HENRY LEWORTHY

Our Venerable Historian

by

mrs. w. rollin morse

The subject of this paper has been a familiar figure in business, social, and religious circles of Fredonia for the past seventy years.

He has, at present, the distinction of having been in business longer than any other merchant in the village. He is the proprietor of "Ye Olde Booke Shoppe" located at no. 32 West Main Street, Fredonia.

On the second day of August he will celebrate his ninetieth birthday.

Let us review briefly some of the events in the life of Fredonia's Grand Old Man.

Mr. Leworthy is of English descent. A number of years ago he was privileged to visit England where he spent some time browsing among the ancient church and cemetery records and visiting the places where his forbears had lived.

As a result of this trip abroad, Mr. Leworthy gained much interesting information concerning his ancestors. The Leworthy family originally came from Devonshire, England. Here in the little village of Charles which is about nine miles from Barnstable, many members of the family lie buried. Here, also, branches of the family can be traced back for about four hundred years.

In the ancient village church at Charles, Mr. Leworthy saw an old church register which dated back to the year 1531. Here he
noted that the sixth marriage entry was that of John Leworthle and Englishe Bright, on June 28, 1547.

The old church tower in the village of Charles proudly boasted of five bells. On the largest of these bells, Mr. Leworthy was thrilled to read the following inscription, "Given to the parish by George Leworthy, gentleman, in 1733, during the pastorate of John Hosier."

John Leworthy, great-grandfather of Henry Leworthy, was an English soldier who fought with Wellington at Waterloo. It is recorded that he was wounded and received a medal for bravery. He died in the Chelsea hospital in London. His only son, Richard Leworthy, married Mary Allen. William Beer Leworthy, the eldest son of Richard and Mary and the father of Henry, was from north Devon, England. His wife, Mary (Jamison) Leworthy, Henry's mother, was from Waterford, Ireland.

They were married in the village of Johnson Creek, Niagara County, New York, in 1856.

Henry Leworthy was born on August 2, 1856, in the town of Villenova, near Hamlet, Chautauqua County, New York, where his parents had come as bride and groom the previous year from Niagara County to make their home.

After about a year Henry's father traded the farm in Villenova for a hill farm in Charlotte. The move proved to be a bad one and, after struggling along for a few years and getting nowhere, the family left Chautauqua County in 1860, going back to Niagara County to the village of Johnson Creek where Henry's parents had lived at the time of their marriage. Here the Leworthy family lived dur-
ing the years of the Civil War.

In this vicinity young Henry spent his boyhood days. Mr. Leworthy fondly recalls how he used to go to Johnson Creek for the mail and then carry it to all the neighbors between Johnson Creek and Jeddo for which service each family paid him twelve cents a week. In truth, young Henry was a pioneer mail carrier at the age of 10!

When questioned about the town of Jeddo, Mr. Leworthy jokingly remarked, "Oh! Jeddo! I learned to lie, cheat and steal at Jeddo, N.Y!"

In 1861 the Leworthy family moved to Michigan, where many families were emigrating, allured by the tales of the wealth of forest, field, and mine.

The Leworthys settled on a farm in Noble Township, Branch County, Michigan. Here the family resided for a number of years. The father passed away in 1873 and the mother in 1904.

Young Henry accompanied his parents and two brothers to Michigan, but it became evident that he would never make a farmer. After two years, parts of which he attended school in a log school house, Henry returned to his birthplace in Chautauqua County.

His father's brother, Edwin Leworthy, was the proprietor of a general, country store at Hamlet, New York. Here, Henry came to live with his uncle, help him in the store, and continue his education in the district school in winter.

Young Henry lived with his uncle in Hamlet for six years. He had long outgrown the country school. The time had come when he must decide upon his life work. A country store clerk as a life job did not exactly appeal to him. He decided to become a teacher;
and, in 1875, he enrolled as a student in the State Normal School at Fredonia. Henry studied at the Normal for three years, when the death of his father in 1878 again made it necessary for him to change his plans. Funds were low, and it was imperative for young Leworthy to get a job.

Here, his experience clerking in his uncle's store served him well. He entered the employ of Jesse K. Starr, popular Fredonia grocery man of that day. For twelve years he remained in the Starr Grocery, first as clerk, later as manager. Always genial, pleasant, and very efficient, Mr. Leworthy made many friends while in the Starr store.

In 1890, Mr. Leworthy severed his connection with the Starr grocery to become a partner with Bert Belden in the new firm of Belden and Leworthy, dealers in groceries and crockery. This store was located at number five, East Main Street, Fredonia. They later purchased the building at number eleven, East Main.

This partnership proved to be one of unusual congeniality and success. For eighteen years the firm of Belden and Leworthy carried on what was conceded to be the number one grocery business in the town. They catered to the best class of trade in a day when the independent grocer was king; competition was keen, and the modern chain store was as yet unborn.

The business firm of Belden and Leworthy closed out in 1908, owing to the illness of Mr. Belden.

Later on, Mr. Leworthy purchased the drug and grocery stock of Dorsett Brothers. He soon closed out the drug department, built up the grocery business, and, after a few years, sold out to the
new firm of Annas and Dorsett.

It is interesting to hear Mr. Leworthy tell about some of his personal experiences during his long and successful career as an independent grocer. The custom of extending credit to customers was, one might say, the curse of the age. A shockingly common practice among certain people was to trade at a store as long as it would carry your account. When the store discontinued credit, or pressed a little for the payment of the bill, the customer often left it cold and traded with a competitor, probably paying him the cash. The grocer's books were full of accounts, many of which had to be marked N. C.; and, the wonder is that any of them were able to survive as long as they did.

In one instance, related Mr. Leworthy, a customer refused to pay for a barrel of crackers because he said the mice had eaten the top off the barrel; yet, neither crackers nor barrel had been returned, nor complaint made, at the time of purchase.

One family had run up quite an account, and Mr. Leworthy suggested that the head of the house give a note for the amount. The man promptly replied, "No notes! The last time I gave a note my children had to go without underclothes all winter!"

Another family was about to lose their home. Mr. Leworthy saved their place by taking over the mortgage. In addition, he agreed to extend to them fifty dollars worth of credit on groceries to carry them through the winter. The customer promptly demanded the cash, saying they could get their groceries cheaper at Sears and Roebuck! And yet, with all the risks attendant upon running a credit grocery business, Mr. Leworthy says he never sued but one
While in partnership with Mr. Olden, Mr. Leworthy began his study of early China and porcelains. He had full charge of the crockery department of the store for a number of years. Through his wide experience and study, he has long been recognized as an authority in this field, and has often given talks on the subject of early China. He, himself, is the proud possessor of one of the largest and finest private collections of old English China to be found anywhere. The collection includes many rare pieces.

In 1918, Mr. Leworthy established his present business at number 32 West Main Street, Fredonia. Interesting indeed, is the fact that this is the very store in which he began his clerkship in the Starr Grocery sixty-eight years ago! Started more or less as a hobby, "Ye Olde Book Shoppe," as he calls it, has grown steadily.

The store has long been a favorite rendezvous for book, antique, and curio seekers. Here, collectors may find anything they want from buttons to bathtubs. His customers have come from every state in the union, and, many noted people have made purchases at his store. Until recent years, scarcely an auction was held within a radius of many miles of Fredonia, at which Mr. Leworthy could not be found, an interested and enthusiastic bidder.

Just to drop in for a brief chat with Mr. Leworthy as he sits among his treasures of a bygone day, is a never to be forgotten pleasure, which many Fredonians, as well as others, have long enjoyed. Many a casual caller at this store has gone away an enthusiastic collector of something or other! Very appropriately, Mr.
Leworthy's business cards contain these lines by Edgar Guest, entitled the "Antique Shop":

"There's a little old man in a little old shop.
That is cluttered with things from the cellar to top.
There is something of everything scattered about,
But whatever you want he can ferret it out.
'Now just wait a minute,' he says with a grin,
'I'll find what you're after. It's somewhere within."

In politics, Mr. Leworthy has been a lifelong Republican. Through the years, his business interests have always superseded his political ambitions. He did, however, serve as overseer of the poor in the town of Pomfret for many years, an office which today goes under the more glorified name of Welfare Officer. He also served a term as town assessor.

Mr. Leworthy has never been a "joiner." He belongs to no fraternities, no clubs, and no organizations except his church. Throughout his long life his chief interests have always been his home, his business, and his church.

On September 2, 1885, Henry Leworthy married Arabelle Wheeler, daughter of Dan and Mary (Kirkland) Wheeler, early settlers in the town of Hanover. Two sons were born to them: Ralph Hall Leworthy, now residing in Silver Creek; and Henry Kirkland Leworthy, residing in Dunkirk. Mr. Leworthy also has two grandsons, Henry the third, and Wilbur Leigh, children of Henry K. of Dunkirk. Mr. Leworthy's wife, Arabelle Wheeler Leworthy, passed away March 31, 1942.

Mr. Leworthy's connection with the Methodist Church in Fredonia is somewhat of a record. He has been a member of this church for
seventy-four years! Not merely a member, but an active one, until recent years, having served the church in just about every capacity that it is possible for a member to serve, from Sunday School teacher to president of the Official Board. His large class of young men, largely made up of Normal School students, in earlier days, and later on, his large Bible class, were outstanding. For many years he was the delegate from the church to the Erie Conference. He was always proud to have been instrumental in securing for his church preachers of such high caliber as Robert Brown, Bruce Wright, and the Reverends Farr and Davis.

Mr. Leworthy's interest in religious work goes back to early manhood. Three years ago, The Emanuel Evangelical Church at Laona celebrated its seventy-fifth (diamond) anniversary. In the booklet published by the church commemorating the event appears an early picture of Henry Leworthy, captioned "Superintendent of the early English Sunday School." Young Leworthy, with others from Fredonia, volunteered his services as Sunday School teacher in English. Sermons, of course, were in German. The volunteers used to assemble at a given place, and were transported to and from Laona in a horse drawn vehicle, furnished by Fredonia's enterprising nurseryman of that day, T. S. Hubbard.

A former pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Reverend Farr, now living in Westfield, says of Mr. Leworthy:

42 Union Street, Westfield, New York,
April 29, 1946

"I count it a distinct honor to be requested to write a testimonial regarding the loyalty and devotion of Henry Leworthy to the Methodist church during my pastorate in Fredonia.

During my years as pastor I never had a member who was more..."
devoted to his church than Mr. Leworthy. It can be said that serving his church was truly a large part of his meat and drink. He allowed nothing to stand between him and the meeting of his obligations in the various offices he held in the church. He was for many years a trustee, a steward, conference representative, head usher, and so forth. No task was too menial or taxing for him to give to it his best. He never said, "Let George do it," but gave his own money and time liberally.

I have never known a man so skillful in decorating a church. He could take even a bunch of weeds and so arrange them that they looked artistic and beautiful.

Mr. Leworthy was a faithful attendant at all church services and official gatherings. He was a familiar person at the meetings of our annual Conference. Indeed, that was his annual outing.

The following line from one of our great hymns is an appropriate description of Henry Leworthy as a Christian churchman, "I love thy kingdom, Lord, the house of thine abode."

Sincerely,
C. G. Farr

In addition to his other interests, Mr. Leworthy has always been a student of history. His wide reading and study on historical subjects have made him an authority. He also owns many rare historical books. At one time, while reading an old book published in the seventeen hundreds, he found where the name Fredonia had once been suggested as a name for the whole United States, or at least what was then known of it.

It was this discovery, perhaps, more than anything else, that called the attention of the New York State Historian to him, and led to his appointment as Town Historian for Pomfret, a few years ago.

Mr. Leworthy is one of the original directors and founders of the Citizens State Bank, now the Citizens Trust Company of Fredonia, of which he has been an official for many years. Mr. Cumming, president of the Citizens Trust Company, says this of Mr. Leworthy:

Henry Leworthy, one of the most esteemed and beloved figures of Fredonia.

For nearly half a century Mr. Leworthy has been associated with the Citizens Trust Company of Fredonia, New York, or its predecessor, The Bank of Fredonia, always as Director, and later as Vice President. During these long years he has endeared himself to the officers and members of the Board by his devotion and loyalty to the institution which he serves. His advice and counsel have
always been sought and respected knowing they would be unbiased and of sound conservative judgment.

In all phases of civic, religious and social life of Fredonia, he has been active, interested, and always ready to do his part to promote the welfare of the Village where he has made his home for so many years.

Henry Leworthy will be remembered and loved long after he has gone by his many friends whose privilege it has been to know him well.”

One organization in which Mr. Leworthy has always had a deep interest is the Young Men's Christian Association. He is one of the founders of the Chautauqua County Y. M. C. A. and he is still a director.

The following tribute to Mr. Leworthy is paid by Mrs. Marian Belden, a member of the Board of Managers of the Darwin R. Barker Library, Fredonia:

"Mr. Leworthy's love and knowledge of books, together with his business training, led to his being selected as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Darwin R. Barker Library forty-one years ago (1905). He was soon made Vice President.

Associated with him on the board at that time were such men as Lewis McKinstry of the Fredonia Censor, B. F. Skinner, Dr. Albro, of the Normal School, Judge Lambert, Winfield Holcomb, later, State Commissioner of Education, Festus Day, L. B. Green, nephew of Darwin R. Barker, donor of the present library building. All, long since passed away. Mr. Leworthy succeeded L. B. Green as treasurer of the Library Board, and when the president, Judge Lambert, died in 1937, he was made president, which office he still holds.

In 1906, on the motion of Mr. Leworthy, it was voted to extend the privileges of the village library to the people of the whole town of Pomfret, on condition that the town vote an annual appropriation of $1000 toward library expenses.

This question was debated for three years before its final adoption by the board.

As the service and needs of the library have increased, the town appropriation has likewise increased, until it now triples the original amount.

Mr. Leworthy's background of extensive reading and his infallible memory have made his judgment of books of great value. His advice in financial matters, and his good judgment in the handling of endowment funds, especially during the years of the depression, made possible greatly improved library service to the community."

To live to be ninety is a definite accomplishment. To feel, at that great age, that life has been full and satisfying is an
even greater attainment. Mr. Leworthy feels that life has been very good. Many honors have come to him, although he sought none. He is deeply grateful for all his blessings, especially for that of a sound mind and a clear memory. For, with advanced age, we naturally live more in the past, and memory is the bridge to all our yesterdays.

Mr. Leworthy's story is the story of a poor boy who made good. The story of a man who found his greatest happiness in service, fair dealing, and clean living, ever mindful of the spiritual values of life. "The influence of such a life in any community cannot be measured. Henry Leworthy is well deserving of a place among the honored citizens of Chautauqua County."

"Age is the top of a mountain high,
Rarer than the air and blue;
A long hard climb, a bit of fatigue,
But, Oh, what a wonderful view!"

Prepared for the Chautauqua County Historical Society, and read at the meeting in Stockton, June 8, 1946.