

# "The Backbone"

A P U B L I C A T I O N O F T H E B A C K B O N E R I D G E  
H I S T O R Y G R O U P

## FALL CLEAN-UP AT THE SMITH METHODIST CEMETERY

The Backbone Ridge History Group met again this fall at the Smith Methodist/Bethel Cemetery in Covert along CR 143 to do more restoration work. The group met for two very soggy days at the end of October to cut brush, locate, repair, and clean headstones.

is shown resetting the headstone of her ancestors, Isaiah and Annis Smith. A tremendous amount of work was accomplished—thank you to all!



Additional headstones were uncovered and many were repaired and re-set.

The group had a special guest—Lynn Stevenson Fisher (see photo) all the way from California to assist in our efforts. Lynn is related to the Smith's, and

Isaiah Smith



Annis Smith



## NOT FOR PROFIT STATUS UPDATE

Members of the group have been meeting, trying to pull together the various parts for the application which include a questionnaire, constitution, petition, by-laws and purposes documents. It involves a lot of introspection and thought about what the organization really wants to do in the long run.

If you are interested in being part of this endeavor, please contact Allan Buddle at 607-532-4213.



## VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR ARCHAEOLOGY EXCAVATIONS

The Finger Lakes National Forest (FLNF), in conjunction with Dr. LouAnn Wurst, Associate Professor and Chair of Western Michigan University, and the Backbone Ridge History Group, invite community members to take part in the 2010 archaeology excavation during the weeks of June 14 and June 21, 2010.

Excavations conducted on the FLNF have an educational purpose, and that purpose is to learn about the people that once populated the Hector Backbone. Researchers and students have been looking for clues about how the people lived, and what kind of life they led. The site chosen this year is the Ball Farmstead, and it is located right off Burnt Hill Road in Hector, NY.

Please contact Kari Milliman at the FLNF at 607-546-4470 ext. 316 for additional information. Participants will be expected to wear field clothing that can get dirty, appropriate footwear for the woods, and bring their own drinking water and bag lunch. Supervision and educational information will be provided, and a porta-potty will be on site.

This is the first year that we are inviting the community to take part in the excavations. We hope you are interested and can join us to learn more about the history of your local area.

**SEARSBURG GRANGE EVENT  
HELD IN OCTOBER 2009**

The Searsburg Grange Hall was filled to capacity on Saturday, October 24, 2009 as attendees heard from guest speakers Mike Tunison and Charlotte Lee Wright Mosher.

For six generations the Tunison family lived and farmed on land that is now part of the Finger Lakes National Forest. The Abram Tunison farm, which was located on West Covert Road just west of its intersection with Burdick Road, became a casualty and was sold in the early 1930's to pay creditors. None of its buildings survive today, but photographs and documented memories of what it was like on the Tunison Farm have been preserved by the descendants of Abram Tunison. Mike Tunison, who grew up in nearby Trumansburg and is a great-great grandson of Abram Tunison, discussed the history of the homestead, and shared remembrances of life on the farm from books written by his father, Lewis E Tunison (1923-1985). Mike also shared photographs of the Tunison's who lived on the farm from 1864 to 1933, and of the farm itself during the 1920's and early 1930's.

Charlotte brought to life memories of growing up in Searsburg, NY with her first-hand accounts describing the lives and times of Searsburg, which, as she described it, was "just four corners in the middle of widespread amounts of farmland on the Northeast corner of Schuyler County". Charlotte also presented on the history of the Searsburg Church, and how it played such an important and historic part in the Searsburg Community.

Bob Bower shared some rodeo stories with us from Hector Grazing, and the afternoon was rounded out with good stories, recollections, and refreshments.

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**NYS ARCHIVES DOCUMENTARY  
HERITAGE PROGRAM GRANT**

The BRHG received funding for the "Documenting Land Use and Population on the Hector Backbone" project. The grant comes from the NYS Education Department, New York State Archives, Documentary Heritage Program. The group plans on continuing their work surveying potential record holders, collecting materials identified during the survey process, and compiling a final guide to the collections. Funding was just released, so work will begin soon.

**BACKBONE RIDGE GROUP  
RECEIVES  
2009 DEBRA E. BERNHARDT ANNUAL ARCHIVES  
AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN DOCUMENTING NEW  
YORK'S HISTORY**

The Backbone Ridge History Group of Seneca and Schuyler Counties received the 2009 Debra E. Bernhardt Annual Archives Award for Excellence in Documenting New York's History. The award was presented by the Board of Regents and the State Archives at an awards ceremony at the Cultural Education Center in Albany in October that Andrew Tompkins, Christine Ridarsky, Kari Milliman Lusk, and Jodie Vanselow attended. The award is given out annually to an organization in New York State that has demonstrated leadership in improving the documentary record of New York State, and is named after the late Debra E. Bernhardt, an archivist who was instrumental in pioneering documentation work and building one of the premier labor archives in the nation at New York University.

The BRHG was recognized for its efforts in facilitating partnerships between organizations and individuals in Seneca and Schuyler counties interested in the history of lands now part of the Finger Lakes National Forest and promoting the study of that history in the "Documenting Land Use and Population on the Hector Backbone" project. The group is quite honored to have received such a prestigious award. Kari Milliman Lusk, Allan Buddle, and Walter Gable presented a framed copy of the award to the Seneca County Board of Supervisors at their December meeting.



**BACKBONE RIDGE TRIVIA**

Does anyone know where Liberty Corners once was?

BECOME A VOLUNTEER!



Julia Clawson, Lodi Historical Society and Lodi Town Historian, (607) 582-6484

Walt Gable, Seneca County Historian, (315) 539-1785, wgable@co.seneca.ny.us

The Backbone Ridge History Group is a grass roots organization that formed to uncover the history of the land and people between Seneca and Cayuga Lakes, in and around the area that is now known as the Finger Lakes National Forest (FLNF).

If you'd like to share stories, information, or pictures, please contact us!

Kari Milliman Lusk, Finger Lakes National Forest (607) 546-4470 or klusk@fs.fed.us

Allan Buddle, Interlaken Historical Society (607) 532-4213 or orchardland@zoom-dsl.com

Andrew Tompkins, Schuyler County Historical Society, (607) 535-9741 or info@schuylerhistory.org

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★ FROM OUT OF THE WOODWORK ★  
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As we continue on with our research, and in talking with people, more and more information comes "out of the woodwork". That's why I've added this special column that will appear in each edition of The Backbone.

- Ruth Wagner of Lodi sent me a newspaper article from 1974 written by Stanton Hager entitled "What do you know about Backbone, Hencoop Gorge, Burnt Hill?". The article talked about the backbone, and mentioned that the author talked to individuals that helped tear down the farmhouses and barns.

- Relatives of E.B. Smith heard about our restoration efforts at the Smith Methodist Cemetery, and Kari Milliman Lusk received an email from Kristine Smith from Minnesota. She sent us as much information on EB Smith the stonemason as they were able to obtain. What is most interesting is that while he carved the most beautiful headstones around, he is buried in an unmarked grave in Bradford, PA.

FINGER LAKES NATIONAL FOREST  
FARMSTEAD ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT  
UPDATE FROM THE LAB

FEATURE 5 AT THE DUNHAM II SITE

DUSTIN CONKLIN AND LOUANN WURST,  
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

The Dunham II Site designates the remains of a log cabin located in a wooded area on the east side of Burnt Hill Road. Historical records show that Mowbry Owen purchased the farm in 1836, probably for his son Daniel and his wife, who may have built the Dunham II log cabin as a temporary residence. Later records indicate that Daniel died in 1840, and “Mrs. Owen” is listed in the 1840 census with four children. Mrs. Owen remarried before 1850 and moved from the cabin. Thus, it appears as if the Dunham II Site was occupied for a brief period of time, perhaps as little as 1836-1850, by the same Owen family. There is no evidence of later 19th century occupation in this area.

We located this site in 2000, the first year we worked in the forest. The area had a concentration of ceramics visible on the surface that would indicate a domestic site. We excavated 23 1x1 m units across the site, and identified a stone pier that was probably the cabin’s corner, a foundation for the chimney, as well as a trash midden. Low density sheet midden was recovered from all these units, yielding ceramics, glass, nails, smoking pipe fragments, and buttons.

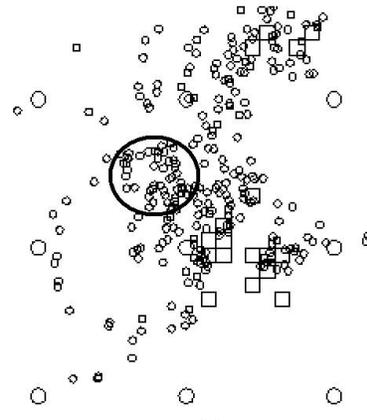
We also conducted a metal detector survey across the Dunham II Site. A flag was placed whenever a positive hit was obtained, and its location was then mapped. These points clearly depict a rectangular configuration, marked within the circle on Figure 1. We returned to the Dunham II Site in 2006 to determine if this rectangle represented an additional structure.

A total of ten units were excavated in this area, and we discovered the remains of a wooden floor to a small outbuilding that we labeled Feature 5 (Figure 2). Feature 5 was located about 20 feet to the south west of the house area defined by the stone pier and chimney foundation. Feature 5 measures approximately four and a half feet square.

Figure 2 Wooden Floor Remains



Figure 1



We recovered a total of 2,420 artifacts, representing 76 distinct ceramic and glass vessels (plates, cups, bottles, etc.), from this area. These artifacts have a mean date of 1835, slightly earlier than the site was occupied; this suggests that these household items were bought shortly before the Owens moved to the site. Other than architectural remains, the most common group of artifacts was food related. Figure 3 depicts the number of food-related fragments (mostly ceramic and glass) with their function. It is interesting to note the high percentages of food preparation and storage artifacts, as well as artifacts related to table and tea wares.

Figure 3: Food Related Artifacts

Type	Count	Percent
Food Prep/Storage	204	42.9
Food Service	87	18.3
Tableware/Teaware	182	38.2
Unidentified	3	0.6
Total	476	100

Even though Feature 5 was well preserved, we still had no idea what its function was. However, given the analysis of the soils, artifacts, and a comparison with other outbuildings excavated in the area, it seems probable that it was a smokehouse.

We first looked at the soils. The soils in the lower levels, directly over the structure, were much darker in color than in the other units. These levels also contained more charcoal or other evidence that the soils may have been subjected to heat, which appeared to be concentrated near the wooden floor. This suggests that the presence of charcoal may be related to the function of the structure.

Next we examined the artifacts to see if they would help us interpret the feature. We discovered that there was a very clear concentration of faunal remains (bones of cow, pig, sheep, etc.) near the structure. A total of 84 percent of all the faunal remains recovered from the levels immediately above the structure, and 76 percent of them were found in the lower levels immediately above the wooden floor. Analysis indicated that 88 percent of the faunal remains located within the bounds of the structure exhibited signs of burning or exposure to heat.

Thus, the presence of charcoal in the soils, concentration of animal bone, and evidence that these bones were burned all suggest that Feature 5 was a smokehouse. However, to be certain, we compared the location of this feature to other known smokehouses in our project area. Figure 4 depicts the relative distance that smokehouses were located from the houses. The similarity of these distances suggests that Feature 5 is located at roughly the right position to be a smokehouse.

Site	Feature #	Distance from House
Dunham II	5	20 feet
Wickham	6	20 feet
Dunham I	5	25 feet

When considering the soil characteristics, the spatial patterning of artifacts, and the relative location in comparison to other smokehouses, it seems very likely that Feature 5 was a smokehouse. Even though this cabin was occupied for a brief time, the artifact assemblage recovered from the Feature 5 area helps us to illuminate the everyday life of the Owen family. The quick analysis of the ceramics presented above demonstrates that the Owen family was actively involved in food preparation and in more formal dinner and tea practices. The results of our excavations have provided important insights into the earliest settlement of the Hector Backbone and the farm families that lived there.

## HELP WANTED

Since coming to the Finger Lakes area in 1964 I have lived in Tompkins, Schuyler and Seneca Counties never more than a few miles from the Finger Lakes National Forest. From day one, at age twenty-two, single and with lots of time on my hands then, I began to wander the more or less abandoned roads on what was then the Hector Land Use Area. Looking at what little evidence there was left of the old homesteads I wondered what it was about them and the area that attracted me. Some forty years later, having married and with my wife raised a family, completed an entire career and operated a small farm for most of those years, I am wondering why the area still has such a strong attraction.

Nostalgia probably has a lot to do with it because I can relate to the small diversified farms along the Backbone having grown up on several in the 1940's and 50's in Otsego County. Although tractors and implements were just coming in, my father and grandfather were still farming mostly with horses at that time and indoor plumbing was still in the future for our family.

There is far more to the attraction though, than just nostalgia and it obviously affects others too. As more and more individuals share their stories we all seem more anxious than ever to learn how the times, the 20's and 30's, impacted the lives of the people on the Backbone and the surrounding communities.

Many questions arise. What did the houses, barns and fields look like, what constituted the family, how many children, how many generations of family on the same farm, what crops and livestock were raised, where was the excess sold, how did it get there, what was purchased with the return, where did the children go to school, the families to church, what other organizations did they belong to, who visited who on Sunday afternoons, what newspapers did they read .....and the list goes on. At some point for every family on the Backbone, this all changed and I have embarked on a mission to uncover as much information as I can about government policies at all levels that eventually led to abandonment and resettlement of the Backbone farms and families. As a start I have read several research papers, student theses and books about the Great Depression and the decade before, when it is generally agreed that the agricultural depression began. The most recent paper read is- *Franklin D. Roosevelt's Farm Policy as Governor of New York State, 1928-1932*, by Gertrude Almy Slichter, *Agricultural History*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (October, 1959), PP. 167-176. In future issues, I hope to share relevant excerpts from my readings.

My purpose in writing here is to encourage anyone and everyone to share whatever information you might have, from any source and in any form whether it be paper copies, interviews, sharing at one of the public programs, letters, family history research, deeds, diaries, farm ledgers, newspaper clippings or other sources that we have not thought of. All of this information will help us to answer the questions and paint a true picture of those hardy souls on the Backbone. As so many people have said, "Too bad you didn't do this fifty years ago." At least we are doing it now and we need your help.

Thanks!

Allan Buddle