

Historical Highlights

Sand Lake Historical Society

Volume 23, No. 2

Winter 1996-1997

Christmastime Open House

Christmas is a special time of the year. A time to celebrate and visit with friends and share the joy of the season. On Sunday, December 15, from 2:00-5:00 p.m., an open house will be held at the home of Joan and Alan Fuess at 65 Schumann road, Sand Lake (off Routes 66 & 43). Their home will be decorated for Christmas — including three trees. This interesting turn-of-the-century Victorian home has been featured on the historical house tours and was part of the September meeting program.



This open house is limited to Society members and their guests. Homemade refreshments will be served. The cost is \$5.00 per person. Income from this fund raiser will be used to help close the Society's budget gap.

Reservations, or requests for a ride, may be made by calling Bea Danks at 674-5030, or Linda Ormsby at (home) 674-3624 or (work) 674-3388. *Reservations are required and must be made by December 10.* Come and share in the holiday festivities.

See you December 15.

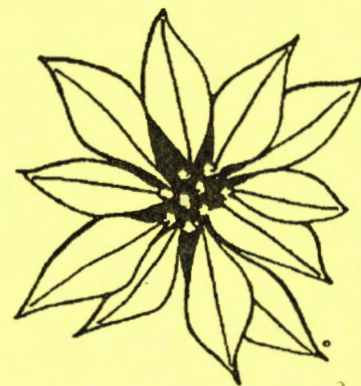
From the President

During the preceding months, the Sand Lake Historical Society has increased membership and presented very interesting and entertaining programs. We have, of necessity, changed meeting places several times, as well as the hour of assembly. We now meet at 7:30 p.m. Attendance has been very good, despite rainy weather and conflicts with other community scheduling.

Programming for the approaching new year is in progress, and we are planning a meeting of interest to everyone. Our need to identify and record the contents and origins of the many photographs and documents entrusted to the safekeeping of the Historical Society will be the focus of the January meeting. We look forward to everyone's participation, so that we can bring background and life to these "faces and places" of the past.

I look forward to enjoying our Christmas afternoon at the home of Alan and Joan Fuess. Thank you *all* for your talents and generous support. May the glow of our shared experiences be reflected in your personal Holiday celebrations!!

Sincerely, Bea Danks, President



A short history of an Immigrant William G. Higgitt, 1865-1943

My maternal grandfather was born in the small town of Wednesbury, Staffordshire, England, a part of the so-called "Black Country." Staffordshire is an inland county about 100 miles northwest of London. The nearest large city is Birmingham.

Wednesbury does not appear on present-day maps because of its small size. However, it is an ancient city, and I was lucky enough to find in on an old map reproduced in that wonderful magazine *National Geographic*. The town is situated on a high hill, and Druids first settled there because of that hill. They always chose high ground to erect their temples in order to be near their god because, like most of us today, they, too, thought their god resided in Heaven.

The Romans appeared next and, after evicting the Druids, they fortified the hill. A

Christian church was first erected on the site in 700 A.D. At present, St. Bartholomew's (Church of England) occupies the site. My grandfather was baptized in St. Bartholomew's in a font that is now more than 900 years old and still in service.

The Black Country lies between Birmingham and Wolverhampton, some 15 miles in length. It is one of the chief iron and steel manufacturing districts in England. According to the American Consul in Birmingham in 1868, "The Black Country, black by day and red by night cannot be matched, for vast and varied production, by any other space of equal radius on the surface of the globe."

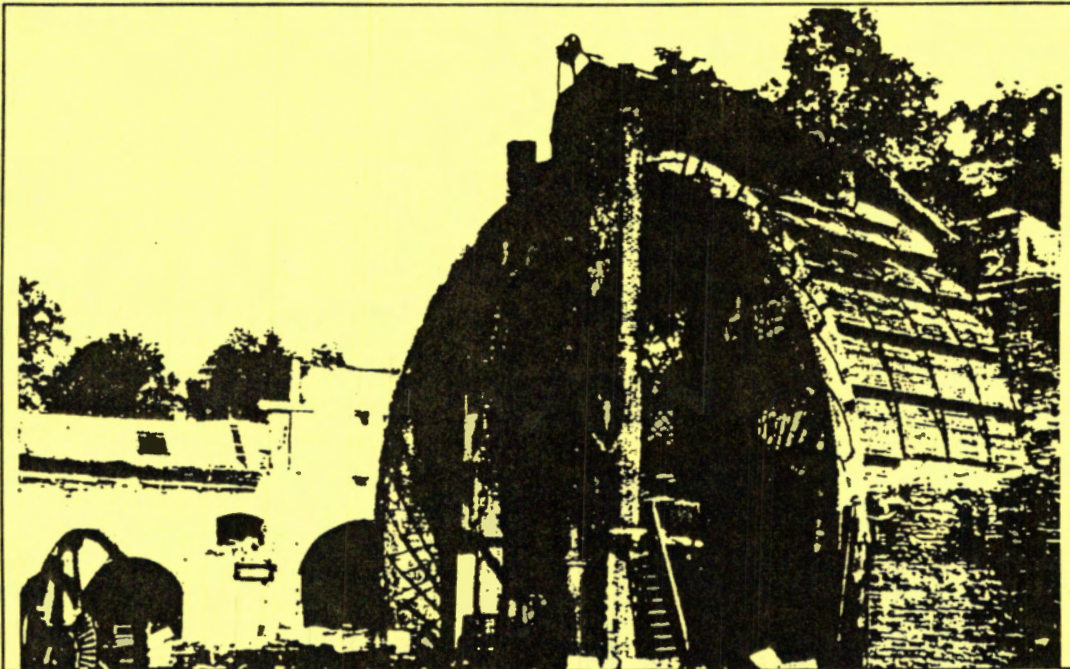
I don't know why my ancestors decided to leave England. Perhaps it might have been because of the

living conditions in The Black Country. The air must have been foul with the smoke that made the sky black all day and the fumes from the fires that made the sky red all night. At any rate, my great-grandparents, their daughter Prudence and my grandfather left England for America in 1879. They sailed from Liverpool and landed in the United States at New York City, then up the Hudson River to Troy, where many families from England were already settled. My grandfather, age 14, went immediately to work in the Upper Works of the Burden Iron Compa-

ny, where the "Niagara of Water Wheels" was located.

The wheel, erected in 1851 and last operated in 1897, was located on the Wynantskill Creek. It was an overshot wheel 60 ft. in diameter and 22 ft. wide, contained 36

buckets, each over 6 ft. deep. It weighed 234 tons, used 4500 cubic feet of water per minute, made two revolutions per minute and produced 278 horsepower as it operated. Each night the wheel was shut down by cutting off its water supply, and this allowed the ponds and lakes (primarily the three Burden lakes) that supplied water for the wheel to regain their capacity. However, when water was again introduced to the wheel on the next working day, and the upper four buckets were filled, the wheel would not begin to turn as the weight was insufficient to induce movement. My grandfather's first job was to stand near the bottom of the wheel and pry the gears with a bar until a second, third or fourth row of buckets was filled and their combined weight started the first



Sand Lake Historical Society Board of Trustees 1996-97

John Allendorph (1997)
283-4838

E. Berenice Danks (1998)
President
674-5030

Winifred Edwards (1998)
283-1218

Ross French (1998)
Recording Secretary
674-5710

Chet Gavryck (1998)
674-5515

Arthea Gibbs (1999)
674-3127

Marion Hacker (1999)
674-3191

John Kacharian (1999)
674-3587

Marge Larsen (1997)
674-3209

Andrew Mace (1999)
766-5413

Barbara Mohan (1999)
283-1067

Linda Ormsby (1998)
Vice President
& *Corresponding Secretary*
674-3624

Stanley Supkis (1997)
Treasurer
674-5172

revolution of the wheel.

It was a slow, arduous and wet job. As the rows of buckets filled and before movement began, the excess water cascaded down until a new row of buckets could be pried into place to be filled. I don't know how long he had that job, or how much he was paid, but he worked for the Burden Iron Company for more than 60 years, finally retiring in 1940. When he retired, he had worked more years than any other employee in the plant.

It was the custom of the Burden Company to shut down two weeks each year to do necessary maintenance and make needed repairs to the plant. At the same time, employees could take a much-needed vacation, but without pay. With a wife and eight children to feed, my grandfather couldn't afford to be idle, so each summer during those two weeks he went to Utica, New York, and picked hops for extra money. Life became harder for the family with the death of his wife at age 47 in 1919, but the older children were able to help him financially and by caring for their younger brothers and sisters. That's the way things were done not too many years ago.

My grandfather died December 3, 1943, after a long, productive life. He is buried with his wife Agnes (Glasheen) Higgitt in St. Mary's Cemetery, Troy. —
John Allendorph

Ruthea Backer

Kind, quiet, talented — Ruthea Backer brought bright emphasis to the Sand Lake Historical Society programs with keenly appropriate refreshment table centerpieces.

Soldiers and drums, boats and steamers, speaker-box radios, miniature landscapes, Old St. Nick, decorated eggs, Irish blarney, the handcrafted facsimile of the Crooked Lake Hotel were some of the many props Ruthea pulled from her collection of Americana to form memorable designs, coordinating the table decor with the evening's program. The arrangements were always a topic of delight.

For each month's presentation, she used her eye for detail and color, her designer instinct for form and shape, her humor for the whimsical, her warm appreciation for the folksy; she always achieved what was most appropriate for the evening.

Ruthea has been most faithful each month for more years than can be recalled. The Historical Society has gained much from her many talents and has been enhanced by her interest and her quiet, sweet presence.

Ruthea passed away on November 22, 1996. She will be greatly missed.

Thank you, Ruthea.



Historian Reporting

It's been almost a year since I've been Town Historian. The overwhelming awe of 20 years of collections still amazes me whenever I come across a "new find" in the Historian's office.

My goal has been to index, consolidate and cross-reference this treasure trove of historical information. With the help of several volunteers, we've gotten a "start" on this endeavor. So far, we've indexed the Historian articles appearing in *The Advertiser* and town of Sand Lake articles appearing in *The Echo*. We've begun to index death notices, done selective clipping and duplicating (on acid-free paper) news articles in *The Advertiser* and *The Record*. We've also begun to catalog the books in the Historian's office for inclusion in the Sand Lake Town Library's automated cataloging system.

Thank you to the following persons for your help in the past year: John Allendorph, Pat Detmar, Dianne Freeman, Ross French, Artie Gibbs, Jennie Gundrum, Marge Larsen, Bob Lilly, Andy Mace, Iona Mosher, Judy Rowe and Rosemary Supkis.

We've had some interesting encounters:

- discussing with Bill Hoffay the World War I medals and diary of his grandfather, William Hoffay.
- verifying with T. Carl Racquet that Reichard's Lake was also referred to as Racquet Lake. He's pursuing the belief that his grandfather was instrumental in it receiving the Racquet name.
- enjoying the preparation for a presentation of a program on the hotels, camps and resorts on the three Burden Lakes to the Burden Lake Improvement Association.
- expanding my knowledge at a seminar on the MARC (machine-readable cataloging) format for cataloging archival materials.
- assisting the Palatine Yorkers in having their fall conference in Sand Lake. They chose the oldest public building in the town, Sand Lake Baptist Church, as their location.
- preparing materials on the Fox Mansion for the Rensselaer County Historical Society's display on dating your house, for their booth at the Schaghticoke Fair.
- Accompanying Judy Rowe as she placed American flags on the graves of Revolutionary War soldiers in Sand Lake Union Cemetery for Memorial Day.

There are continuing projects and goals for which volunteer assistance would be most welcome:

- indexing the death notices
- cross-referencing materials by topics
- completing the cataloging of books
- entering information on computer spreadsheets for selective sorting alphabetically, chronologically or topically
- survey of town organizations to determine their efforts at preserving their history

■ working in conjunction with the Sand Lake Historical Society on congruent policies for accession of donated materials, conservation methods for holdings, security of holdings and accessibility of information to the public in preparation for applying for a discretionary grant for consulting services on records management.

It's been a good orientation year. I've enjoyed the support and encouragement of the Historical Society, and I look forward to continued collaborative effort in preserving our heritage and making it come alive when we revisit our past events and the people involved in "making history." — *Mary D. French, Town Historian*

Regan preserves town history of Sand Lake

Preserving the Town of Sand Lake's history and passing on a legacy of education to the public is important to the community we live in. New York State has designated Oct. 13 through 19 as Archives Week 1996, a week geared to improving public awareness about town record keeping and the importance of archival repositories.

In keeping with this theme, Colleen Regan, Town Clerk, Records Management Officer, and Freedom of Information Officer, accomplished a great feat for the Town of Sand Lake. That should go on record.

Soon into her term of office, Regan became aware that the town records were in complete disarray. Due to lack of adequate storage, records could be found in a variety of places including under office desks, in cardboard boxes, on shelves, and in a secure vault in Regan's office. Records are housed in the Town Hall's basement area where they are stored on cold, moist floors which promote mold. There are archival documents in the historian's office which should be in a controlled temperature environment. Some inactive records are even stored in a closet in the Town Highway Garage. Basically, records could be found all over the place and subject to destructive elements.

There was no way to centralize, preserve, and allow proper access to public records. What Regan saw was "no monitored program" for records, which motivated her to implement a records management program.

In February 1995, The Town of Sand Lake applied for a SARA (New York State Archives and Records Administration) grant. It took Regan several weeks to prepare the comprehensive grant and it was the first time ever the Town had applied for a grant to create a records management program.

In June 1995, Sand Lake was awarded the SARA grant through the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund. The town was one of only 390 local governments selected throughout New York State to achieve this distinction. Although the grant was awarded in June, funding from the State Education



Department did not come until September. The deadline for the grant's completion was set for June 30, 1996.

Regan went into action and hired two inventory clerks who were already familiar with the records. They are Regan's two Deputy Town Clerks, Betty Thornton and JoAnne St. Claire.

In the mornings, Thornton and St. Claire were mild-mannered clerks, but in the afternoons they became determined inventory clerks who went through every piece of paper while working in all kinds of conditions; some rather uncomfortable. They inventoried every department, every closet, the storage space downstairs, the space at the garage and all the nooks and crannies.

For 625 hours, they inventoried all the records in the ten major town government departments and two storage facilities. In all this work, Thornton said their biggest find were old Town Board minutes, dated from 1889-1915, which they didn't know they had.



Colleen Regan, Town Clerk
(Allison Morey Hays photo)

During the inventory they identified active, inactive, obsolete, and archival records. Regan cites archival records as those the town may feel have historical value and those records which are informational and educational to people in the community. Archival records from the town garage have been removed and put in Regan's vault.

After the inventory the clerks es-

tablished a data base with the use of a records management software program. They entered every record into the computer, creating a computerized list of inventories record series, indexed by department, series title and location.

The next phase was to determine a destruction schedule. There was, originally, a visually estimated figure of 1,233 cubic feet of records. 1,218 were actually inventoried and, of that, 302 cubic feet of records were destroyed. This now leaves 916 cubic feet of records; 200 feet are designated archival and 358 feet are inactive records. Regan remarked that microfilming is a consideration for the future.

Said Regan of the actual inventory, "The longer I'm here, the more knowledgeable I've become of what we have. We've been educated with the inventory itself."

Being awarded a grant is not cut and dried; Regan had to provide SARA with specific required reports. During the entire process, she had to submit an interim report, develop a town-wide needs assessment with plans for the future, and submit a final report. Regan hired a consultant to assist with these objectives. The consultant also provided a model policy and procedures plan for the development of an inactive records storage program.

Besides implementing the records management program, Regan has implemented a Records Preservation Program. Many of the record books were dilapidated. With the town's approval, she sent half of the town's vital records to Brown's River, Records Preservation Service, where they restored the books by coating the records, removing the acid in the papers, putting vinyl on the covers, and binding the books. For 1996, she has budgeted, upon approval, the restoration of the other half of the vital records, books which have been neglected.

Asked what Regan foresees for the records at the proposed Municipal Center, she explained the necessity of the centralization of a records center. Although all of the records are in order, they are still located in different places and still exposed to the elements.

She has asked the Supervisor to keep in mind that, ideally, she needs to be provided with a vault and a controlled-temperature record storage facility. Said Regan, "Then records can be kept for our lifetime and our children's lifetime."

A centralized system will facilitate access to, and use of, needed records. The public is granted access to the majority of the records, although, according to state guidelines, there are some not available to the public. Based on state guidelines, Regan has only denied two people access in almost three years.

An enormous amount of work was done this past year and Regan takes pride in this. "It took a lot of time, effort, and energy, but gave us the satisfaction of knowing we've done this." She added positively, "I think I've accomplished a lot for the town of Sand Lake. No one can say I didn't do my job."

— © By Allison Morey Hays. Reprinted by permission of the author from *The Echo*, Thursday, September 12, 1996.



FORWARDING/ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

Sand Lake Historical Society
POB 492
West Sand Lake, NY 12196

Historical Highlights

Bob Lilly, Editor
Andrew Mace, Publisher

*Please note change of location for
September 10 meeting:
Sand Lake Baptist Church.
Details on page 3.*



FIRST CLASS MAIL