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Irelandville

by

Barbara H. Bell

In 1814, Mrs. Judith Ireland, wife of John Ireland, inherited 2,000 acres of land lying between the west shore of Seneca lake and the Old Pre-emption Line westward, uphill and with the north boundary at what is now known as Lovers' Lane. The south line was approximately where the Mud Lake Road runs westward from the Irelandville Corner of Schuyler County Road 28. Mrs. Ireland was one of seven to receive a share from some of the holdings of her father, Jonathan Lawrence.

Lawrence, of New York City, had invested considerable money in two large sections, now in Schuyler County, of the newly-opened "West" after the Clinton-Sullivan Campaign of 1779.

George Washington had ordered General John Sullivan to take troops through the Seneca Lake region to oust, by a scorched earth policy, the remaining Indians who were providing the British with food, scouts, horses and warriors. Even though the Revolutionary War was over, the boundary between British and United States holdings had not been firmly fixed. The action to stop aid to the British was deemed necessary to settle the matter.

Immediately afterwards, land speculators bought quantities of land rights in areas as yet unoccupied by white men. Thus, Jonathan Lawrence "bought into" claims of one James Watson which included what is now called Irelandville. Lawrence invested even more heavily in the region of Kayutah Lake, also in Schuyler County. As so often happened with early land grants, ownership changed. Watson had sold to Melancton Smith in 1786 and, the next year, Lawrence paid 10 shillings per acre. As with most such speculators, Lawrence probably never saw his holdings but left to an agent the business of selling portions and managing permanent holdings.

Many pioneers had heard, thanks to reports of Sullivan's men, about the lush growth of timber, plentiful wild game, and fish so large that no angler need lie about their size. Moreover, to the wilderness without roads through the heavy forests and swamps, the Seneca Valley offered easy access by waterways.

As some of the Seneca Indians returned to their home land, they began to live in log cabins rather than the longhouses of former years. There are accounts of their taking the cook pots of settlers to bring back salt from the area now known as Syracuse. The Indians also shared their knowledge of local salt seeps, and

existing orchards of wild apples and plums. There is no record of subsequent strife between the early settlers and returning Indians.

In what became known as Irelandville, there were, by 1806, eleven dwellings, and, what was a necessity for those building new homes, a sawmill. It was run by Elidia Parker. The growing area boasted lime kilns for mortar and plaster, asheries where lye was produced by a leaching process and then sold for soap making, and pits where charcoal was made for forge fuel. There was already at least one resident blacksmith. From a hill above the settlement came bog iron which made a poor quality metal. Nevertheless, utilizing it was, in those times, a financially-viable venture.

Almost everyone made maple sugar and syrup, sometimes in an evaporator which was shared communally. Wild apples were pressed into cider, a common beverage in all homes. An early Gilbert family had a "nut mill" that mashed apples between wooden corrugated rollers turned by a horse or domesticated ox walking 'round and 'round the crushing mill, pulling the sweep, an overhead pole.

In 1822 John Ireland and his brother, William, moved to the "wild west" from New York City to manage their mother's inheritance. The area was already partially settled, some by people merely squatting, and some by persons who had purchased or received a grant of land, such as Revolutionary War veterans, who had been thus paid in lieu of cash for military service.

When the name Irelandville came into use has not been documented but certainly by the time John and William moved in to establish homes and a family farm. Irelandville was the first named settlement in the Town of Reading.

William built a fine home, undoubtedly the largest in the region at the time. He imported brick and marble as well as real glass for windows. It was located almost where today's Castel Grisch café and manor stand. Local "commoners" called William's place, by turns, "Ireland's Castle" and "Ireland's Folly." Research gives one the feeling that William may have "put on airs" and alienated settlers. An old newspaper clipping reports that the house was finished, furnished and a house-warming date set, when a fire virtually destroyed the whole. The clipping states that the fire was obviously of incendiary origin. William returned to New York City, leaving local operations to John. A home was built for the farm manager, "Old Billy Young." No charges were ever brought in connection with the fire.

John located near the lake front, according to an old atlas. John was the still listed as a local resident in 1857, but, sometime later, apparently went back to the old family home in New York City.

The earliest settlers around Seneca Lake "took to the hills" to avoid marshes and swamps which threatened fever and ague during mosquito season. Thus Irelandville was an establishment long before the first portions of what is now Watkins Glen, Schuyler County's seat, were occupied.

Irelandville is identified, on a crude map in an 1837 gazetteer, as having 70 residences. If so, the "census taker" for that gazetteer must have counted every dwelling in the entire 2,000 acres inherited by Judith Ireland. The same map fails to show Penn Yan, Dundee, or a name for the village now known as Watkins Glen.

Irelandville was on the Bath-Catskill Turnpike, and a drovers' inn had been erected in 1828 on the corner where the stage coaches turned uphill to head toward Bath. It had a post office, called simply Reading, a tannery, two blacksmith shops, two general stores, a wagon shop, a harness maker, among other commercial places, and a school.

Local farmers shipped produce and cattle to the north end of Seneca Lake for larger markets, and, once the canal was opened, earned some income by shipping to more distant markets, and by providing wood for fuel for lake boats. The drovers' tavern, however, had played a major role even earlier as families "pooled" cattle, sheep, horses, pigs, and even turkeys, to be driven to Owego where water travel carried items to larger cities for sale.

After the stage routes were established, fine riding or harness horses might be tied behind a stage and taken to Bath, or other stage stops, for sale. The horse was a vital part of the settler's life since it was often necessary, for many years, to make an overnight ride to a mill to sell grain and have wheat or corn ground for family use.

Reading post office, started in 1816, was first kept in a house kitty-corner from the tavern. Its first postmaster was Hiram Chapman. The nearest post office was in Mills Landing or Catherinestown, which today is Montour Falls. The two were not even in the same county until 1854 when Schuyler was formed.

The hamlet of Reading Center acquired its first permanent settler in 1798, and, in a few years, rivaled Irelandville for size, occupancy, and business. Those in Reading Center (spelled then Centre) referred to Irelandville as "Meanerville," one old-timer recalled in an interview. In no time the epithet was returned as "the Centre" was nicknamed "Meaner Still."

The telegraph, which preceded the telephone and electricity in the "backwoods," generally followed the stage roads. The road that runs from Bradford to Bath is still called the Telegraph Road.

In 1876 the Fall Brook Railroad was cut through the hills, parallel to the Irelandville Road, to haul coal from the mines at Blossburg, Pennsylvania, to buyers north of Seneca Lake. This was a project of John Magee in Watkins Glen. His railroad was not always welcomed by land owners along the right of way. One farmer, Charles Potter, argued with Magee about rights across his lands. Magee installed an underpass so that Potter could safely herd cattle to his fields without crossing the track, and easily pull wagons from his fields west of the railroad to his barn which sat against the main road east of the rail line.

Potter built himself a residence in the Greek style like the houses he had seen in the South when he was in the Civil War. His house had a central part with a portico at its front and wings on both sides. A subsequent owner tore down one of the wings, but it was later replaced by Mr. and Mrs. G. L. Freeman who bought part of the original farm in the late 1930s and lived there in the summer time. Mr. Freeman taught in Illinois.

Their house became the center of a project to establish a prototype museum village they began after World War II. They named it "Old Irelandville." The project included moving the old drovers' tavern from its original location on the corner to a site across the road from their house, which had been Potter's home. The drovers' inn now stands on the spot where Potter's barn had stood until it burned many years ago..

The Freemans also purchased a large Greek Revival structure and moved it to their museum village. This building had served as a church and as a town hall. It came from the east side of Seneca Lake where Sampson Naval Base was established. The building was dismantled and each piece marked for reconstructing as a part of "Old Irelandville." It stands now across the road from the Freeman's house. Several other buildings were either erected or converted from existing structures to add to the village.

However, like many a dream, the anticipated income from tourists coming to see "Old Irelandville" failed to match the upkeep costs, and the project ended about 25 years ago. Some of the buildings are still visible along Schuyler County Road 28. There is also an historical marker which the Freemans placed in their front yard. Freeman authored a number of books about antiques such as those that were in his museum. He even established a family publishing business.

Of the buildings of original Irelandville, Hiram Chapman's home, where the post office was once located, is now a private home. A later post office is on duty in Reading Center. The schoolhouse has been converted to use as a private home, as were two of the former general stores. The tavern remains, forlorn and neglected, and, perhaps, haunted from those early years when it was noisy with the tavern business and community meetings. If John or William Ireland's ghosts ever come calling, there is little for them to recognize.