SPEAKING OF SMALL TOWNS

The birthyear of a little town calls out long memories and the dust from history books.
Menfolk wear bristling beards and the women talk about poke bonnets and the day great-grandma wed.
Vast wonders have been wrought these hundred-fifty years
Out of bright hopes, hard work, and stinging tears.
They say, "Look what we have instead of covered wagons over Indian trails!"
The birthday of a town is more than this.
It is enduring faith in genesis,
While a kindly God looks down to hear the steady heartbeat of a town.
Adapted from Helen Adams "Centennial"

Last year, Ripley became ninth of the original twenty-seven sister towns of Chautauqua County to celebrate her sesquicentennial. Proud to share her heritage with you, she cordially invites you to open the pages of her history book to see what lies therein.

Once upon a time, there was a dense forest which the sunlight scarcely penetrated. It was the most magnificent forest in the northern latitudes; and few white men had laid eyes upon it. The heavy silence in what was to become Chautauqua was broken now and again by the trill of a bird, by the howl of a wild animal, or by the rustle of an invisible indian. For these were the hunting grounds of the Iroquois; and the pioneers told of a camp-site in the shade of a wild cherry tree.

The genesis of our town, and that of all other Chautauqua County towns, occurred at the end of the 18th century. The United States herself had only "come of age" when Joseph Ellicott commenced his survey of what was then termed the "far west". The survey included lands on the western-most bounds of New York State which were, eventually, to become designated as the township of Ripley; and the well-worn Indian trail of the hunting Iroquois was to be constantly improved and modified to become the hundred-seventy-year-long main thorofare which traverses the village to this day.

The newly opened lands attracted several different groups of people. There were New Englanders who felt their lands had become exhausted with usage. Other New Englanders had already migrated to eastern and central New York State but in their hearts the challenge of the unknown still beat

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strong. There were early Pennsylvania settlers who found themselves unable to secure clear title to land in that state. And a few came the long, perilous way from Europe in search of something better in America. Whatever their backgrounds, these were brave souls who quelled the awesome wilderness which was Chautauqua. Nor did they leave empty footprints, for direct descendants reap today the fruits of their yesteryear's labors.

Dickering for lands in what is now Ripley, James McMahan contracted a large acreage in 1801 for the express purpose of re-sale and became, without question, our first real-estate entrepreneur.

Far away in Ireland, a restlessness took possession of Alexander Cochrane. He and Nancy assembled their children and undertook a wearisome sea voyage, a rigorous cross-state journey, the final hundred-mile sail along the wooded shores of Lake Erie, disembarking at the mouth of Twenty-Mile Creek. In 1804 he exchanged gold for acres and became the first person in the entire county to hold clear title to his land.

At Pittstown, New York early in the 1800's, the close-knit and wealthy Prendergast family formed a caravan which journeyed south to Nashville, Tennessee; but they found a strange and alien land. In mutual agreement, they turned their wagons northward and arrived in due time in Erie, Pennsylvania. A decision was made to settle on Ellicott's newly surveyed lands; but inhabitation was sparse and provisions scant; and most of the company wintered in Canada, returning the following spring. Thomas Prendergast remained, however, and came in September of 1805 to territory in what is now Ripley. Of pure homespun is the salvaged memory of one who often watched Thomas sit upon his front porch enjoying to the utmost "the pure air of heaven and the scenery about him".

Also, the Truesdale brothers came. They built taverns and James' house straddled the New York-Pennsylvania border. How clever, for in this way he purchased his license from either state, as convenient, and moved the bar accordingly.

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By 1805 ten or twelve clearings dotted the trail as it passed through Westfield and Ripley.

Charles Forsyth of Connecticut had paused in Pennsylvania but shouldered his axe shortly and proceeded, on foot, to select the choicest lands he had ever seen. He constructed a log cabin but built in 1834 the first brick home in town. The house of Federal design still stands and, loosely speaking, still protects its first family for his lands have been continuously owned and occupied by descendants.

Those who came before 1811 found it necessary to travel to the land office in Batavia to make their land and tax payments. Many a tale is told of the sharing of one good pair of boots for the purpose of making a presentable appearance in Batavia and the "land office business" phrase was born of these times.

No doctor came until 1820; but assuredly, birth and death were with our ancestors from the time of their arrival. Birth was anticipated and executed with the ingenuity of the mid-wife; death, though never anticipated, occurred nonetheless and many dear ones were laid to rest in unmarked graves. When Olive Dickson died in 1812, she was buried under a tree on the home farm. Three years later, her husband deeded for public use the part of East Ripley Cemetery which included her grave.

Buffalo was in the smouldering ruins of War of 1812 action when Oliver Stetson, Sr. passed to reach the place of his son's settlement in what was shortly to become Ripley; and John Post owned the pre-Ripley tavern which still stands and which was the scene of many early public meetings.

One who came in 1815 had a past record of achievement and another had a future commitment. John Bell Dinsmore, nephew of two New Hampshire governors, had travelled south to visit another uncle who was a government agent among the Choctaw Indians. Left in temporary charge of the post, he and a young friend refused to allow General Andrew ~~Stonewall~~ Jackson to pass with a contingent of slaves. In spite of this, Jackson ordered his

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slaves on; but Dinsmore and Smith had armed Indians in readiness and Jackson was forced to secure the necessary government pass before proceeding. It was in this wise that John Bell Dinsmore became one of the first conquerors of "Old Hickory" who later became seventh president of the United States. On his return from the south, the 22-year old Dinsmore passed through the Ripley part of what was, by then, Portland. He purchased land and remained for the balance of his long life.

In the same year, the Gideon Goodrich family came; and the man-grown sons, Anson and George, built a tannery where they engaged in shoe-making and paid off the men who cleared their lands in leather work and leather goods. In later years, a baby boy was born to Anson and Susan. Nothing spectacular was expected of the new child, but he was named Benjamin Franklin Goodrich; and he grew up to establish the first rubber factory in the United States.

Other pioneers formed our advance guard--enough by now to warrant the formation of a new township. No ribbons of concrete led to the new lands. They came by water and ice into the harbors along Lake Erie or along the uncleared forest trails. Some came on foot. Some came on horseback. Some came alone and some came with families. Their first task was to make a clearing and build a log cabin. And to continue the clearing of the virgin timber to the very eve of the Twentieth Century. Generally speaking, it took more than one lifetime of labor to open a farm in the woods. Would any of us, I wonder, accept such a challenge?

According to the Memorable Events section of the World Almanac, nothing of reportable importance occurred during 1816. Forgive us that we think otherwise. The morning was undeniably chill for the year was known as the "Cold Season" and ice formed in every month. The ensuing year was appropriately termed the "Starving Season" for there had been a complete crop failure. On March 1, 1816, by virtue of population, the Town of Ripley was separated from her parent town, Portland.

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The War of 1812 had been a tribulation to the pioneers; but Amos Atwater, a soldier of that conflict, was chosen first supervisor of the new town. Perhaps he fought under General Eleazur W. Ripley in whose honor the town was named. Atwater lived in a house presently occupied by the Patterson Crandall's of Westfield, for it must be borne in mind that our original boundaries were the Pennsylvania State line on the west and Apple River on the east. Does this statement startle you? It needn't. The explanation is simple. "Riviere Aux Pomes", or "Apple River", was the French designation of what we know today as Chautauqua Creek.

Ripley was now launched on her first half century, a period which extended through the Civil War and into the era of Industrial Revolution.

The incoming pioneers and settlers lit fires which were to illuminate the night skies for twenty-five years or more in their efforts to clear the land. Their fires produced their first cash crop in the form of wood ashes and as their needs demanded, so were their wishes fulfilled. Early records give evidence of tavern, smith shop, still house, tan yard, sawmill, and store-ashery.

School districts were laid out and initial efforts made to educate the children of the township. Three inspectors of common schools selected the teachers and their examination included such questions as:

"Do you know a sure cure for itch?"
(to which the correct answer was, "Yes, sir. Itch Ointment.")

and

"Can you wrestle?"
("Yes, sir.")

A saying during the days of the Holland Land Survey that there was "no sabbath west of the Genesee" was soon refuted by early organization of church groups. In what became Ripley, a few Methodist families had formed an alliance by 1811; and by 1818 several Presbyterians separated from the original Cross Roads membership. The Presbyterians met for six years in homes or public places and then subscribed to build on the site of the East Ripley cemetery. An unfinished church was struck by lightning

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and burned to the ground; but its builders replaced it with a white frame structure which had green shutters and a steeple so tall that boats on the lake took their bearings from it. The Methodists built their first house of worship around 1840. Upon entering, one found himself in a vestibule which extended across the front. Stairways at either end led to the galleries where the girls occupied one side and the boys sat on the other. The body of the church contained four rows of seats; and the elevated pulpit had a walnut communion table in front of it. Seats to the west of the pulpit were occupied by influential church membership, while seats to the east were called the "amen corners" and there sat those who often responded to the sermons in that fashion.

Three perpendicular cuts or blazes on the trees was the method employed to mark the future roads. This was the hold-over of a surveyors' practice originating in the time of Britain's George III when all roads belonged to the king and were marked with his name. Early politicians devoted much time to the establishment of these roads. The main road, following the Indian Trail, was marked between 1801 and 1810. Original survey of the Lake Road was made in 1817 and included eight and a quarter miles from John McMahan's mill-house on Chautauqua Creek to the Pennsylvania State line. Previous to the time that this could be made passable, the settlers used the beach and bank of the lake. From the beginning, it was evident that some roads had been poorly planned and that others were necessary. The surveyors' descriptions include such gems as:

> beginning at a large oak in the center of the Buffalo Road at Alexander Cochrane's
>
> 2 rods easterly from the first row of apple trees
>
> southeast corner of George Whitehill's stoop

Ripley's first native son to achieve more than local fame was born in 1819. John Bidwell moved on to the west and became "the father of the raisin industry".

General elections of the early period, and until the 1830's, took

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three days to consummate. During these days, the ballot box was moved about to various polling places and carried to the home of an election inspector at night with nary a thought to the possibility of unscrupulous stuffing.

The clearings of the settlers were called "improvements" and it was necessary that they keep their animals in "enclosures". Violations of this ordinance resulted in remunerations to the Overseers of the Poor who handled the largest single item in the early and unsophisticated budgets.

A curious occurrence during the formative years was the coming, night and morning in the early spring, of enormous flocks of wild pigeons. They appeared in the sky as huge, black clouds and the noise of their wings sounded like distant thunder. Descending into the forests, their combined weight would break the tree limbs. A spring snowstorm in 1834 caused great numbers of them to perish and the flocks had ceased to exist by mid-century. However, Pigeon Road acquired its name because of this phenomenon and the custom of the people to kill the birds with clubs.

Meanwhile, a village had been growing on the westernmost boundary of Portland. It was, appropriately enough, called Westfield, and when its people applied for independence in 1829, parts of Portland and Ripley were taken to make up its area.

Still the settlers saw nothing but forests. In their own words, "Two or three settlements were scattered about, but they were so small as to be hardly noticeable to a migratory crow passing over them." The lake was not yet in view and each man's improvement was clearly outlined by the native forests. With the coming of sawmills, framed homes began to blend in with the log cabins, examples of which are still much in evidence. The predominating architecture was that of the story-and-a-half structure with its side toward the road. A hall extending the width of the building opened into square rooms; and a kitchen and woodshed of one story adjoined the main building at the rear. The kitchen always had a large fireplace

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and oven. The floors were often of ash which could be highly polished; but within a few years the ladies had made carpets said to have been exclusive of Ripley so brilliant were their colors and so harmonious their shadings.

It seems whimsical now, but in a hundred years it may be said, "They came in a gas-powered station wagon." Nevertheless, in 1831 Gameliel Parker loaded what goods he could carry on an ox-sled for the trek to a new homestead in Ripley uplands. When it became evident that there was no room for the red rocker, Renewed sat down in her chair and vowed that if it did not come, neither would she. The chair came and is a sentimental treasure of Gameliel's descendants.

Putting out of Portland Harbor at 2 p.m., the sailboat "Barcelona" lay over the night in Dunkirk because of a rough lake. Lodgings aboard the boat were so uncomfortable with water washing over the lower deck and shoe deep in the ladies' cabin that many of the vomiting passengers went ashore to spend the night in a public house. Resuming the journey at six the following morning, Buffalo was reached by 11. On a similar return trip, young Horace Sawin came in 1832 and spent his first night on Chautauqua County soil in the comparatively new Barcelona Inn then kept by Joshua Tinker. I feel compelled to digress here long enough to mention the twelve-holer which was removed during later renovations; nor can I say why it amuses me except that one simply fails to appreciate the need of the settlers for such commodious facilities. Proceeding to the hill section, the Sawins' took up permanent residence in Ripley. It was Horace Sawin who, in later years, penned memoirs which are vividly descriptive of our early history; and it was his great-granddaughter, Mrs. Howard Ward of Silver Creek, who recognized and cherished their value and shared them with us.

The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 had heralded a vast tide of westward immigration and eastward movement of huge droves of livestock

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to city markets. On one day, by actual count, a hundred covered wagons passed through. All of this had a stimulating effect on the economy. There was work for several blacksmiths. There was need of many inns and taverns, for the day of the stage coach had also arrived. This state of affairs continued to exist until the coming in 1852 of the Buffalo & Erie railroad which ended temporarily at Ripley.

Several hamlets in the township had by now acquired designations; and a flurry of activity developed in Quincy as one of the hamlets was called. Quincy had been in existence since the 1820's. Origin of the name is shrouded in mystery, but surely there is a connection between it and an early settler who had roots in one of the New England towns of that name. Everyone believed that this was where the town would grow because Quincy was to have a depot; and the hamlet did flourish to become the main village in the township. Trains were turned on a Y and passengers were transported by stage to the Pennsylvania trains on the far side of Twenty-Mile Creek until such time as the railroads were connected. The people now had direct links with the outside world.

In 1854 Ripley produced another son who, with his contemporaries, was to become responsible for changing the economic trends of the Federal government; and his name was Richard Theodore Ely.

In January of 1861 the first shot of the Civil War was fired and Ripley, with other Chautauqua County towns, sent her quotas of men into the world's first mechanical war for it had become necessary to resort to the drafting of soldiers. Consider the joy of the 10-year old Portland girl who later came to Quincy Village that the insurrection was over. As her parents discussed the war, and in the innocence of her childhood, she took literally Lee's threat to water his horses in Lake Erie. She truly believed the war was coming to her very door step.

Sara Burton Walker

The unfolding second half of the first hundred years witnessed the development of an industry significantly important to the economic health of today's community. As the Lake Erie shore of Chautauqua County was

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cleared, it became a grain and dairy section; but horticulturists slowly evolved the fact that essentially it was a fruit growing region. It is, in fact, one of few places in the entire world uniquely suited to Concord grape culture; and of all towns in the belt, Ripley lies most securely nestled between lake and hills which exert the influences governing a usually successful harvest. Grapes, introduced at Portland, became second nature to the boy born there who grew up, married and undertook a honeymoon to Erie behind a horse named "Old Genus". The newlyweds reached the pretty village of Quincy by dusk and sought shelter at the inn of Henry Fairchild. The year was 1844 and no automobile frightened "Old Genus" nor did train whistles disturb the slumbers of those at the inn. The returning couple established an enviable farm enterprise which Harris Community interests eventually desired to purchase. The owner placed a large value upon it and felt secure from any temptation to sell; but an agent came one day and said, "Mr. Harris elects to accept your offer." The property was relinquished; and our young man set out upon a trip which took him as far west as Omaha, Nebraska to search out choice lands for relocation. He viewed all manner of farmlands and returned at the end of seven weeks content in the knowledge that Chautauqua County was, indeed, the king's favorite jewel. He chose a new home and farm in the village of Quincy to which place he brought his past experience with grape culture and in 1869 Hiram A. Burton planted the first acre of that fruit in Ripley. Grainlands were rapidly converted to vinelands which quadrupled their profit potential.

Dr. Elbridge G. Simons commenced a medical practice in the late 1860's which was to span the balance of the century. The young lads of the village told of a rotting cadaver in his manure pile and the skeleton was later used in his medical observations. Simons opened the first drug store of which there is record and no one dreamed that his sixteen-year old clerk was destined to become involved in a political career which

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would lead to the threshold of governorship; but Joseph A. McGinnies did not accept this challenge. The Republicans may even have lost the election this year; but ahead of being a statesman, McGinnies was a gentleman. A dead man's promise led another into the campaign arena.

New homes continued to be built and the age of gingerbread became manifest.

Capricious winds fanned the flame which destroyed business buildings in 1880. The brick Randall Block rose from these ashes the following year. It housed store units downstairs; but its large and spacious upstairs room was an Opera House and the site of many cultural performances and social activities in the years which followed. History was to repeat itself on the same site eighty-four years later.

One summer day in July, the twelve-year old George Ryer sat in the open window of an East Main Street residence and watched the first issue of the Ripley Local Review come off the press. Editorially, John Hale Cobb promised a media of news which would: "hit every obnoxious political head that shows itself be it Republican, Democratic, Greenbacker or under any other name whatsoever. We look upon so-called politicians, generally speaking, as a shrewd and scheming class whose love of country is only measured by the salary of the office that they are seeking." And this was written eighty-five years ago.

Editor Cobb, in his historically valuable Volume I, No. I, reminded his readers in his own inimitable way that "Ripley is entirely out of lawyers" but rendered a further accounting of healthy business activity which seems to have existed through 1931.

Editorship of the local paper passed through several hands before LeRoy Stringham took over and shortened the name to Ripley Review. It was Mr. Stringham who promoted the coming of William Jennings Bryan to speak at the Macabee Lodge picnic in 1896. Of the 'golden-tongued orator', it was recorded: "Bryan's speech at 1:30, short and poor."

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In his 1897 memoirs, Horace Sawin says, "Our latest surprise is the horseless carriage." Though it took many years and is best observed in retrospect, the influences of Mr. Sawin's 'latest surprise' would ultimately transform the face of an entire nation, let alone that of a small town. The day of the automobile was coming. Believe it or not, one Ripleyite drove his new vehicle into the barn, shouted 'whoa', and crashed through the other side. Men mastered driving under the precept that experience was the only teacher; and boys soon learned the art of borrowing the family Model T and substituting kerosene for the more expensive gasoline, though they could at no time allow the engine to stop or it would never start with the cheaper fuel.

Public utilities were introduced in the community during the mid-1890's with the forming of Water and Telephone Companies. Locally franchised gas wells had for some time been a source of light in some homes and business places; but in 1914 electricity was manufactured by a dynamo and gas engine and used largely in the beginning to light the streets until the bewitching hour of midnight.

Growing up in the political image of his grandfather, Charles Mann Hamilton was well prepared for Federal Congress early in the twentieth century. He always chose to call Ripley home. Using a portion of his birthplace as a nucleus, a showplace mansion in the style of Italian Villa was built in 1924. It turned its lovely back to the street and overlooked formal gardens and fountained pool. Its hanging black marble staircase had been a challenge to its architects; but in it Bertha Lamberton Hamilton had 'a place for everything and everything in its place'. When its occupants died in the 1940's there were no children to inherit the estate which was left for the care and comfort of animals--small wonder that it is called the strangest will in the annals of Chautauqua County history.

The late 1920's ushered in the period of time during which Ripley gained the reputation of being a "Gretna Green". Laws enacted in nearby

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states brought thousands of couples to the village for their marriages. A present day citizen tells of directing young lovers in the wee hours of the morning to the town clerk for a license, to a justice of the peace for the ceremony, and finally to the accommodations of one of the several tourist homes. Marriage laws were changed in 1937 and Ripley lost her unique distinction.

History has its tarnishments as well as its embellishments. As a result of prohibition, the rum runners became familiar with certain Ripley beaches for the unloading of their contraband and this was true all along Lake Erie shores.

The Great Depression descended with the 1931 closing of the First National Bank and when others followed suit in 1933, the local editor commented, "Now the rest of the country knows what Ripley felt like when the bank closed." There has never since been a banking facility and citizens transact much of their fiscal business out of town.

It was predicted that the opening of the New York State Thruway would commit us to the status of ghost town. In truth, it opened not a moment too soon. People found it frustratingly difficult to enter the flow of Main Street traffic and the relief the Thruway afforded is re-emphasized with this summer's detouring procedures.

The moving of the Federal Post Office eliminated an only drug store and forced an ever increasing dependence of Ripley residents upon the services of her neighbors.

On New Years Day 1965 fire of unknown origin again destroyed business buildings in the center of the village. This was a heart-rending blow for the profile of the town was, by now, primarily residential in character and almost totally without the economic stimulus to rebuild. There was, however, sufficient demand for a new grocery facility; and it is doubtful if another market within many miles boasts the red carpet entrance which ours does. It is also true that customers from near and far avail them-

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selves of the unusual values and selections of a hardware-variety store. The economy could support more but on the one hand we have failed to attract enterprise and on the other we have become habitually addicted to the wider freedoms of choice which our automobiles have given us.

We are told that we will become part of a strip city which will exist between Buffalo and Chicago. We believe this will come to pass, for people continue to come onto the earth and God is no longer in the business of making land.

This and more is written upon the pages of 55,000 days. We are not sorry that we live in a small town. Rather, we revel under sun-drenched skies and are not particularly hungry for the industry which could turn them into chemical sewers. We leave home briefly in anticipation of return. The pleasure of cresting the last hill which hides the panoramic expanse of Lake Erie is unmitigated. The hazy foothills of the Alleghenies form a summer backdrop which is surpassed nowhere in the entire world. Our grass roots are one hundred and fifty years deep. Speaking of small towns, indeed it is peaceful in the country.

Marie B. McCutcheon
Read at Chautauqua County Historical Society
Presbyterian Church, Westfield, New York
Saturday, August 5, 1967

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