

# Elliot P. Harrington

## *A Sketch of One of Westfield's Pioneers as Read at the Historical Society's Meeting September 10<sup>th</sup> at Fredonia by F.A. Hall*

To begin at the beginning in regard to our friend of some years ago, we have to say that Elliot P. Harrington, was born April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1824, in Oswego County, New York. He was the son of Larkin and Abigail Harrington, who came to Chautauqua County in 1825. The journey was typical of those days, when a good ox team was the reliable, propelling force. They took up land in Westfield, near Volusia.

His brothers were Lewis T., Bert L. and Charles Murray Harrington. The sisters were Taricy, Jane and Fanny, none of whom are living. In his case, as we often say, the child was father of the man. From the early days he showed a remarkable gift in mechanical devices. He could always do things and make things and seemed to understand mechanical bearings at sight. With this endowment, may we call it, together with the fact that the water was to him as a native element, he seemed predestined to take up submarine work. This being the situation, when the Oneida went down a few miles east of Barcelona in 1852, what could be more in line with his life than that he should find his way to the sunken ship and begin to secure the valuable cargo. With such help as he could obtain he was soon on the job and was able to bring to the surface the whole shipment of flour, and strange as it may seem, it was very little damaged.

About this time he associated himself with a diver named M. Quigly, under the name of Harrington & Quigly, the latter being the older man, but not the aggressive member of the firm, if firm it could be called. In this same year, the propeller Atlantic was in collision with the Ogdensburg off Long Point and went down, carrying to the bottom over 200 passengers. Not only was the ship lost with the great number of passengers, but there was a cargo of freight and a heavy safe containing \$33,500. As the craft was in 181 feet of water, there was no thought of raising anything but the safe. Nothing daunted by the depth, which men, told him it was impossible to work in, he addressed himself to the task. First, he discarded the outfit that was in common use and made one that was adapted to the conditions and to his requirements. This new piece of diving mechanism gave rise to the statement that he was the inventor of the diving bell. This was entirely incorrect. He simply improved that which was in use so that it served his purposes and likewise that of many others.

A safe is a hard thing to move. In this case, with the ship lying on its side, with a great amount of freight to be moved before the beginning of the work, some idea may be had of the difficulties to be overcome.

After many trips down nearly 200 feet, he finally was ready to address himself to the real matter, and that was the raising of that loaded safe, Now he had to force his way into the purser's office. With no keys to unlock the door, there was nothing left to him but to smash it in. Did anyone here ever attempt to stand under water and strike a blow with an axe? If you have, you know what a feeble thing a man is when only under a few feet of

water. Now increase the depth to the "x" measure where this man was at work, and possibly you can begin to understand the difficulties to be overcome. Finally the door had to give way, for our hero was mollicoddle. Just here there was yet another difficulty. The width of the safe and the opening of the doorway seemed to be the same, with no room to spare. Right here he had to attack the door casings until finally he got good entrance to the enclosure. An attachment was made to the handles of the safe. Now it looked like plain sailing, but not so. The handles were made for men to lift by and not for an engine to pull on. They gave way and in the breaking hit our friend a glancing blow, which might have been fatal if he had received it full force. Once more he called for the hoist, and he went to the surface to forge a chain which would encircle the great safe and should be strong enough to pull it over and through all obstacles. A satisfactory chain was finally made and for the 11<sup>th</sup> time he went down the long waterway to his prize. This time everything worked as he had anticipated, and the safe with its great fortune was brought to the surface, and on the top of the safe when it came in sight Elliott P. Harrington. Mr. Harrington's share in this was, according to the agreement, one half, or \$16,750. The money was in gold and scrip, as paper money was called in that day.

In 1853 the propellor *Princeton*, in charge of Captain Charles Ludlow, went down a little west of Van Buren Point. This boat was loaded with dry goods, stoves, hardware and agricultural implements. The cargo had been received from the Erie railroad at Dunkirk. This wreck was more easily handled than was that of the *Atlantic*, as it was in only about half the depth of water. With consummate skill the *Princeton* was unloaded,

and the young Chautauquan gave back to the Erie railroad a large portion of the cargo which had been delivered to the ill-fated steamer.

During the following four or five years there were a large number of wrecks on the Great Lakes. The work of Mr. Harrington had placed him at the head of the under-water men. All the lake men knew him, and when trouble came sought him. He did much work on the upper lakes, and this might have had something to do with his making a permanent home in Detroit. At one time in Lake Huron, he nearly lost his life. The current was exceedingly swift and the ropes became entangled with his air line. When he was finally brought to the surface, he was black beyond recognition. The resuscitation was a slow process, but finally successful.

It was during the Civil War that he became a national character. In 1862, he was called to Norfolk to raise the celebrated Rebel battleship Merrimac. The current was found so strong that nothing of this kind could be accomplished.