballston Hardware, or all-of-the-above at Steiner's. Pearl's, Betor's, and Newberry's were the department stores. Except for day-long excursions to Montgomery Wards in Albany, Barney's or the Carl Company in Schenectady, or special sales in Amsterdam, the village offered all that was needed. People didn't bother much with Saratoga Springs.

Ballston Spa in the 1950s drew its customer base from Malta, Ballston, Charlton, Galway, Milton and Malta, except for residents of southern Ballston and Charlton, who were drawn into Schenectady's orbit. People of those towns looked upon themselves as part of the Ballston Spa community. As the village prepared to celebrate its sesquicentennial during the summer of 1957, the six-town area joined in. Men grew beards, farm women continued to eschew makeup. Clean-shaven men and faces with highlight, lipstick and rouge were fined. Ballston Spa executed its parade, pageant, and fundraisers with enthusiasm. Store fronts were dedicated to exhibiting historical items. Oblivious to damaging ultraviolet rays, people throughout the Ballston Spa area pulled things out of their attics for display. The absolute wealth of artifacts was astounding. Downtown Ballston Spa became a museum, of sorts.

The seed had been planted in the minds of those who lived in and around the village. There was a history here, and it should be preserved.

In September of that year, Nancy Hawkins welcomed her next group of 5th graders. Students were tracked then, and she had been assigned students who took academics seriously and easily. As in the past, she had her students draw their own constitution and elect officers. Fines were levied for transgressions that funded a party at the end of the year. Students were encouraged to share their talents. Those who knew how to tap dance taught others; baked goods were hawked, a group attempted to piece together a partial cow skeleton a student had found. Paula Beebe came in and suggested the class form an "I Spy" club. A group of us joined in, but it fell apart, as no one knew what it was.

Then, Nick Westbrook suggested we form a "Yorkers Club." Again, we joined in. This time, there was a "Yorker Magazine;" the club was real. Nick had been prompted by his father, John Hall (Jack) Westbrook, a BSHS grad and metallurgist at GE. Nancy Hawkins was game and encouraged the club's formation. The students decided on a name, "Kayaderosseras Yorkers Club." Richard Fuller's dad managed the tannery, and a leather banner was fashioned with the club name. The only problem was, the Yorkers, formally known as the Junior New York State Historical Association, had no elementary clubs. Nevertheless, Cooperstown embraced our efforts.

Money had to be raised for projects and attending the 1959 convention in Buffalo. Parents were drawn into the vortex and helped with food sales and transportation. Nancy Hawkins enlisted the help of her teaching friends, the Tinkham twins, Mary and Margaret, and Beverley Bardwell. When the former 5th graders entered junior high school, they brought the club with them, creating an elementary-high school crossover, and enlisting Marlene Forbes as their high school advisor. By 1961, 50 to 60 students and their parents were focused on local history.

In 1909, New York State pulled off the "granddaddy" of all historical events- the Hudson-Fulton Celebration. 1959 couldn't pass without something. New York's Year of History was announced, and localities were encouraged to do something to promote local history. Ballston Spa formed a committee, chaired by insurance agent, Tom LaClair, which organized a self-guided driving tour of historic sites and houses. Participants purchased the guide booklet at the old armory and drove off through the village into Ballston, up to Milton, over to Malta, back into Ballston and ended where they began. The Cavalcade, as it was called, was a success. The title of the booklet was prescient, "Historical Booklet of Historic Ballston Spa Area Including Towns of Ballston, Malta and Milton."

The stage was set, and in 1961 everything came together. It was later recalled that Gazette Reporter Blanch Hartman was the first to articulate that the area should have a historical society. Everyone turned to Lewis Howe Sears, who had acted as "Historian" for the Year of History. In his 80's Lew was the embodiment of history. His forbearers had been early settlers of Ballston, his home was a

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Welcome to the first issue of The Gristmill – Saratoga County History Journal

The Gristmill is a local historical journal published quarterly by the Ballston Area History Roundtable in association with the Saratoga County Historical Society. Following in the footsteps of the original Gristmill published by the SCHS from the late 1960's into the 1990's, the purpose of the Journal is to provide an opportunity for local historians and history buffs to share historical information with readers in Saratoga County and beyond.

Articles will range from personal narratives and memoirs to more serious works of scholarship. Topics will include historical events, economic developments, social and religious trends as well as biographical and genealogical sketches related to Saratoga County from the 18th through the 20th century. Articles should be submitted in Word format and images in web format (jpg. or png.) to SaratogaCountyGristmill@gmail.com.

For more information on submission guidelines please refer to the BAHR website https://ballstonareahistoryroundtable.com/

Forming a History Society_____

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veritable museum. Local history was his passion, and he had become well known to the young Yorkers. A community of history lovers had been discovered. Brought together were farmers, engineers, authors, housewives, teachers, attorneys, white and blue-collar hourly workers from throughout the commercial region for which Ballston Spa was the hub.

This diverse group, which had in common a sense of community and an understanding of the role of history in social cohesion, met twice in the meeting room on the second floor of the Eagle-Matt Lee fire house. They voted to organize as the "Ballston Spa Area Historical Society" and seek a charter from the State Education Department. Lew Sears was elected President. Of the attendees, at least a third were Kayaderosseras Yorkers and their parents. Those parents became the young organization's driving force and backbone.

Postscript: In the late 60s, when Saratoga Springs' historical society changed its name to "Saratoga Springs History Museum" and dropped its reference to the county, the officers and directors of the "Ballston Spa Area Historical Society", including Jack Westbrook, jumped at the opportunity and changed its name to "Saratoga County Historical Society." At this writing Jack is the lone survivor of the adults who formed the organization in 1961.

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For Whom The Bells Toll - Honoring Our Veterans

By Paul J. Loatman Jr., Ph.D. Mechanicville City Historian

Twenty years ago on a cold morning while my wife and I were on our way to hike in Vermont, we slowed down coming into the Village of Cambridge. With the windows rolled up, we were shielded from the sound outside until stopping for a traffic light. Then something in the background caught our attention. Bells-three church bells-were simultaneously pealing softly. Immediately, I recognized that they were marking "the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month," November 11th, always known as Armistice Day in my family. Suddenly, a rush of memory transported me to another time and place.

My maternal grandparents had each served in "The Great War," my grandfather as a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy; my grandmother attained the rank of 2nd Lt. in the Naval Nurse Corps. I inherited a cache of her war-time correspondence written while she served in France, 1916-1919. I have read these letters many times, and one in particular caught my attention. Written on September 8, 1918 by surgeon Will J. Jones on the front-lines with Battery D, 42nd Artillery, A.E.F. [The Rainbow Division] the writer paused mid-letter while his dugout was being shelled. Surviving the bombardment, he went on to remark, "It is fierce to have to be half mole and spend so much time under the earth. I'll be there long enough when my time comes without having a [head] start on it." Jones could have been speaking for thousands of others, and such letters written from the trenches give the reader a sense of immediacy regarding a war fought a century ago.

As a boy, my paternal grandparents who were "Over Here" often described the pure elation they shared with millions of Americans when word came that an armistice had ended the bloodiest war in human history. Schools were immediately dismissed; businesses shut down; and people marched in parades organized on the spot. In fact, the "eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month" meme that has become cliché did not happen exactly the way that most people now believe. In many parts of the country, two separate celebrations occurred. News reports quickly spread word that the Germans had surrendered on November 7, 1918 which was technically true. However, the official Armistice was not signed until four days later on November 11. The largest broadside ever published in *The Mechanicville Saturday Mercury* announced that the German surrender on November 7 meant "It's All Over, 'Over There.' End of The War." When the news spread that Thursday, all businesses shut down and the local citizenry engaged in impromptu celebrations. School bells, church bells, and factory whistles sounded continuously from 2:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. and residents paraded through Mechanicville streets the entire afternoon. If that were not enough celebration, at 8:00 p.m. that same evening, another parade that included three bands marched through the streets for hours.

Hardly worn out from all of this activity, when word came four days later on the 11th that the Armistice had actually been signed, Mechanicville citizens and those from the surrounding countryside once again organized a "monster Peace Celebration parade" beginning at 10:00 o'clock in the morning and lasted until midnight. With hundreds of its young soldiers either fighting in France or on their way there, residents felt a huge burden of worry lifted from their shoulders with war's end. These kinds of spontaneous events occurred all across the nation.

The confusion over which day the Armistice had actually been signed created an issue more serious than whether or not celebrations had been premature. Brig. General John Sherburne of the Artillery Brigade of the 92nd [Negro] Division told a Congressional House sub-committee on January 8 1919 that American lives had been needlessly sacrificed on November 11, 1918. Sherburne contended that orders to restrain attacks on German lines that day had not been conveyed to his staff on a timely basis. The General went on to declare that "so horrified were my men … at the needless attacks of the morning of Nov. 11 and the consequent loss of life that they did not [participate in] the general celebration of the signing of the armistice." The 92nd Division lost 17 men and suffered 286 wounded, including 99 victims of gas attacks, in the final hours of the war. A.E.F. Commander, General John J. Pershing, later dismissed Sherburne's charges, attributing American casualties that day, ironically, to the enthusiasm and courage of our troops in continuing to fight even after our Allies had withdrawn from attack. Pershing's rejoinder ended the potential controversy and no sooner had the war ended but that the American public became focused on the threat to peace posed by the Communist takeover in Russia.

Although Woodrow Wilson issued a Presidential Proclamation calling for special observances to mark the end of the conflict, November 11 was not designated a national holiday. In reality, the Armistice was binding for only two months and there was no guarantee that Germany would abide by it until a permanent peace treaty was signed at the conference at Versailles. As it happened, the Armistice held and Germany signed the Treaty. However, the United States never did ratify that pact, technically remaining at war for years afterwards. [A similar situation applies today between the United States and North Korea.] The sense of euphoria marking those first Armistice Day celebrations in 1918 did not last long. Immediate cancellation of government war contracts to balance the federal budget threw millions of people out of work and many returning veterans were unable to find jobs. Consequently, as The New York Times reported, the second Armistice Day was observed "with a note of solemnity that contrasted sharply with

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the delirious joy with which the signing of the armistice was greeted a year ago."

Locally, *The Mechaniville Saturday Mercury* reported on November 15, 1919 that although Armistice Day was observed as a holiday, "business in the City of Mechanicville proceeded as usual," implying that no special ceremonies were held. The lack of enthusiasm here may have been due to the controversy surrounding the efforts of the Mechanicville War Chest to collect delinquent pledges from hundreds of local residents. Many who had contributed to the fund believed it had been organized solely to help "the Boys Over There." Once the war ended, they believed that contributions were no longer needed. When War Chest officers threatened to take legal action against the delinquents, they demanded individual jury trials. This strategy led to scenes where hostile crowds, dominated by unruly women, packed the court room supporting the delinquents and sorely tested the skills of City Judge T.J. Finigan to prevent riot and mayhem. The controversy dragged on until 1920 when War Chest officers, faced with the reality that no local jury would convict a delinquent, lost their taste for continued litigation.

An interesting side-note to the changed atmosphere surrounding Armistice Day 1919 that occurred in Auburn New York received wide-scale attention in the press. Two-hundred and fifty local high school students went on strike to celebrate the event, contending that since school authorities had not prepared appropriate exercises, they would organize their own. Upon returning to school, they were suspended and ordered to write essays explaining the true meaning of Armistice Day, the purpose of their strike, and lessons learned from their experience. The New York Times reported that both the student population and the larger community were equally divided on the issue.

In his 1920 Armistice Day Proclamation, President Wilson acknowledged that while Congress had not yet recognized November 11th as a national holiday, "our participation in the World War will some day doubtless be effected through legislation." In New York, Governor Alfred E. Smith proclaimed November 11th as Armistice Day and requested that political and church officials throughout the State "have bells tolled at 11 o'clock in the forenoon." In the absence of a federal law declaring a national holiday, it was up to local officials to decide whether or not formal observances were to be conducted. Since the United States had never signed the Treaty of Versailles, Congress did not acknowledge that the war had ended until 1926. At the same time, while lawmakers urged President Calvin Coolidge to issue a proclamation promoting observances, it still took no action declaring November 11 a national holiday

Twelve years later as the 20th anniversary of the war's end approached, lawmakers finally acted. President Franklin D. Roosevelt on May14, 1938, signed a bill proclaiming Armistice Day, November 11, a national legal holiday "dedicated to the cause of world peace." As of that date, forty-four state legislatures had declared it a legal holiday and three other states empowered their governors to issue proclamations while North Carolina failed to observe the anniversary.

Following the mobilization of the largest military force in our history during World War II, veterans groups persuaded President Dwight D. Eisenhower to change November 11 to "Veterans Day." In 1954, Representative Edward Rees of Kansas claimed that Armistice Day had lost its original significance and the change would allow "a grateful nation [to] pay homage to all its veterans," not just those who had fought in World War I. Since 1954, Veterans Day has been celebrated as a national holiday every year. However, the Uniform Holiday Act passed in 1968 moved the observance to the fourth Monday of October, taking effect in 1971. This move led to so much confusion and loss of public observance that in 1978, the holiday was moved back to November 11, whence it has been observed ever since.

Certainly, November 11th celebrations take on a much more somber tone today than those raucous spontaneous eruptions that occurred in 1918 on that first Armistice Day. In recent years, some Veterans Day traditions have fallen by the way-side, including the morning tolling of bells marking the event. However, the Village of Cambridge and other Washington County communities uphold the practice, supporting Hartford Supervisor Dana Haff's annual request that churches, fire houses, and municipal buildings ring their bells for one minute at 11:00 a.m. on November 11. Next year, we shall observe the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day. I would urge everyone to contact local officials, governors and state legislators, congressmen and all federal officials to restore the practice of having bells all across this nation toll at "the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month." In so honoring all American men and women who fought to defend our country and the cause of peace throughout the world, we would send a powerful message that we as a nation have not forgotten their sacrifices.

The Father of Clifton Park

By John L. Scherer, Clifton Park Historian

A gleaming white monument in the Jonesville Rural Cemetery proclaims that buried here is the "Father of Clifton Park." Also on the monument is the name of Robert W. Van Patten, born in the hamlet of Ballston Lake on December 8, 1918, died in Clifton Park on February 28, 1990. It is a pretty bold statement to claim that anyone is solely responsible for the development of a community, but in Robert Van Patten's case, he has earned his title.

People had been moving from the cities to the suburbs since trolley lines and automobiles first made it possible for people to live outside the city limits and commute to work. Until Clifton Park became a commuter's paradise in the 1960s, it was a very rural area made up chiefly of farms and small hamlets. The population was a mere 4,500. Inspired by the arrival of the Adirondack Northway in the late 1950s, Van Patten built and sold more than 3500 homes in Clifton Park. He ushered in the era of present day Clifton Park.

Van Patten was a radio repairman for Sears Robuck when he acquired a Mobil Station on the corner of Brandywine and State Streets in Schenectady that he operated for about 15 years during the 1940s and early 1950s. In the late 1950s, he began a salvage business involved in tearing down buildings. His first building venture was the construction of the Mayfair Shopping Plaza on Route 50 in Glenville.

In 1957, Van Patten began Clifton Park's first residential development, Country Club Acres. Located in Rexford at the intersection of Route 146 and Blue Barns Road, Country Club acres boasted 40 homes. Today one can see how these first homes influenced the styles of Van Patten's later models.

Bernie and Jutta von Schwerin, now living at Coburg Village, once owned 12 Fairway Lane, Country Club Acres, Robert Van Patten's first home. After Van Patten moved out of this house, he could not bring himself to sell it, as it was the first one he had constructed. For a while he used it as his office, and later he rented it. Bernie and Jutta were renters who finally talked Van Patten into selling them the house in 1982. Bernie said that he soon found all of the mistakes Van Patten made on his first domestic building project.

By the time Country Club Acres was finished, the Adirondack Northway had opened to Clifton Park and Van Patten moved his base of operation over to the Northway corridor. He began his first major development, Clifton Knolls, in 1961. Land at the time was selling for about $350 an acre, but Van Patten did not have the capital to purchase large tracts of land. Instead he would pay an even higher price for the land and either pay the landowner over time or as the houses were built and sold. In some cases, the landowner was paid $500 per house, or perhaps $750 to be paid over a ten year period. In this way Van Patten purchased the four farms that would comprise Clifton Knolls.

The first farm he acquired was the farm of Heath Peck along Clifton Park Center Road. It was Van Patten's custom to offer the land owner a house in his new development. When the Pecks moved in to their new house in 1961, they had indoor plumbing for the first time.

The last farm that Van Patten acquired was the farm of Vincent Secada that now includes the southern portion of Clifton Knolls around Barney Road. Secada, a native of Spain, lived in the old Barney farm house. He raised veal calves and stored hay in half of his house. Secada developed the present Clifton Knolls ponds. He stocked them with fish and rented one-day fishing permits to city folks who came out to spend the day. When he sold his land to Van Patten he insisted the ponds be preserved. Secada is also responsible for naming the streets that bear such Spanish names as El Dorado, Par Del Rio and Casablanca.

Van Patten built his houses in assembly line fashion, street by street.

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Specific crews dedicated to a particular style home erected the frames. A foreman working without blueprints gave guidance. According to Glenn Valle of Country Knolls, who wrote an excellent history of Country Knolls in the 1993-1994 Country Knolls Directory, Robert Van Patten never named his various house plans. He would refer to them simply by their style. The ranches were simply called the 4-bedroom, the 3-bedroom or the raised ranch and were framed by crews led by Don Ward. The two colonials began to cause confusion, since they had the same number of rooms. As a result, these two homes soon acquired the names of their framing foremen. Hank Graves was in charge of framing one, and this house was therefore referred to as the "Hank's." Stan Marrick was the foreman in charge of the other colonial, and it was referred to as the "Stans."

In later years sales agents attached more formalized names to the homes. The Hank's became the Hanover, the Stan's became the Standish, the 4-bedroom ranch became the Executive Ranch while the 3-bedroom became the Top-Half (it was essentially the top half of the raised ranch). The Raised Ranch never acquired a formal name. These original designs ranged in price from the low to upper $20,000.

In busy times Van Patten's workers numbered over 200, including plumbers, masons, electricians and carpenters. The only phase of construction that was sub-contracted was the driveways and the foundations. By the mid 1960s Van Patten was even fabricating his own aluminum siding.

The Schenectady Savings Bank provided most all of the mortgages. The president of this bank was a friend of Van Patten. There were no written contracts to purchase a Van Patten home, only a $100 deposit and a handshake. If the buyer was not satisfied with the completed house, the deposit would be refunded and the deal cancelled. If by the time the house was finished Van Patten came to dislike the buyer, he would refuse to sell the house.

In July of 1962, Ed Meiser of 11 Pinewood Drive, Clifton Knolls purchased one of Van Patten's first homes in that development. He indicated that as you entered Clifton Knolls from Clifton Park Center Road, the third house on the right side of Beechwood Drive was the first home built in Clifton Knolls. It was a ranch house purchased by Ed and Gail Hebenstreet in 1961.

Clifton Knolls ultimately contained almost 800 homes. In 1964, a new housing development, Country Knolls, was begun in the Jonesville area. Van Patten built and sold the same style homes as he had at Clifton Knolls. Country Knolls now contains about 1270 homes. Country Knolls South was begun in 1973, ultimately containing 600 homes, and Van Patten's last major residential development, Country Knolls West, was begun in 1978 and contains 700 homes. Another Van Patten project was the Northway Eleven Apartments, which contain about 1,000 apartments, one of the largest apartment complexes in the Capitol District.

Such amenities as golf courses and swimming pools were added to Van Patten's planned communities. He also made a practice of saving as many trees as was possible. In fact, in 1973, Robert Van Patten advertised "superb wooded settings where piney woodlands, clean air and spacious homes make gracious living a habit." Today, Van Patten's son, Robet Van Patten, Jr., continues his father's businesses..

Robert Van Patten's affordable, yet beautiful homes, attracted thousands of people to Clifton Park. Truly he is the father of modern Clifton Park, and as his children we share his legacy.

The information for this article was obtained through a number of oral interviews including with Bernie and Jutta von Schwerin of Clifton Park and Ed Meiser of Clifton Park, both conducted about 1995. A memoir written by Frank Townley of Clifton Park (now deceased) provided information on Vincent Secada and Van Patten's building practices. The Country Knolls Directory for 1993-1994 included a history written by Glenn Valle that provided further information regarding the contractors and the naming of the models and number of homes in the various Van Patten developments. Local newspapers, such as the Commercial News (Southern Saratoga County), Times Union (Albany) and the Schenectady Gazette all published advertisements for Van Patten's houses. Much of this source material including the two photographs is part of the Town of Clifton Park History Collection at the Clifton Park Halfmoon Library.

A house in Clifton Park's first planned housing development, Country Club Acres, at Route 146 and Blue Barns Road, constructed in 1957 by Robert Van Patten.

***RESEARCH TIP*: Looking for an old family deed in Saratoga County?** You can access these records at the website: https://www.searchiqs.com/NYSAR/Login.aspx. Click on the link to sign up for access, create a user ID and password and log in. On the search page, go to "infodex." To search by name choose Select Volume. In addition to Grantee and Grantor deeds, you can search for Mortgages, Civil actions, Church Incorporations and several other types of county records. TIP: If you can't find a deed, try looking up the name under mortgages. These records often contain similar information regarding lot size and location. Deeds were sometimes filed years after the owners death when family members wanted to sell the land. Later deeds may mention who "formerly owned" the land. Deeds for bordering land may mention the neighbors to the north, east, south and west.