The Backbone

A publication of the Backbone Ridge History Group of Schuyler, Seneca, and Tompkins Counties

BECAUSE HISTORY MATTERS

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The Dirt Angel Gang

BY GARY EMERSON

We usually think of gangs as being an urban phenomenon, but rural areas also have a history of gangs. In the 1920's Hector has its own notorious gang. It was known as the Dirt Angel Gang, and it terrorized the countryside until the group encountered a determined sheriff.

Several men made up the gang. They were Floyd Simpson,, Frank Simpson, Richard Smith, and George Conkie (or Conkey). Frank Simpson and Richard Smith hailed from Bennettsburg. Conkie lived in Reynoldsville. Floyd Simpson, brother-in-law to Frank, lived in Elmira, with his wife, who he married in Georgia because she was his first cousin and New York State law would not allow the marriage. [1]

For more than a year and a half the gang used the cover of darkness to steal poultry and livestock from farms in Hector. Geese, chickens, calves, and other farm animals disappeared leaving farmers in Odessa, Alpine, Reynoldsville, and Bennettsburg angry and frustrated. The James Robinson family of Bennettsburg had over 600 poultry taken from their farm in 1927, a loss of $1600. Many farmers suspected who was responsible for the thefts, but none wanted to reveal their suspicions to authorities fearing reprisals against their property or family members. [2]

It was the Robinson family theft that led to the gang's undoing. Mr. Robinson attempted to prevent further thefts by installing an alarm in his farm buildings, and he kept a shotgun handy. In December 1928, his vigilance paid off. One Saturday night, as her husband slept on the couch and the radio played in the background Mrs. Robinson peered out a window and saw a car with no tail light drive by in the direction where the family kept the geese and poultry. A short time later, the car drove by again. Mrs. Robinson turned out the lights in the house, let her dogs out, and woke her husband. The dogs suddenly began barking incessantly as the alarm system rang out in the cold night. James Robinson flew out of the house with his gun. The thieves ran to their car and sped off towards Bennettsburg before Mr. Robinson could stop them. Robinson found the door to his chicken house unlocked, and discovered that some of his prized geese had been stolen. Meanwhile, Mrs. Robinson had called Sheriff Frank Crowe in Watkins Glen at 9:45p.m. and described the car to him as one that was open, had no bumpers, and no tail light. Crowe began to search for the car. [3]

Crowe drove around the area roads looking for the suspected vehicle. As he drove through Burdett he hit paydirt. He passed a car by the Burdett Grange Hall that fit the description. Crowe quickly gave pursuit. The car sped up, and the chase was on. It would last most of the night, and Crower later estimated the chase covered 50

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PRESIDENT'S UPDATE

BY HAROLD BUSH

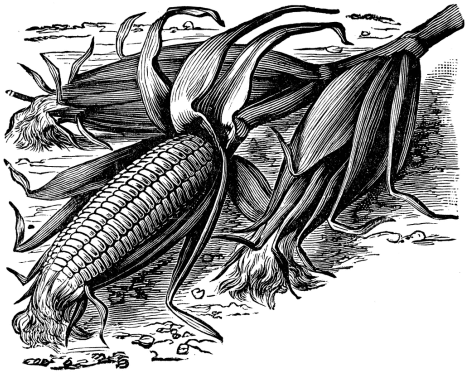
Welcome to the end of summer.

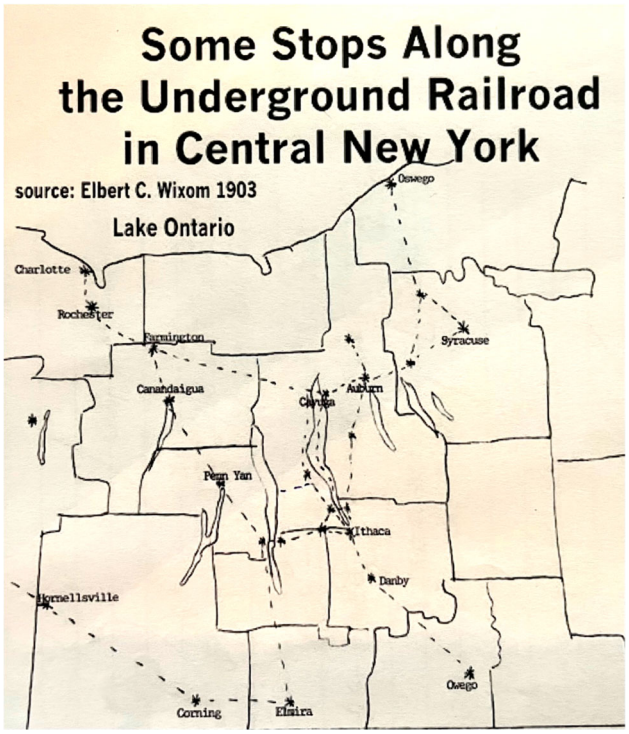
Seeing crops being harvested, I think of this past couple of months. Common events of then, and now. Church dinners, family reunions, picnics for community service organizations. For this letter, I am highlighting family reunions. I have seen a photograph of one of our family reunions from back in the day. Transportation being horses, horse draw carriages, and by foot. Attendance was generally a large number because most of the families lived in the area, and most all of the generations attended. This year our family reunion was attended by families from the area, some traveled from other states. There were some 1st, 4th, but most attendees were 2nd and 3rd generations. The food was great, catching up with each other was wonderful. Hoping next year, more will get to have the experience.

I'd like to say a hearty "Thank you" to Mark Brown for mowing around the BRHG building this year.

Our building in Lodi continues to need repairs. If anyone is interested in volunteering with building repairs, please contact me at 607-227-8994.

Below: Photo from our display at the Trumansburg Fair.





The Dirt Angel Gang

by Gary Emerson

miles. The car sped down Burdett hill, passed a gas station, and then headed east up the dirt road to the Cass farm, a cloud of dust swirling behind it. Crowe laid on his horn several times trying to get the driver to stop, and he even pulled alongside them at one point while ordering the men to pull over, to no avail. The vehicle raced towards Footes (Hill) Road desperately trying to get away. Here Crowe lost them in the dust, and with no tail light he could not see the car. [4]

Crowe decided to drive back towards Bennettsburg, assuming that was where they would try to go. Suddenly, the pursuit became a re-run as Crowe once again spotted the car at the bottom of Burdett hill. The two cars roared off in tandem again on some of the same roads. The thieves zoomed up Cass Road again and continued on. Crowe pulled alongside the car once more ordering them to stop. Instead the car turned suddenly and headed toward Montour Falls. Sheriff Crowe had had enough. Continuing his pursuit he pulled his revolver. As the car turned toward Montour Falls, Crowe fired two shots over the hood, and one into the soft covering of the car. Pulling up behind, the Sheriff fired two more shots into the back of the car hoping to disable it, but they had no effect. One bullet whizzed by the head of the driver, Richard Smith, and smashed through the windshield.

The chase continued up the hill to Odessa, then thundered down Texas Hollow Road. The dust continued to make it difficult to see the car, and Sheriff Crowe once again lost sight of it. [5]

At this juncture, Crowe returned to his office and decided to call for assistance from the state police. They decided to stake out some places where the suspected thieves were known to hang out. They first went to a gas station owned by Ely Smith on the Bennettsburg to Ithaca highway. Mr. Smith was the father of Richard Smith, one of the suspects. After waiting an hour there, they left and went to the home of Frank Simpson, where they waited from 2:45 a.m. to 3:30 a.m. No sign of the car.

The men decided to go back to the Smith gas station. It was a good decision. There was the getaway car parked in front of the gas pump, and there was someone inside. Trooper John Barry approached the car cautiously and saw the occupant in the rear seat. The man appeared to be drunk and asleep. Barry flung open the door, grabbed the man, and shook him to awaken him, only to discover that he would never awake again. George Conkie was dead from a bullet to the head. One of Sheriff Crowe's shots had killed the 55 year old Conkie, who was said to be the leader of the gang. The body lay slumped in the car, which was full of goose feathers. Conkie's accomplices had simply abandoned him there.

A few hours later, eighteen year old Frank Simpson was arrested as his home in Bennettsburg. The other two gang members, Floyd Simpson, 30 and Richard Smith, 32, the driver of the car, were still in the wind. As the Conkie family arranged for George's funeral and burial in Union Cemetery near Burdett, the authorities launched a manhunt to find the last two members of the Dirt Angel gang yet to face justice. [7]

Rumors swirled around the whereabouts of the two men, and authorities followed up on any tips. Someone phoned in a tip from Penn Yan that Simpson and his wife had boarded a Pennsylvania Railroad train heading south out of Penn Yan. When the train arrived at Watkins Glen, state troopers and Sheriff Crowe searched the entire train, even the sleeping cars, but found no sign of the couple. Another rumor indicated that Simpson and Smith were hiding in abandoned houses near Bennettsburg and along Texas Hollow Road. Police searched nine abandoned houses in those areas, but found no evidence that anyone had been there. Someone reported that they saw two men hop a freight train at Burdett while it was taking on water. Every tip came up empty. [8]

One tip, however proved valid. Sheriff Crower received a report that Richard Smith was in Rochester, New York, at a rooming house run by a couple named Mr. and Mrs. Levi Garrison. Crowe wired the Rochester Police, who visited the home and arrested Smith. Now only Floyd Simpson remained at large, but no one seemed to know where he was. [9]

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The Dirt Angel Gang

by Gary Emerson

(continued from page 3)

At his hearing, Frank Simpson claimed he was drunk on liquor supplied by Conkie, and did not remember anything that happened that night. He did not even remember hearing the gunshots. He claimed to have slept through much of the car chase. Frank said that the next day, his cousin Floyd and Richard Smith came to his house and told him that he should go on the run, but Frank told them he would stay and "face the music". Frank Simpson and Richard Smith were found guilty of burglary and grand larceny. They were sentenced to five to ten years at Auburn Prison. [10]

But where was Floyd Simpson? The trail had gone cold, and he was nowhere to be found. Two years went by. It seemed Simpson had successfully eluded authorities, but then a lucky break occurred—someone ratted out Floyd Simpson. Valparaiso, Indiana authorities were tipped off that Simpson and his wife were living and working on a farm just west of that city, and that he was a wanted man. Simpson was arrested. His lawyer filed a writ of habeas corpus seeking Simpson's release, arguing that Simpson was not a fugitive, that he had committed no crime, and that the sheriff did not produce sufficient evidence. The judge turned down the request and Simpson remained in jail. [11]

Sheriff William Beebe of Watkins Glen, and his deputy, Leon Taylor of Montour Falls, set out for Valparaiso to bring Floyd Simpson back to justice. When they arrived after their long trip they discovered that they had made the journey for nothing.

After ten days and three hearings, the judge suddenly ruled that Simpson was free to go since no one had appeared in court against him. When Beebe and Taylor failed to show up by 2 p.m. on Thursday, July 23, the judge gave Simpson his release. Sheriff Beebe had missed a golden opportunity to bring final justice to all the members of the Dirt Angel Gang. Instead, once again, Simpson and his wife were gone. [12]

At least the Dirt Angel Gang was also gone. Its days of rustling livestock from Hector farms were over. When Frank Crowe passed away in 1944, final tributes recalled one of his greatest accomplishments while serving as the Schuyler County Sheriff: he broke up the Dirt Angel Gang. [13]

Endnotes:
1 – *Interlaken Review*, August 7, 1931; *Elmira Star-Gazette*, December 13, 1928. I have not uncovered any explanation as to why the group had the name the "Dirt Angel Gang."
2 – *Watkins Express*, December 12, 1928.
3 – Ibid.; *Watkins Express*, December 19, 1928; Ovid Gazette, December 14, 1928.
4 – *Watkins Express*, December 12, 1928
5 – ibid., *Elmira Star-Gazette*, December 10, 1928
6 – Ibid
7 – *Watkins Express*, December 19, 1928. Elmira Star-Gazette, December 13, 1928; December 18, 1928.
8 – not listed
9 – *Elmira Star-Gazette*, July 19,1929.
10 – *Watkins Express*, December 19, 1929, *Elmira Star-Gazette*, December 31, 1928; December 3, 1929.
11 – The South Bend Tribune, July 15, 1931; *Elmira Star-Gazette*, July 25, 1931; Valparaiso Vidette-Messenger, July 17, 1931.
12 – *Valparaiso Vidette-Messenger,* July 23, 1931; *Elmira Star-Gazette*, July 25, 1931; *Interlaken Review*, August 7, 1931. I have been unable to find any information that Floyd Simpson was later found and charged. It appears he got away and avoided justice.
13 – *Watkins Express*, May 17, 1944.

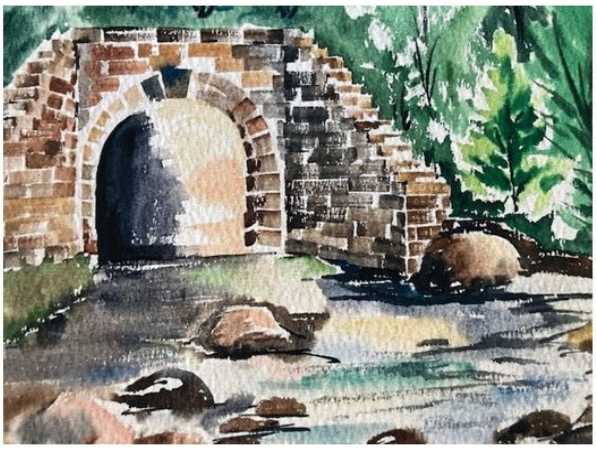
THE BACKBONE RIDGE HISTORY GROUP

Presents a Special Program

The Lehigh Valley Railroad

by Gary Emerson

Schuyler County Historian Gary Emerson will present a program on The Lehigh Valley Railroad and The Great Stone Arches of Hector. The stone arches built in the late 1800's remain as remnants of the past. The program will focus on the Railroads service in Schuyler County. Join us for a great program!



Painting by Jean Adams Bishop of the train trestle at Saw Mill gully

Sunday, October 6th, 2024, 2 p.m.

Burdett Fire Hall

Lake Avenue, Burdett NY

For More Information:
Harold Bush, President, BRHG
607-227-8994

Event sponsored by the Nelson B. Delavan Foundation

The Underground Railroad

by Sandra Bradford

It was a mythical passage to a promised land! It ran without tracks! Its passengers moved under the cover of darkness, and it was guarded with great secrecy. An invisible network of escape. It ran from the South to Canada from the late 18th century up to the Civil War where it continued in a less secretive fashion.

The Underground Railroad was a network of persons comprising of black freemen, white abolitionists, wealthy and poor, all aiding in the escape of slaves from bondage. In 1839 a Washington newspaper reported that a slave under torture revealed following a north route through an Underground Railroad to Boston.

This mysterious organization made it a business to receive, forward, conceal, and protect fugitive slaves. As runaway numbers increased, new agencies were created. The underground stations became many and, in every direction, all a vital link in this network maze.

The Quakers were a prominent part of this network from Pennsylvania into New York. In 1786 George Washington complained that Quakers had attempted to "liberate" one of his enslaved workers. In 1793 a Fugitive Slave Act made the capture of runaway slaves a lucrative business.

Persons known as "Conductors'" guided fugitives to hiding places, such as private homes, churches, schoolhouses, and even banks; these places were called "Stations, safe-houses, and depots". Those operating the stations were called "Station masters'. The runaways were the "passengers" on this Underground Railroad.

Because of the Underground Railroads great success, another Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was designed to strengthen the previous law. It placed the power of the Federal Government in the recovery of escaping slaves. This exploded sentiment in the North in favor of the runaways.

Advertisements were sent throughout the States for the capture and return of the runaway slaves as well as spies everywhere making it harder for those involved in the escape of the slaves. To conduct slaves over this long line and baffle their pursuers, required quick wit as well as secrecy and great courage. So successful were the conductors that after fruitless searches it was once said "It was as easy to find a needle in a haymow, as a negro among the Quakers". They traveled at night mostly, concealed in hay wagons or specially fitted carriages.

What made New York a destination for fugitive slaves? The significant number of Quakers who formed their own anti-slavery societies, the connections with sympathizers, abolitionists, and free black persons as well as the remoteness of the area with its close proximity to Canada with direct access to water routes.

A conductor almost always had two or more routes to choose from, the next station being determined by the circumstances. The intricate network made it almost impossible for slave hunters to trace the runaways. They made use of what was called the "Grapevine Telegraph" where news was conveyed from one vicinity to another. They would convey how many were coming, what time they would arrive, and where spies might be.

If spies were discovered, the fugitives were immediately changed to another route or to a community of Friends who sheltered and cared for them and then sent them on when it was safe.

There were three main routes running through New York State, with several branches. I will first focus on the Hector area which was not on the main route, but a crossover branch between lines running east to west and mostly used when there was information of spies waiting on the main route.

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BACKBONE RIDGE HISTORY GROUP

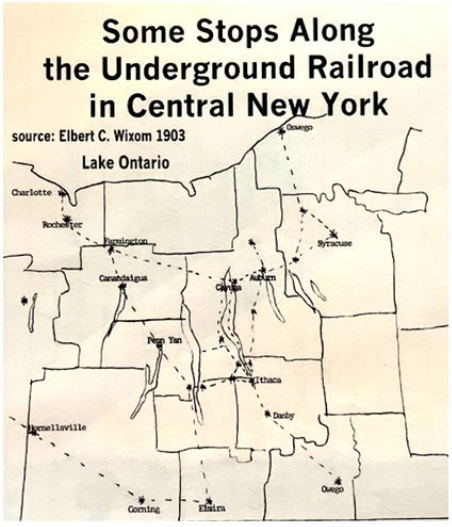
Special Program

The Underground Railroad

by Marty Evans

Village of Burdett Historian Marty Evans will present a program on the Underground Railroad in Schuyler County. Learn how our local area was involved in the path to freedom for so many.

Join us for a great program!



Sunday, November 3rd, 2024, 2 p.m.

Location To Be Determined

For More Information:
Harold Bush, President, BRHG
607-227-8994

Event sponsored by the Nelson B. Delavan Foundation

The Underground Railroad

By Sandra Bradford

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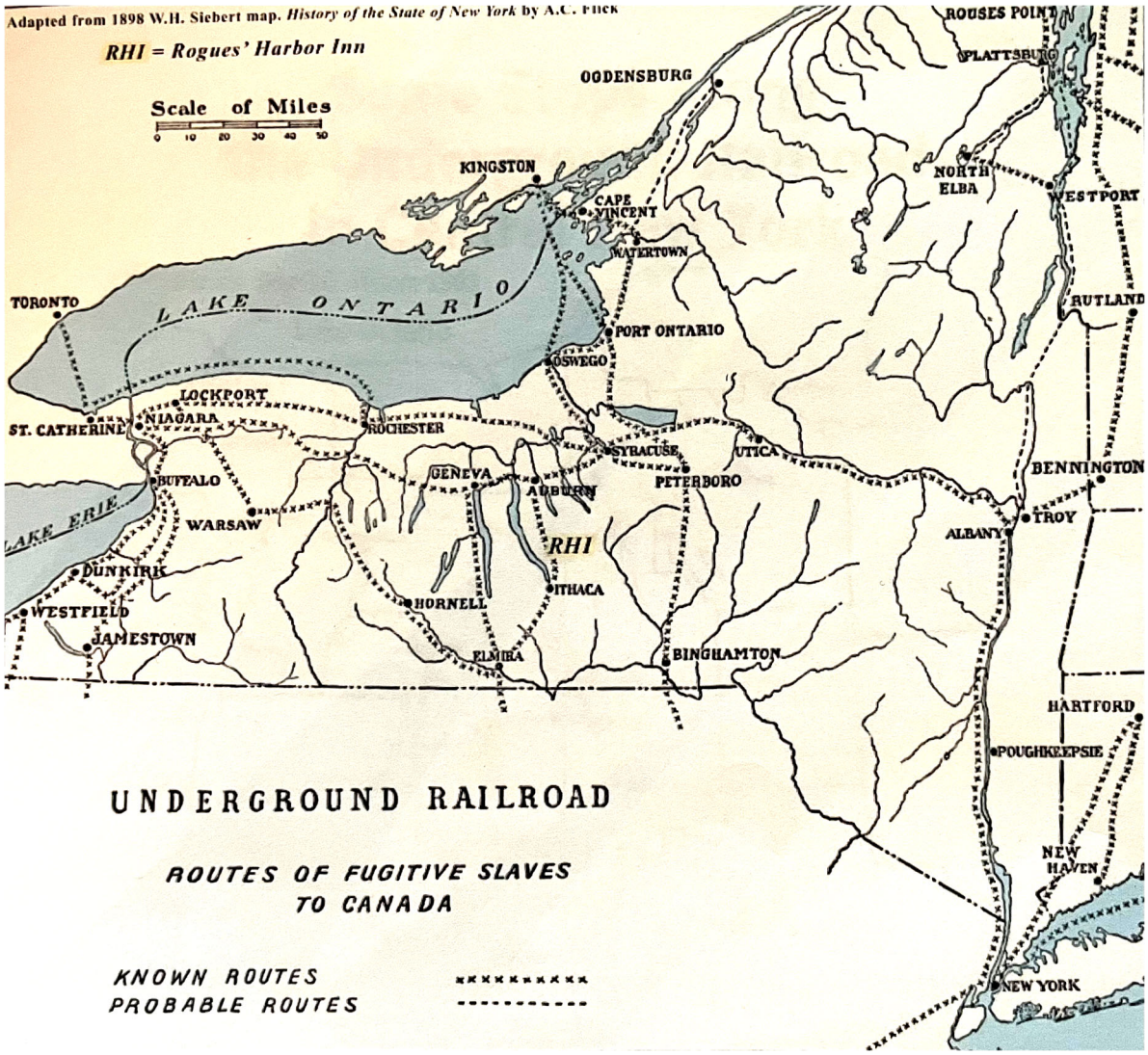
A remembrance of Charles Tripp, son of Humphry Tripp, a conductor in the Hector, Perry City area:

"So far as I can remember, there was one slave that passed through this Perry City Mecklenburg area on the way west to east, leaving Elmira, going to Watkins to here then being helped to Sherwood or that vicinity. The same slave afterwards returned to Virginia and brought his mother away to freedom. He left her in Watkins with some colored people while he came here and then on to Sherwood staying there until those in pursuit concluded that he and his mother were in Canada. All other slaves came here from Sherwood and vicinity. Then taken on to Seneca Lake, rowed across the taken up to Starkey and on to Canada. I remember two slaves, one was from a Washington Plantation and he was the most intelligent slave I ever saw with a reward of $1500 offered for his return "Dead or Alive".
They arrived on a Friday night very frightened, as they had run a chance of capture at Auburn. Saturday they kept very secluded, Sunday their friends convinced them the seclusion was unnecessary in this neighborhood, so they ventured outside. I remember they sharpened their disk knives in father's shop and hearing them remark that if captured they would sell their lives as dearly as possible and never be returned to slavery in the flesh. Early on Monday morning, father had taken them on to Seneca Lake and procured a row boat of Uncle Henry Carman and before daylight they landed on thee other side. In a few days we received a line saying they had arrived in Canada. Those two slaves had been so hotly pursuid in Auburn that they were rushed into one of the banks there, where they were kept for several days before it was safe for them to be brought to the Mecklenburg, Perry City station."

Wm. Carman, a Friend, ran a ferry across Cayuga Lake from Ludlowville to "Frog point" now Trumansburg point, where they were transported by wagon to the Perry City area. This Perry City line was used when spies were detected on the main routes or when it wasn't boating season, forcing them to go over land.

Editor's Note: This story will be continued in the next newsletter!
Photo: This is the Wixom/Carman home built in 1815 by Wm. Carman of Dutchess Co. a devout Quaker. The home had two concealed hiding places. This was part of the UGRR between Mecklenburg and Perry City.



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Please look to see if you have paid your annual dues.

Your contributions and dues help support our organization and allow us to provide newsletters, programs, and special events.

We thank you for your continued support!