

CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Meeting at Ripley, Hamilton Mansion/Presbyterian Church

June 15, 1991

Good afternoon everybody

It has been said, and I think you will agree, that the two most important places in the world are your hometown and my hometown. Welcome today to my hometown.

Ripley, 8th named and second largest township in Chautauqua County, was raised to government status Mar 1, 1816 and named for Gen Ripley under whom townsmen fought during the War of 1812. Presently we are celebrating our 175th anniversary. But you know all this.

Pendulums swing one way and then the other; and Ripley, like other towns and cities, has seen growing and prosperous days and waning days which are the result of many factors. We have, however, a rich historical background and we think you may not be aware of some of our "warp and woof".

Let us touch upon geography.

Ripley is pretty much dead center of the 50-mile length of Lake Erie Shore which is called the "Grape Belt", and her lowlands lay in closest proximity to that shore and the foothills of the Alleghenies--a situation which has much to do with the excellent quality of the grapes raised here. The highest of all Lake Erie banks are at Ripley and just west of the East Lake Road Conley property.

While on the subject of grapes--and we can state with certainty that our first vine was planted April 23, 1869--did you know that the first marketing union anywhere in the grape belt was formed by foresighted men who organized The Ripley Grape Growers Association during 1886? Its work and influence were stepping stones to the several area marketing unions which have followed.

It would be remiss not to remind you that the mechanics of the grape harvester were developed in Ripley. Max Orton and his nephew Roy perfected and patented the miracle which revolutionized vitaculture on national and international levels.

Appropriately, the first commercial use of the harvester was in Ripley vineyards during the fall of 1968

Let us touch upon geology

As an independent topic, it is full of local interest, particularly so in the area where Twenty Mile Creek originates. One of our best kept secrets is the natural beauty found in that gulf

Many years ago, Gilbert Harris, Professor of Geology at Cornell University visited a Ripley aunt and became intensely curious about the recently placed stone leaning against a tree in her yard. The slab--perhaps 12" long, 8" wide, 2" thick--was wavy and resembled a washboard. He asked permission to take it back to Cornell. Reconstructed, it was determined to be part of a 10-foot prehistoric animal and the largest section of such ever found in this locality. Taken later to the Albany Museum, it was originally found in the bed of Twenty Mile Creek.

Another phenomenon of our gulf is the rock formation called Cone-in-Cone. Caused by pressure, so far as I have ever known the gulf is one of only two places in the world where it is to be found. Taken for granted locally, it is surprising to learn that outsiders have never heard of it.

Let us touch upon our Indian Village and Burial Site

First excavated professionally during 1904 and again during 1906, a third major excavation was commenced during the summer of 1988. The current archeological thrust is on the true age of the site, its flora and fauna, the diets and habits of the village occupants. You know already that some of the new data is in and that the village is much older than at first presumed. We were surprised to learn last summer that the first recorded evidence of tobacco in all of New York State has been discovered at the Ripley site.

Let us enumerate a "first" or two which you may find interesting

Alexander Cochran, a Ripley pioneer, was the first landowner in the county with his October 1, 1804 deed for 344 acres on West Main Road. They cost \$792, they were paid for in gold specie.

Automobility had first come to Ripley during 1897 when Alexander Winton passed thru with his "horseless carriage" invention, and the first privately-owned automobile in the county was a Winton purchased by Charles M Hamilton during 1900. It follows as the night the day that the earliest "gasoline station" in the county was in Ripley. In conjunction with his Main Street hardware store, George Bennett installed the first gasoline pump between Buffalo and Cleveland for the feeding of those early single cylinder gasoline engines called one-lungers.

Consider the accomplishments of a few of our native sons

JOHN BIDWELL, sometimes called "Prince of Pioneers", was part of the first organized band to enter California over the Sierras during 1841. With Capt John Sutter when gold was discovered during 1848, Bidwell carried the first authentic news to San Francisco. Settling later in northern California, his intense interest in farming methods led in many directions. He became known as "the father of the raisin industry"; and in due time laid out the city of Chico, California. Active in politics at all levels, in 1892 he was the Prohibition Party candidate for president.

The achievements of BENJAMIN F GOODRICH need no review; but let's set the record straight. The monument on the school lawn does NOT mark the site of his birthplace. The homestead, which burned during 1933, was located on route 20 but at the western outskirts of the village.

RICHARD T ELY became a renowned educator and an early proponent of the theory which birthed Social Security.

CHARLES M HAMILTON's political reputation requires no repetition, but we know several amusing stories about our accomplished citizen. Upon one occasion he was returning from oil interests in Kansas. A train conductor punched his ticket and informed him of his good luck. The train would be stopping at Ripley for Congressman Hamilton. Can you imagine the look upon the conductor's face when he assisted the single de-training passenger! This anecdote amused Charley the rest of his life.

DR FRED C RICE received a Ripley elementary and Westfield high school education. Having earned his medical degree at the University of Buffalo, it was December 1903 when he opened his medical office in Ripley. Soon his reputation grew to be more than county-wide. Contemporaries called him twenty years ahead of his

time, but challenged in particular with his tuberculosis cases, he did accomplish much toward alleviation and eradication of the ravages of that dread disease.

With parental moral support, a basic district school education and character and patriotism forged in rural Ripley, GEORGE A NEWBURY and \$240 went to Cornell University the fall of 1913. A few weeks short of receiving his law degree, he joined the navy during 1917 becoming the first local youth to answer the WWI call to colors. Upon military discharge his law degree was conferred and everything about his professional life was phenomenal. His legal expertise led to his position as president of Manufacturers & Traders Bank in Buffalo. His interest in health care and health insurance led to the organization of a Buffalo Blue Cross plan which became the model for all others nationwide. In his Masonic work, he rose through the ranks to 33rd degree and Sovereign Grand Commander, receiving during 1968 its highest honor--the Gourgas Medal. For over fifty years George Newbury never failed to "come home" on Memorial Day. His last trip "home" was after his 1984 death leaving us with yet another memory to keep untarnished.

JOHN L. TESTRAKE became known internationally during 1985, and *everyone* remembers the Odyssey of TWA Flight 847 and the now famous cockpit-window picture of hostage Pilot Testrake with the gun-holding terrorist behind him. I have seen this hijacking listed as the first incident of events which escalated to the current troubles in the Middle East.

Consider other notable residents:

Joseph A. McGinnies was not a native son but a Ripleyite from childhood. Any public school education he ever received was local and sufficiently adequate that he attained the richly deserved title "First Citizen of Chautauqua." His field was politics, first on local and then on county and state levels. He might have become a New York State governor except for political promises considered sacred, and it was unfortunate that he was foreign-born for there were those who considered him presidential timbre. Joe McGinnies was the president of this group one year and perhaps one of you can tell me when. The Lt. Gov., 22 state senators, and 29 assemblymen attended the 1945 McGinnies funeral and shortly thereafter Gov. Thomas E. Dewey placed a floral piece on his local grave. Incidentally, if I mistake it not, the funeral was held in this church.

Robert M Rownd, Sr was a citizen whose memory we cherish. He lived among us from 1924 until 1949. Seemingly proudest of his Civil War participation, the patriotism in his soldier heart never faltered.

During his terms as National Commander of the G A R during 1935 and 1947, Ripley was National Headquarters of that august group.

At death, Rownd was 104 years old. He had been the last surviving Civil War Veteran in Ripley and Chautauqua County, the next to the last in New York State and one of about 12 Union Veterans in the United States.

One of many [quote-unquote] "children" who made names for themselves in the world outside of Ripley was Howard Lillie whose two sisters still live here. Howard was about 5 when his family came to town. A graduating member of the Class of 1919, holder of degrees from Allegany College and University of Wisconsin, Dr Lillie joined the Corning Glass Co. in 1927 and rose rapidly to executive capacity. He was credited with many patents from his research work much of which dealt in the field of outer space. It was a great tragedy when, on a business trip, Dr. Lillie was killed in a jet plane crash near Brussels, Belgium during Feb 1961.

Let us touch briefly upon other images:

Following the Civil War, Rev. William L. Hyde accepted an 1865 call to the two Presbyterian churches--one was this church--and, while in residence at 119 W Main St, wrote what has been considered the best history of Chautauqua County's 112th NY Infantry Volunteers of which he had been Chaplain.

Andrew W. Young, during East Ripley residence, authored locally, at least in part, his 1875 History of Chautauqua County.

William Jennings Bryan slept here the night of Aug 31, 1896, guest of the West Main Street Lyman Bennetts. Bryan, campaigning for the presidency, was in the area for a Chautauqua Institution appearance. Editor LeRoy Stringham had engineered the visit to Ripley and Bryan spoke that afternoon at the Macabee Lodge-sponsored Town Picnic. Thousands came to hear him but his speech, reportedly, was short and poor, and, during the speech, the local bank was robbed of about \$1000!

Another presidential campaign, another Chautauqua Institution speech Alf M Landon was the Republican candidate opposing incumbent President Roosevelt and it was an excruciatingly hot day during August 1936 when an enormous crowd gathered at the Ripley depot to greet the Kansas governor Sunflowers sprouted from telephone poles and other unusual places Landon and Charley Hamilton were friends of long standing and Landon spent that night in the Venetian Room, most elegant of all the mansion guest rooms

Ripley has its own version of the Casey Jones saga Another was at the throttle that May day during 1902 but Herbert L Down was firing the boiler for the speed-breaking trial run to determine the practicability of proposed Twentieth Century railroad service between New York City and Chicago Down never lived in Ripley but he courted and wed a local lass named Nellie Perkins, so he visited frequently and sleeps with her now in a local cemetery

Architecturally speaking

We are at least 175 year's worth of a little bit of *this and that* No, there are no more shanty shelters or log cabins However, a few of our houses bear earmarks of the 1810-25 period when the earliest framing was done and when the floors of the best rooms were covered with homespun yarn carpets considered exclusive to Ripley, so unique were their brilliant colors and woven patterns

Our first brick homestead, said to have been the one built for Charles Forsyth during the 1820s, is considered by a 1977 county study to be the best Federal style structure in the county and the only one with "a Mereador fan in the gable and transom over the door"

It is relatively easy to identify the houses of the 1830s to 70s, to recognize the remnant elegance of the Victorian Era, to appreciate the unique opulence of the 1926 Hamilton Mansion And attractive home building continues in our small bedroom community

Let us consider specific eras. Perhaps most colorful were prohibition and Gretna Green days.

Stories about the rum running days between 1917 and 1933 are scarce. Nevertheless, we have collected a few. Strange and unusual signals spoke of clear coasts for dark of the night beach unloadings of contraband and, on occasion, maffia-type transfers.

Gretna Green episodes, on the other hand, could fill a book. It is my speculation that the era started during the 1880s, brought about, of course, by the more stringent marriage laws of other states. It peaked prior to changes in New York State law. Notwithstanding out-of-state signs which proclaimed that "Dimples cause more damage than dynamite" and "If you call her dear, it usually proves expensive", couples came from far and near and more marriages took place here than in any other town the same size in the United States. Marriage was as simple as securing a license from the Town Clerk and choosing among one of 8 ministers or JPs to perform the ceremony. Moreover, the Town Clerk received no stated salary but was amply rewarded with half of every \$2 license fee. Weekdays, weekends and holidays, it was all the same--the marrying business was a 24-hour industry. There are several recorded anecdotes of enterprising young lads relative to the profitability of directing prospective couples to the Town Clerk, a marrying official and one of numerous tourist homes. The vintage year was 1936 when approximately 3000 marriages took place. Things were never quite the same after September 1, 1937.

This and more is written upon the pages of our history, but in Gulf War vernacular, my time has been attrited. Thank you for calling on us during our Triquasquicentennial Year. Please come again.

Marie B. McCutcheon
Historian, Town of Ripley [1957-present]