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" Some Early History of the Town of Villenova "

Prepared by H. S. Sweetland and read at
the annual meeting of the Chautauqua
County Historical Society at Mayville
October 17th, 1931

This is not intended as a history of Villenova
for I have neither the time to prepare nor you to hear such
a paper, but rather to record the common place instances that
occurred in the early settlement and to get into permanent
record the location of the various mills and manufacturing
plants that were once so numerous along the streams of the
town.

As Villenova is not on one of the many larger streams
which the Indians and first early settlers followed, the first
settlement was not quite as early as some other parts of the
county. The first purchases of land were made by Daniel Whipple,
Ezra Puffer and John Kent in October, 1809, the honor of being
the first permanent settler going to Daniel Whipple, who
settled at Beardsley Corners, the site now being marked by a
granite marker erected in 1923 at the Centennial Celebration of
the Organization of the Town Government.

In the years immediately following, John Kent, Jr.,
the five Wright Bros, John Arnold, Benjamin Sweet, Chas. Mather,
Vileroy Balcom, Nathaniel Warner, and ~~Arda~~ Wheeler bought land
and became permanent settlers, the descendants of many of the
above are now residents of the town. These first settlers were
all of New England stock. Many others followed until in 1823
the inhabitants became so numerous that it was felt that they
needed a township government of their own, and Villenova was
formed on January 24th, 1823, by taking part of the southern
part of the town of Hanover and Ezra Puffer was elected super-
visor at the first town meeting.

^{first} One of the public improvements that the settlers had
to perform was road building to connect up their scattered
homes with the outside world. In this undertaking, they had
but little help from the outside. The Holland Land Company
to better sell the lands, built what was known as the Allegany
road, starting at what was then known as Cattaraugus Village
near the present village of Irving, running southerly to the
Allegany River. This road entered Villenova near the northeast
corner of the town and left near the southeast corner. The
road was given by the Holland Land Company to the ~~village~~ through
which it passed and was laid out four rods wide and the deeds
for the adjoining land specify that the measurements of the land
commence at the road line instead of the center of the highway
as is the usual case. This road followed an old Indian Trail.

The Holland Land Company hired John and John P. Kent to cut a road from Kents Mills in the Southeast corner to Kennedyville for the munificent sum of ten dollars a mile; also to cut a road from the same place to Sinclairville for the same compensation. A toll road was built through the town near its center, one toll gate being just south of Balcom Corners. The last of the planking for this road was dug up when the improved highway was built two or three years ago. The town never had a railroad or trolley line. In 1836 the Legislature of New York State authorized a loan of three million dollars to the Erie Railroad Company and a road was graded from Dunkirk east to Arkwright and Villenova and east towards Salamanca. Rails were laid from Dunkirk east for six or eight miles but the road was never completed. The right-of-way for this road is still seen for much of it extends through pastures that have never been plowed and many of the bridges built of stone are still in excellent state of repair. The Company was reorganized and when rebuilding started their line over the present right-of-way from Salamanca to Dunkirk. Naturally little settlements grew at convenient points. Last year I read you a history of Hamlet and Wrights Corners, or Villenova, so I will omit reference to that particular part of the township.

Balcom Corners in the south central part of the town was named after Vileroy Balcom, one of the first settlers who built a log tavern on the southeast corner, it being the third tavern built in the town. One room of this tavern was used as a store. This log tavern was used for several years when Mr. Balcom built a new one from sawed lumber on the northeast corner. This log tavern was later used as a barn until some thirty years ago when it was torn down. This frame tavern was a three story building, the upper floor being used as a dance hall and the place became famous for the size of its dances. Several owners at different times operated this tavern, among them being W. W. Bacon and Marvin Smith, and Royal Rundell owned it when it burned in the '80s. The stories of the drunken men who slept off their stupor in the fence corners do no credit to Balcom, altho it does add to the notriety of the place. While Mr. Bacon was landlord, he built a fair ground and trotting track on the northwest corner and fairs were held for several years but were finally abandoned. The track continued to be used as a ~~training~~ spot for training horses for many years thereafter.

Balcom Corners boasted of two stores, two blacksmith shops and one harness shop. Jerry Fisher operated a marble shop for nearly all his lifetime. Now only one store and filling station remain.

in the town

The only village of any pretense was originally named Omar, but its name was later changed to Hamlet. This village was located on Conewango Creek and originally most of the village was on the north side but later the south side became the business part of the town.

On Christmas eve in 1823 a class of Methodists was formed at the home of Obadiah Warner and after meeting at the homes of the members for a little time, they erected a log church, the first one in town where the improved highway curves to the west, a few rods from the bridge. Later both the Methodists and Baptists built pretentious churches just on the easterly edge of the village and these churches were surrounded by horse sheds which were filled to the limit every Sunday, for in those early days practically everyone attended church regularly.

Daniel Cross and Asel Goodyear operated the first store in Hamlet about 1829 and ~~Ashery~~ was built on the south side of the ~~first~~ highway which leads west. There were two general stores and two blacksmith shops on the north side of the creek. A log tavern was built which was later replaced by a frame building and a livery stable run in connection with it. J. B. Walker run this hotel for many years and later Amenzo Root was landlord. At a later period a creamery and cheese factory was also built on ~~the north~~ ~~side~~ of the creek. Many of the names of the early merchants are unknown to the writer, but at a later period Edwin Leaworthy and Ed. Denson run grocery. J. C. Mount and William Mount had a hardware store. The Session Bros had a Dry Goods store and Isaac Leeworthy had a shoe store. Dr. M. S. Cory run a Drug store in connection with his practice. Perhaps the most famous of the Hamlet merchants was R. L. Shephard, who for many years operated a store upon the present site of the Crowell store. It is said that he had seven clerks, all kept extremely busy. During the early winter season, Mr. Shephard exchanged goods for many tons of dried apples which were brought in by the farmers. Samuel Clark operated a general store on the northwest corner of the Four Corners and later H. B. Parker successfully operated this store for a long period.

The land in the northern part of the town drains toward Lake Erie but most of it is drained by the west branch of the Conewango Creek which flows eastward out of town. Conewango Creek and its branches furnished power for all the early mills and factories that were so numerously erected upon its borders. Where Silver Creek and the Fredonia improved highway unite in the eastern boundary of the town was a large mill pond. East of the highway on the north side of the creek was a saw mill built by James ~~Fisher~~ and the ~~building~~ timbers which were the foundations of this mill have only recently been removed from the bed of the

creek as sound as when they were placed there one hundred years ago. On the south side of the creek was a combined Carding and Grist mill and there the early settlers brought their corn to be ground into meal and their wool to be made into rolls which were later spun into yarn and made into warm socks and mittens for winter use. These mills were abandoned about 1860.

Arad Wheeler run a Saw Mill near what is now the Wooley Farm and a fourth Saw Mill was built near the present home of Rudolph Hunziker. On the creek which flows from the Warner neighborhood Steven Congdon had a Saw Mill for many years. Eli Sanderson built a Grist Mill about one and one half miles east of Hamlet and later Horace ~~Sanderson~~ operated this mill and his brother Charles operated a Saw Mill in connection and this mill is now the only one of the numerous mills now in operation at all. Farther up the creek towards Hamlet there was a Saw Mill on what is known as the Judd Farm. In Hamlet there was a large pond and water from this pond furnished power for ~~the~~ mills and factories located there. ~~and~~ There was also a Saw Mill on the south side of the creek. On the north side of the creek was a two story Grist Mill which ~~only~~ made wheat flour and ground grist for cattle feed. A Carding Mill adjoined this Grist Mill and still farther west was a Foundry which made iron plows and other farm implements. There was a Tannery where the farmers brought hides to be tanned into leather which were made into boots and shoes for the family, and farther east was located a Distillery and it is said that the boys of the neighborhood caught pigeons which gathered around the mash with nets attached to long poles.

Five Blacksmith shops were at one time successfully operated at Hamlet as were also two Wagon shops, one of which manufactured cutters. Orlando Wilbur had a Woodworking shop near the bridge. William Blydenburg and later his ~~brothers~~ sons Edwin and Jerome run a Carriage paint shop. John Barnes had a Barrel Factory on the eastern edge of the village. Edmond Crowell built a three story hotel in the center of the village which he operated for many years but which was torn down some thirty years ago. John Gordener run a Saw Mill about a mile west of Hamlet on the present Wentworth Farm. A little farther west there were four Saw Mills and one Grist Mill, all located within one mile. Two of these mills were on the Walter Mathewson Farm and the others near the residence of Percy Abbey. These various mills gave the location the name of Millville, which is still known by. One can still see the location of most of these various mills by the embankments ~~and~~ the mill ponds or races which let the water into the mills.

Before the white man came, the Indians had wandered along the banks of these creeks and fished and camped and arrow heads and flint have been found in several places, most numerously upon the Phillips' Farm in the eastern part of the town.

Without the power supplied by the water of Conewango Creek, one can hardly see how it would have been possible for the settlers to have received their lumber and manufactured goods which they stood so much in need of and can readily be seen that most of the needs of the early settlers that they could not supply from their own farms were manufactured for them right in their own township.

The number of the inhabitants of the town grew steadily for a rural community until they reached about seventeen hundred but about the time of the Civil War like all farming communities the number commenced to decline until now the town has nine hundred inhabitants.

If one could have taken a birdseye view picture of Villenova a hundred years ago, they would have seen a wilderness with settlers' homes scattered here and there with their owners chopping down and burning up these original forests, for their sole thought was to get the land under cultivation. Their only means of locomotion was a pair of oxen with occasionally a horse. They kept a cow or two to supply the family needs. They carefully saved all the hardwood ashes and made black salts at the different asheries and money received from its sale was about the only cash income. Mills were being erected upon the banks of the creeks to saw out lumber with which to replace their log cabins with better homes. At night one could see a little light ~~which came from tallow candles~~ which twinkled from the small windows in these settlers' cabins and possibly you could see the light of some lantern burning a tallow candle as the family of one settler went to spend the evening with another.

If one should now go up in airplane and take a picture of the same scene, he would see the forests gone to such an extent that there is too much land under cultivation. There is a surplus of crops, many of which sometimes have to be sold for less than the cost of production. Instead of a yoke of oxen dragging a plow around, he would see a tractor with a plow plowing many broad acres a day. Improved highways now run the same places where once their first dirt roads were laid out and over these roads run their trucks and pleasure cars. Instead of the light at night coming from a tallow candle, it comes from electricity generated at Niagara. Inside the homes the candle mold and spinning wheel have been laid aside and in their place ~~the housewife~~ is using modern electric appliances.

The one hundred years have wrought wonderful changes and life is ~~said~~ lived far easier, but the question of whether these changes have been improvements might be open to debate. It would resolve into the question of whether we are happier with our conditions of life than they were one hundred years ago.

South Dayton U.G. Oct 17-1931 J. F. A. Loveland