SILVER CREEK'S EARLY HARBOUR DAYS

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By

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Times change and with them customs, manners, transportation, and ways of life. Whole eras rise and fade forever, generations come and go. The one time seemingly uneventful daily life becomes recorded history and the hony stories of yesteryear pass in to the realm of heroic legend; but how oft the scene, the natural background of it all, having lent itself with supple grace to each period's passing needs, emerges in the end but little altered, little affected by the transitions it has endured and witnessed in civilizations march of progress.

Such might be true of Silver Creek's Lake Front with its twin shale points austere and ageless stretching out to sea, with its graceful bay ever receiving the mingled waters of Silver and Walnut Creeks at their outlet. Never was nature kinder than when she fashioned this natural harbour. The vacationist's and fisherman's paradise of to-day, the busy, important marl of yesteryear. Barring the ancient timber whose shade once rose and fell reflected on the surface of Lake Erie's waters, can it the bay id but little changed, its contours not at all. One realizes the thrill that must have caused through the being of Oliver Lee that Sunday in 1828 when having walked from the Cross Roads, lured on by the ever changing shore line he found himself on the Western Point, and there from the cliff saw spreading before him a harbour created by nature more perfect than engineer could conceive or heart desire.

A pioneer from New England, an early settler in Warsaw and later an early merchant at the Cross Road, this man of enterprise grasped with the quick business intuition the rich possibilities of his discovery. A man of action, he lost no time in purchasing from John Howard, the first permanent settler, three hundred and fifty acres including the lake front; in moving his family temporarily to "The Howard House", the first tavern, until a home could be built; in erecting a brick structure for his store;
and setting about to develop the harbour and make the most of Dame Nature's lavish gift.

Beguiling though this gift might be, tantalizing and frustrating was it also. The smooth rock bottom of the lake proved an obstacle not to be coped with lightly nor with speed. So uncompromising was this obstacle that to a lesser mind, it would have passed as unsurmountable - but not to Oliver Lee, the commerce-minded, not-to-be-daunted young pioneer of resourcefulness and, fortunately, capital. He conceived the idea of forming cribs, so called, from timber, filling them with stone and sinking them as foundations for the wharf. Fantastic though this sounded, it proved to be both practical and workable.

With despatch, the experiment having proven satisfactory, contracts were let for the delivery of large numbers of square hewn timbers, and for the quarrying of unlimited amounts of stone from the cliff on the west shore.

Such a scene of fevered action as the lake front became: timbers being delivered in great numbers, squads of men preparing the same by hand with their crude implements, the quarrying going on to the west to the sound of ringing, sledge and falling rock! The quietest spot in the locality suddenly teemed with strange, new activity in contrast to its customary hushed solitude, that solitude which witnessed Mr. Heaton, the first permanent mill owner, push off in his Skow one December's day in 1815 with his two Indian oarsmen, to row to Buffalo to pay for his mill machinery, never to return, being washed overboard by a high gust of wind; that same silent port from which hardy settlers in the earliest days set forth on occasions to row to Canada for much needed and otherwise unattainable supplies; that little haunted shore from which not infrequently row boats set out for Chadwick Bay (Dunkirk, of course) or Dibble's Bay (Amesla) to transact business or to indulge in an interval of social intercourse, though
there was little time for light living in those rugged days. Lake Erie
from the time the Indians first beached their canoes silently on the
creekside was a commonly used highway by the first settlers of Fayette,
that first little community centered about the first mill in the shade
of the giant walnut tree above the bridge on upper Main Street of today.
Rowing or driving on the ice to Buffalo or Dunkirk, according to the
season, was the most direct route and the most efficient; roads and
trails were often impassable. This was before the lake was known to
craft, as such, and vessels bearing passengers and cargo. This was
the extent of harbour life at Fayette until Oliver Lee's dream began to
take on reality and the waterfront began to hum with action. With
Buffalo the terminus of the Erie Canal and that city but thirty-five
miles to the east, Lee saw in Fayette's location and natural harbour
an opportunity rich with promise; he personally supervised the con-
struction of his wharf with unremitting zeal.

Every condition favored the progress of the undertaking.
December first brought good sleighing which was advantageous in the
extreme for hauling timber to the scene. Heavy and early ice formation
was equally providential enabling men and teams to work in safety.
This ice formation was of paramount importance as the point established
for the wharf was three hundred and fifty feet from the shore where
the water was of sufficient depth to float the largest sailing vessels
or steamboats of that day. Twelve or fifteen ox-teams were employed
hauling stone on the ice and with steady patience did they plod back and
forth over these three hundred and fifty feet.

At no time were there less than fifty men employed in framing
the cribs, putting them into position and in sinking them through the
ice, a tricky job at best. Work continued uninterrupted until after
the middle of March then the early sloughing of ice gave warning that
safety could no longer be insured. The work of necessity was compelled
to end, but what an achievement! In less than four winter months
enough cribs were built and successfully sunk in about a hundred and
fifty feet of pier running toward the shore with an ell portion of about
seventy-five feet on the outer end running down the lake toward the
East. This was little short of an herculean accomplishment and one to
pay tribute to, certainly. What pride and gratification must have surged
through the veins of Mr. Lee and his rugged employees as they realized
their achievement and what a measure of relief, there being no serious
casualties. The contest with nature at its severest must have been grim
indeed, - of what fortitude were these pioneers possessed!

This wharf was then completely planked over at a more leisurely
tempo, the race against the season's hazards being accomplished; and
although a perilsous gap of two hundred feet, approximately, yawned
between it and the land with no communication save that of row boat,
it was ready for business when spring transportation opened and though
but a token dock, business it actually carried on.

The very first season the steamboat "Pioneer" which ran regularly
between Buffalo and Barcelona commenced stopping experimentally and
lying over for awhile at the harbour which was now known as Silver
Creek. Freight, if it could be called that, and numerous passengers
began to appear and the "Pioneer" found, to Mr. Lee's proud satisfaction,
that despite the limitations, and the hazards of communication between
wharf and shore, there was sufficient business to warrant its repeating
the experiment with the result that before the season was too advanced,
the "Pioneer" could be relied upon to dock in passing.

Imagine the sensation of those early inhabitants, farmers and
woodsmen for the most part, as they stood on this very shore in awed,
excited knots watching with breath suspended the first vessel warped
Ain to the new, untried pier two hundred feet distant. Imagine, too, the busy scows and sculls, eagerly plying between dock and shore. Imagine the Captain and the experienced lake seamen trying the timbers under foot, inspecting the newly sunken piles, and generally appraising the situation as they congratulated Mr. Lee and acknowledge the greetings of the welcoming group waving and hollering from the shore.

Though still in its feeblest infancy, this rudimentary wharf marked the beginning of a new, spectacular era for the scattered little community of Fayette, now Silver Creek, an era of lake commerce, lake travel and of direct intercourse with the outside world. Without doubt much of the town's manufacturing success of later years and the present day dates back to that early and little primitive island wharf.

This first summer proved that Mr. Lee's aspiration was no idle dream but a practical business venture, one destined to great success. On the strength of this promise work was resumed with the return of winter's sleighing and ice formation, and was continued unremittingly during the severe winter months. It was a gratifyingly long, severe winter; the ice held well into spring, enabling the entire communication to be completed between the shore and wharf proper. With the advent of spring 1831, teams loaded with wood, lumber, farm products, potash and other homely but necessary commodities could be driven direct from Jackson Street uninterrupted to the far end of the pier, the lading wharf, where they could be unloaded directly on to the waiting schooner. This meant business in earnest. Silver Creek was now ready and adequately equipped to compete with the other harbours for the lake trade. The Town of Sanover had an unlimited outlet for all it could produce.

It was soon apparent, however, that to carry on Lake commerce full scale, one more feature was necessary, - a warehouse, no less. True enough the commodities could now be loaded on to the boats direct,
and in turn the vessels cargo could be unloaded on to the waiting teams, 
but sailing vessels were unpredictable, arriving when and how the wind 
permitted and steamboats, though more reliable, were still whimsical as 
to their arrivals and leave-takings. While teamsters waited for days 
in excited uncertainty with a definite good grace in the first glamour 
of the earliest shipping summer, this was bound to wane and turn to 
disfavor with the passage of time, especially if they had to watch their 
commodities steadily deteriorate under unfavorable weather conditions 
while their fretting minds dwelt on the unattended chores at home. A 
warehouse was an absolute, indispensable necessity if the wharf was to 
achieve the full value to the community.

This building was erected that second summer at the land end, 
approximately where the Fish and Game Club House now stands. There were 
housed the goods and products for shipment and in turn those unloaded 
from the incoming vessels. This accelerated business in a most astonish-
ing measure: the settlers delivered their commodities at will and made 
their purchases, or carried on their barter at their own convenience.

This warehouse became the center of a very busy commercial life. As 
this activity increased, and as more ships docked and with more 
dependable frequency, the whole locality gradually assumed a business 
appearance. Several buildings were erected for family use as more men 
were needed on the wharf and in the warehouse, two of which are still 
standing to testify to the life that once was in those far-away shipping 
days.

Jackson Street, already mentioned, had been laid out meantime 
by Mr. Lee as an approach, a highway leading directly from Dunkirk Street 
(now Central Avenue) on to the wharf. This street was literally hewn 
and blazed through a solid front of black walnut trees which were held 
of so little value that they were burned as they were felled, the readiest
means of disposal.

As the lake commerce increased there came a growing need for accommodations. The wharf was a busy spot indeed with lake travel becoming steadily preferable to stage coach, ox cart, or horseback. In consequence the "Steamboat Hotel", so called was built nearby and a famous old water-front hotel it became, widely known in the annals of harbor life. Facing the lake, a little way to the west of the club house still stands a part of this historic building with its storied walls.

Silver Creek harbour became a thriving, flourishing part, indeed, a famous lumber market to which the East, New England in particular, looked for much of its lumber. This came not from Hanover alone, by any means, but from the South-east towns of the County and from portions of Cattaraugus County as well.

Shipping became so extensive it was not unusual for two or three of the largest sized sailing vessels to be lying at the Silver Creek pier at one time taking on cargoes of lumber or discharging heavy cargoes of grain which came by the vessel load and was so necessary to the well-being of every settler. Purchasers came from unbelievable distances inland to procure grain from this point, also their sugar and tea. From as far inland as Cherry Creek and Randolph merchants came with their teams to procure the stock for their general stores, from the incoming vessels.

Business steadily increased to such a point that the wharf was no longer adequate for handling the volume; an addition was an absolute necessity. From seventy-five to a hundred feet farther out in the lake another "L" was built at the end making a slip where vessels could lie in numbers which greatly facilitated business.

In 1833 or 34 through Mr. Lee's untiring efforts the Government made appropriation for the erection of a Beacon Light at the furthest extremity of the pier, and the year following, realizing the importance
of this harbour and the bulk of shipping handled here, a second appropriation was made for the erecting of a Light House on the extreme point of the west cliff. Through the years this has been known as "Light House Point". Both lights were maintained by the Government for many years, the light house being abandoned until the advent of the railroad - the knell of harbour life.

What a stunning sight it must have presented, the harbour, on a moonless night in the late 1830's - the noble sweep of bay with the wharf stretching far out into the black water five hundred feet, the masts of the sailing schooners rising and falling in the slip, a sleeping steamer, perhaps, tied up at the outer pier; the crouching warehouse looming dark in the foreground, the Steamboat Hotel" shedding light and hospitality from its many twinkling panes, the brooding stillness of the cliffs, the distant beacon reflected in the swells below, and overall the majestic Light House, protective, casting its rays far over the vast expanse of water and highlighting the shore as well.

In the 1830's lake traffic became "immense", to quote an early writer. With no railroad running west of Utica and with the Erie Canal, the greatest artery of travel across the state, terminating at Buffalo, and the lake steamers taking over at that point, it is easy to see how the lake traffic might really be "immense".

Silver Creek came to be an outstanding port and often the most congested. That last might well seem odd. With Buffalo the connecting link between the Erie Canal and the great lakes, why would any nearby smaller port compare for congestion? Fate often plays weird tricks and never were circumstances less to be expected than in that day when for four successive springs 1835-40, no lake traffic was available to Buffalo due to the ice jam in the harbour. The Erie Canal disgorge its passengers at its western terminus only for them to find that was their jour-
ney's end, seemingly - "The city" to quote the same early writer, "became filled to overflowing with its impatient strangers anxiously waiting to proceed on their western journey. They all but lost their minds as the delay continued and the completely blockaded harbour showed no prospect of ever opening."

When the news reached the city that first year, that boats from western ports were coming East as far as Silver Creek and were lying over there for two or three days picking up cargo and passengers for the return trip, it is not hard to imagine the effect it produced. Pandemonium broke loose among the stranded travellers as they competed madly for transportation to the Silver Creek harbour, and no less lively was the contest among self-seeking, advantage-snatching would-be transporters. Animals that could hardly stagger were brought forth from heaven knows where, certain vehicles of every description came to light from equally mysterious whereabouts; every beast that could totter, every conveyance of any vintage with still turning wheels were requisitioned to carry eager passengers with their luggage to Silver Creek, - the sudden mecca of every west-bound would-be traveller. This was a glorious, incredible, heaven-spiked opportunity for the unscrupulous - all prices were charged from three to ten dollars a person - outrageous and unthinkable in that day - according, of course, to the conveyance and, doubtless, the person's apparent means. In many cases, those who had paid the most, alas!, were obliged, in the end to walk a large portion of the way to lighten the load and to insure their baggage reaching its destination in safety, - said baggage was threatened to be thrown out on such occasions when the outraged passenger resisted. At the best it was a tortuous journey over the frozen ruts or through the oozing mud of early spring. Those who had to remain in Buffalo until their funds were about depleted had no alternative but to cover the distance on foot - sorry figures
were they, indeed, by the time their haggard eyes sighted the coveted harbour and the waiting vessel - providing it was still waiting. These boats most of them one hundred any twenty-five tons burden, (Hardly more than a good-sized yacht in today's language,) were definitely limited in their accommodations and straightway took off on their westward voyage when their capacity was exhausted.

Little can we imagine, I suppose, how the shambling nags and plodding oxen were belaboured and urged on; how the anxious travellers pressed forward in their distracted minds in the desperate hope of being among those to get on board. Never did the candle lights flare brighter in the Steamboat Hotel, never did the roasts turn faster on the spits, never was the busy bar trade more bustling; nary a bench, settle, table or floor board was there without its willing sleeper - these stranded transients milled around the little town for days, wandered along the shore and haunted the outer pier and Light House Point straining their eyes westward for signs of a distant vessel.

Hardly was the first crowd dispersed on its westward way and the natives recovered from this breath-taking human avalanche before there was a second influx and the drama was reenacted as before; the indescribable, tattered caravan of ancient vehicles was back again disgorging its agitated weary travellers, tossed by the same hopes and fears as those who had preceded them. This sorry tide of frustrated travellers and attendant excitement lasted unabated for about three weeks, during which time business at the Silver Creek end was lively to the point of fevered breathlessness - never had anything been seen or known to compare - such processions as wound into town; such crowds as poured over it; struggling little town that it was; the Harbour fairly seethed with excitement by day and by night for no hour was too unearthly for some sagging mare to draw up with its desperate rider or for some antiquated conveyance to come mercifully to its last swaying stop at
wharfside. To find housing for such numbers was a serious problem, almost a desperate situation in a community. For there incredible springs in succession was this drama enacted, - congested could be the only word.

Probably no period in Silver Creek life was ever as picturesque as that of the Harbour days: the busy wharf, heaped with barrels, casks, and kegs and chests, - with its double "L", the bursting warehouse with its office or "Counting House" flanked with high piles of out-going lumber, the colorful "Steamboat Hotel" with its ever changing clientele and sometimes staggering seamen, and the ship building going on in the background, its masts and spare lending romance to the scene.

Yes, as early as 1826, before Mr. Lee ever set forth upon the fateful Sunday walk that brought him to Silver Creek's lovely prospect, ship building was in progress. The ship yard was erected on the East side of Silver Creek not far below the juncture of Walnut Creek, very much on a line with the Ramsey Street of today, and here the well-known "Victory" was started in May 1826 and successfully launched in September. The owner and first ship builder, Mr. Holman Vail, a millwright and native of Otsego County, had to have the channel excavated to permit the ship to enter the lake. With this channel deepened a more ideal location for a ship yard could not be desired. It was as ideal for Mr. Vail's purpose as the bay with its protecting West Cliff was to be for Mr. Lee's. Though this first ship was lost by its owner because of the great expense involved and two unsuccessful shipping seasons: it was a very fine vessel, indeed, and was the forerunner of others which were to come from that same ship yard. The schooner "Victory" has gone down in history as the first lake vessel to be built in Silver Creek, the first sail craft to be floated from our creek
and Holman Vail with his brother John have also their place in history as the pioneer ship-builders; there were none before them.

Fortunately for the Vails whose all had been lost with the "Victory" as well as their heart for ship-building, Mr. Lee was not interested in lake commerce alone. Before he ever was known to Silver Creek, he was already part owner of the "Liberty", a successful coasting trade vessel running between Ashtabula, Ohio and Buffalo in 1826 when the Vails were just entering the ship-building business. With Mr. Lee's coming in 1828, came encouragement for the Vails and a new impetus for ship building. Mr. Lee's shipping experience proved how successful a coasting trade schooner could be and it renewed the Vails zest for building. With his interest, encouragement, and financial backing (their special need) the Vails again applied their proven skills to the building of other schooners. Emphasis enough cannot be laid upon the new prosperity and development which came to Silver Creek with the advent of Mr. Lee, with his mercantile interests and ambitions for ship-building and shipping life. To his far vision, perseverance and gift for organization the growth of the village cannot be indebted enough.

As a result of his stimulation to the Vail brothers, between the years of 1828 and 1844 there were fourteen or fifteen different sail and steam craft built and put aloft at this port, an average of one a year. Each in turn was launched in Silver Creek, just to the West of where we are now assembled, and made its tentative way in to the lake right where the creek flows into the same.

Those must have been thrilling days, too, the day of the year when the annual launching took place! How the date must have been rumored through the countryside and how eagerly the settlers must have assembled on the creek-bank and shore to watch with high suspense the maiden schooner's first shivery reaction as it slid from the channel and
security into Lake Erie's unpredictable robust embrace.

Launchings, coast trading, water travel; sails, rigging, schooners and steamboats; humming wharfs and bulging warehouse; captains, seamen, wharf-hands and teamsters; excitement, risk, romance and high adventure—these were the ingredients of harbour life when ship building and water commerce were in flower, when Silver Creek's port ranked with the best known on the Lakes.

Excitement, risk, romance and high adventure, yes, and prosperity, such prosperity as never was known or dreamed before; prosperity for a whole far reaching area extending even to townships in neighboring counties. Real fortunes were made in that day by wharf masters and fortunate ship owners, for each ship had its individual owner or was held in partnership or by a small private company; there were no shipping lines in existence then. Fortunes were made and, alas, in many cases lost for all was not flambouyant success and high good fortune even in that hey-day. Ships floundered and sank at sea, boilers exploded and steamers went up in flames, hopeless passengers cast themselves upon the mercy of the waves and many a floating spar was slung to in vain.

Shipwrecks, disaster and heroic rescues, they had their place in the harbour life saga; strewn with a thousand and fifty washed-up bodies was Silver Creek's shore on one ghastly August morning in 1844 when a flaming excursion boat failed to reach the wharf before it was consumed.

Industry, success, prosperity, fame and tragedy, this port knew them all. There was no colorful element lacking; Silver Creek's harbour life in its span was full, mature and complete, the word for it was drama.
Read if occasion seems right, especially if Mrs. Denny and Mr. Montgomery are present.

Gone, too, is Mr. Lee, long since, (1846), that remarkable figure of business genius who was not only responsible for the wharf, all the commercial life of that day, and the success of the shipyards, but for all the thriving prosperity they brought to the whole, far-reaching locality. He it was who established the first permanent general store, the first real Hotel, - the present Powers Hotel, the first Bank, who promoted the first church and donated the land for its site (the Presbyterian, 1831). He it was who laid out Dunkirk Street and extended Main Street, (Erie Road) to meet it thus erecting the four corners which are today reputedly the busiest traffic center in the State outside of New York City. With his genius for organization, his shore settlement and the original upper Main Street Walnut Creek settlement were drawn into one united, strongly cohesive community which was to be incorporated as the Village of Silver Creek in 1843, not many years after his death.

Mr. Lee is gone, it is true, as well as his wharf, but his public spirit, his great civic interest and pride, and his generosity have lived on in his two grandchildren, who in their ninetieth year are here to represent him today, as we honor him and his harbour development.

I take pleasure in presenting Mr. Lee's granddaughter, Mrs. Nelson Abell Denny, who still occupies the original Lee Homestead, and Mr. Ernest Montgomery who until very recent years still owned his Grandfather's Light House Point.
Gone are the wharf and the beacon, the warehouse, hotel and shipyard. Gone are the lighthouse and the lights far streaming. The rail-road embankment has supplemented the wharf, the streamliners have succeeded the sailing schooners; the warehouse has been replaced by the Fish and Game Club House on its very site, and the hotel has given way to a line of tourists' lodgings, but the cliffs are with us still, their dignity little impaired with age; the bay is as magnificent as in days of yore; the curve of the shoreline is as graceful as ever. The creeks still empty into the bay as always, the sun still sets behind the point, and the afterglow still dyes the sky and water alike in indescribable hues as in the busiest shipping days of the 1830's.

The Harbour's days may long since have been gone and all the picturesque life that attended them, but the natural setting that witnessed and shared it all remains but little changed, betraying nothing of its dramatic, historic past, of its one-time water fame. It remains to us to enjoy in reality as a region of sport or today, and in our minds as our imaginations reach back into the past to re-capture the colorful life and scenes that animated it then.