

Stone Arabia's Changing Scene

When writing a narrative it is seldom advisable to use the word "I" too often. However one's own experiences combined with the remembrances gleaned from others must be used. This is what has been done in this article.

My first real exposure to Stone Arabia was made 58 years ago. There are others still living with longer memories of the community but those who represented a generation before that have mostly passed beyond the sunset. It is my purpose to depict what Stone Arabia as a farming area was like when I came. My deep interest in area history had and still has a great impact on my remembrances. The changes in our area as the pendulum of time has swung back and forth have been profound.

In 1948 many Stone Arabia residents were descendants of the palatines who first settled the land in the first quarter of the 1700s. In fact a considerable number of their descendants still reside on the land that their ancestors wrested from the forest. A few still do. Most people were either related or knew one another well. The Stone Arabia post office that my father-in-law Ben S. Nellis remembered was long gone. Most farms were not large. With a knowledge of the 1723 Stone Arabia patent map it was evident that many of the lot lines laid out in the 18th century had remained much the same. The stones taken from the fields and laid into fences still marked many of the fields and the boundary lines between the farms. Many farms had disconnected wood lots as they had been established from the lands that were less tillable as set aside generations before. These woodlands were often used as sugar sap bushes, to get firewood for the family or to produce lumber for repairs or replacement of farm buildings if necessary. Some farms were obviously better kept than others. If the man power was available the brush was cleared from fencerows. The old adage that "good fences make good neighbors" was sometimes adhered to. Sometimes it was not. Some farms still had teams of work horses but they were being replaced by tractors, soon to be replaced entirely. The grain reaper and binder and corn harvester were giving way to combines and field core choppers. Sometimes the earlier very heavy corn field choppers were pulled through muddy fields with two tractors. The farms were predominantly dairy farms. Most grains were grown for feeding the farmers' own cattle. Milk was drawn in cans to one of the creameries. Ours went to Canajoharie. It became my job to truck the milk each morning. In retrospect I must now confess nearly half a century later that I often stayed in the village longer than I should have. Sometimes I stopped at John Hambrecht's blacksmith shop to observe a way of life that was rapidly drawing to a close. Occasionally I went to the scrap yard at Fort Plain in quest of just good useable things or sometimes special finds such as iron Indian trade axes from the 1600s plowed up in some farmer's field or a British bayonet dated 1779. Where it was found we will never know but it was a reminder of a time long ago. When two factions struggled for possession of our valley and our fertile fields were stained with the blood of both sides.

I and cows did not get along well, possibly because all cows looked alike to me. However I had a deep feeling for the land. It was the same land that my mother's ancestors came to till over 200 years before. In the 1960s I became involved with another remnant of Palatine's rapidly changing past. In 1854 the Farmers Insurance Company of the Town of Palatine was formed. It was founded in a day and age when barn raisings were common. Neighbor helped neighbor. In case a fire or wind-storm destroyed a

building some financial help was available through the company which was composed of local policyholders. In case of fire each was assessed their pro rata share of the loss. Some companies such as that still survive. The company was governed by a local board of director. I was for a time Secretary. It was up to me to renew the policies and maintain records. My friend Curtis Nellis was Treasurer.

It is indeed ironic how things can change from old to new and back again. In the early days when the Dutch barns were built it was a grain growing era. Few cattle were kept beyond those necessary for the use of the families themselves. The grains most grown then were wheat and field peas. Stone Arabia grown grain helped to feed Washington's army. By the mid-1800s, dairying became the main mode of farming. Better transportation made it easier and more profitable to sell butter and cheese. Small local cheese factories were located in several places in old Palatine. Blacksmiths shops were located in strategic places. Various trades were still practices. Spinning and weaving were done at home. There were tanneries, shoemakers, wheelwright shops, sawmills and harness shops, along with hotels and small stores. One room schools were scattered throughout the area. Long lanes led to far-back farmsteads and homesteads. New roads were being built. The Mohawk turnpike, now Route 5, was built in the dawning years of the 1800s. Much overland travel toward the just-opening west, usually Ohio and Illinois at that time, used that route. Taverns prospered in old Palatine. Herds of cattle and sheep were driven to other destinations. When the Erie Canal was opened in 1825 much overland travel chose that route. Then villages on the south side of the river began to prosper. As new roads were built, some of those found themselves located off the main stream of travel. People relocated in more advantageous locations. Even to the present, cellar holes and wells mark the location of these earlier dwelling sites. Wild roses and lilac bushes that descended from those planted by loving hands a century or two ago still survive. Each generation accomplished that which they called progress. Gradually great changes came about without any thought that someday those things might become well known and had disappeared in the mists of times might possibly reappear.

In the 1950s dairy farms were still the norm in Stone Arabia. About then grain farming began to reappear in a big way. Small farms became consolidated. The fences that had endured for many years were removed from small fields. Line fences marking dividing lines between farms also quickly disappeared. Large fields of corn were grown, somewhat resembling farm trends in the Midwest even though the lay of the land was not the same. The day of grain growing had reappeared to remind us that Stone Arabia had once again been transformed to a long-gone local trend.

An even more miraculous return to the past practices began in 1986 when the Amish came. Many of us who had an interest in the history of our area and some knowledge of past practices in everyday life began to see yesterday appear before our eyes. Those of us who attended country schools saw six new ones built. We alone remembered firsthand the experiences of attending a one room school that housed all eight grades. I have heard younger people lament the fact that this has not taken place. Yes, those who attend centralized schools do encounter different experiences. However, only those who went to a one room school remember that those who attended were like an extension of one's family.

So many Amish ways have deep roots in American tradition. Who would have thought that kerosene lamps would again light Stone Arabia homes? The harness maker, blacksmith and wheelwright again

appear in our area. Quilting bees were revived. The machinery well known and used by a generation or two before came back into use. Perhaps the greatest return to a bygone era is the use of horse drawn vehicles. Barn raisings have become an almost weekly event in summer months. These are attended and marveled at by many area people. We have all learned how much can be accomplished in a short period of time by everyone cooperating on a project. As I watched a barn raising I commented to an elderly Amish man about the wonder of working together. He said, "it is a labor of love". The Amish property is assessed by the local assessor and they pay taxes, even for that from which we but not they derive use. There are so many plusses contributed by the ancient Amish culture as they become our neighbors that the few minuses can easily be overlooked. A lot of hard work goes into a day of Amish life as it has and does with us. It is just different than that experienced by many others who go about their daily jobs. As one searches his or her mind for outstanding memories our Amish neighbors have certainly contributed their share. As I search for memories I recall seeing a large load of loose hay drawn by a beautiful team of horses with a father and his two sons coming from the west at sunset. I think of seeing our neighbors plowing their fields on bitter cold days. I think of the day when the first Amish school was being built. Amish boys were helping build the school they would attend. When I commented on it to an Amish father he said, "this is where the boys should learn, working with their father." The elderly people remained at home and were lovingly taken care of until they passed away. Small houses are built for Grandmother and Grandfather to live in near the young folks when the farms are passed to the next generation. These, too are remnants of yesterday that have sadly passed away from much of our society. How fortunate we are that the old ways survive even with a small segment of our population. The effort to revive home care seems to be reviving with all society.

As we go about our way, I hope we all cherish those memories and remember that to "have a friend we must be one". Get to know your Amish neighbors, we are lucky to have them and they are lucky to have us. How the changing scene in Stone Arabia will affect the future no one knows. Let's all try to help make it positive.

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