"HISTORICAL SKETCH OF VILLENOVA"

Given by H. S. Sweetland at a Meeting of the Society at Hamlet
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Villenova is one of the interior towns of the county. No main federal or state highway through Chautauqua County touches its borders. No trunk lines of public utilities, such as, electric, telephone or telegraph lines traverse the township. Villenova never even had a railroad, although we might go but a few rods from where this meeting is being held to see the original grade of the Erie Railroad as constructed ninety years ago. As first laid out, this railroad followed what is now the main line of the Erie from Salamanca to Redhouse to a point slightly west of Randolph, where it turned north-westerly crossing over into Dunkirk. Work on this section was started at Dunkirk and the grade was completed to about the center of Villenova and the right-of-way was graded and some work was done towards clearing to the county line. Rails were laid eight miles out of Dunkirk and the little cars drawn by mules drew the supplies as construction progressed. After all of this work was done, the line was abandoned and built through Dayton and Forestville to Dunkirk. This was the day before iron bridges and the stone bridges where they have not been torn down for other building purposes are now in as good state of repair as when erected long ago. If one wanted to walk from Hamlet to Dunkirk now, if they would follow this old right-of-way, they would go on as short and direct a route as any of the improved highways now leading there.

The west branch of the Conewango Creek rises now where the four Townships of Villenova, Arkwright, Charlotte and Cherry Creek join together and flows easterly, draining the townships, and with the tributaries furnish outlets for two little lakes which are, at least,
partially within Villenova. Upon the banks of these streams from their headwaters to the Eastern Villenova, eighteen mills were erected and diverted their motive power from the water of the streams. The sites of most of these mills can still be plainly seen by the embankments which formed the mill ponds and mill races. The most famous of these mills were located near the eastern border of the town. On the west side of the highway was a large pond. East of the highway on the north side of the creek was a saw mill with an old vertical saw. On the south bank of the creek was a combined grist and carding mill. These mills and the little settlement that grew up around them was known as Parkers Mills and the early historians of Chautauqua County state that Parkers Mills was located at the head of navigation at the head of Conewango Creek.

The early settlers of Chautauqua County largely followed the trail leading south-westerly from Buffalo near the lakeshore and, of course, largely purchased their lands bordering on this trail. The Holland Land Company induced the settlers to purchase land in the interior constructed a road from La Grange, now Irving, south-easterly to the Allegany River, naming it the Allegany Road. This was a four rod road instead of the standard width road of three rods and when completed the Land Company deeded the road to the township which it traversed. This road entered Villenova near the north-east corner, followed near the township line to Parkers Mills, and turned easterly towards Leon. As the township owned the right-of-way, the deeds to the property along this road in making the description say beginning at the boundary of the Allegany Road instead of saying beginning at the center of the highway as in deeds made in other sections.
Villenova was formed as a township in 1823 by taking the southern part of the Town of Hanover, but in 1829 the western part of the town was taken off to assist in forming the Town of Arkwright. In the eastern part of the town will be found a granite monument, erected some years ago, located on the site of the home of the first permanent settler, Daniel Whipple, who built it in 1810. The first collection of homes were built south-east of the center of town, which has always been known as Wrights Corners, named after the early settlers. Here was built the first tavern, blacksmith shop, shoe shop, the first school, which is still known as District No. 1 of the Town of Villenova, and the first religious organization in the township was formed in 1811, when seven person formed a class of Methodists, which later joined with a class at Hamlet and formed the Methodist Church of Hamlet.

Settlers came rapidly as from three families in 1810 grew to a population of nearly seventeen hundred in 1840. One of the serious drawbacks in the life of the early settler was the lack of communication with the outside world. There was no telephone, telegraph or radio.

The first settlers had to go nearly twenty miles to a post-office named Acasto, located in Cattaraugus Village at the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek. In the decade beginning 1829, the settlers in the northeast corner of the town went some eight miles to the postoffice at Aldrich Mills, later named Lodi and now Gowanda, for their mail. The settlers in the northern corner of the town went some ten miles to Sinclairville for their mail, while those in the remainder of the town went to a postoffice at Silver Creek, which caused a round trip of about thirty miles, so that the mail was received but seldom.
There was much agitation for a postoffice to be established in the town and in 1828 Villeroy Balcom, for whom Balcom Corners was named, offered to go on horseback once a week for a year, without charge, to Silver Creek and bring the mail in, if the government would establish a postoffice in the town. The government accepted this offer and established a postoffice at Wrights Corners, which remained in existence for nearly seventy years. Two years later another office was established at Balcom Corners. This mail route lengthened as needed and finally became a stage route. The stage left Silver Creek early in the morning, brought mail to Forestville and over the hill to Villenova, where the tired team was put in the barn and a fresh team brought out, mail was changed, a hasty dinner eaten, and the stage went on its way, leaving mail at Cherry Creek, Olds Creek, now Conewango Valley, Clear Creek, Water borough, winding up at Kennedyville now Kennedy.

At Wrights Corners the tavern was the center of all of the activities, political meetings and social gatherings were held there. For a time the town elections were held there, alternating between Hamlet and Wrights Corners. At the time of the greatest activity, besides the tavern, there were two stores doing a large and profitable business, four blacksmith or wagon shops, one shoe shop, one marble shop and four asheries. For a time ashes were gathered there regularly over stated routes.

During the decade during which the Civil War was fought and before the day of the cheese factory, a butter market was held there one day each week and the farmers from far and near brought in their tubs or firkins of butter to be sold to the two buyers who regularly attended, one of them holding forth in each one of the stores.
Villeroy Balcom bought much land around what was later known as Balcom Corners. He built a log house, which was later enlarged to make a tavern and there for many years he kept a postoffice. After his death, the building was used as a barn and hen house until torn down about forty years ago. When the log tavern became out-moded, a three-story hotel was built, which became famous for its dances and hospitality.

On the northwest corner a fair ground was fenced in and the Balcom fairs were held there for several years. After the fair was abandoned, the track was used for many years by John B. Gardner, who was a famous horse-trainer of his day, who trained colts of Chautauqua County to become winning trotters.

At its height, Balcom contained two prosperous stores, two blacksmith shops, one harness shop and one marble shop. South of Balcom the land was swampy and a toll road was built, the toll gate being some forty rods south of the . When the present improved highway was constructed, some fifteen years ago, in excavating for the foundation, some of the plank in this old toll road was ploughed up after being buried for many years. Balcom acquired considerable notoriety. Men from different parts of the county, who desired to be known as sober citizens when they felt the urge to drink to excess, went to Balcom and stayed until their thirst was quenched. Then, there was a time when a certain class of men traveled on their muscle, all disputes or arguments were settled with their fists, and when a man of this type felt the urge coming on, he went to Balcom and there he would usually find a kindred spirit. No one would think of writing Villenova history without, at least, mentioning the fights or riots that occurred on the Balcom fair grounds for two successive years. No
doubt, these stories are like our fish stories of the present day, they grow with telling. Perhaps, times have changed, but in the forty years that the writer has known Balcom, its people have been as law-abiding as have been the people of other communities.

Great as Wrights Corners and Balcom thought they were, Hamlet was always the metropolis of Villenova. The postoffice there was first named Omar, but later changed to Hamlet. There was a large mill pond on the west side of the highway from which was generated the power for various little factories upon its banks. Originally, the village was even on the north side of the creek. There was a saw mill, planing mill, grist mill and carding mill, a distillery, tannery and a foundry, which acquired quite a distinction for the high quality of the ploughs they made. In fact, there were mills or shops making everything that the people of seventy-five years, or more, ago desired. There was a tavern and for a time a livery stable. A log church stood near at the end of the bridge. A little later, eastward up a little hill, the Methodists built a commodious church and the Baptist had one nearby. If I should tell you the length and number of stalls in the sheds of these two churches and the number of teams that filled them every Sunday, my reputation for telling the truth would become badly shattered. It must be remembered, however, at that time the population of the town was double what it is today and at that time the people did not go to the band concerts or picture shows on Saturday night and tire themselves out so that they could not go to church on Sunday.

Gradually business on the north side of the creek was moved to the south side where more level and convenient building locations were available. The Baptists thought their church to be out-of-date and they moved to the south side and built the church in which this meeting is being held today. Their congregation dwindled until they abandoned
it as a meeting place and some years ago it was sold to the Methodists, who moved to the new location and sold their old church on the north side, where it is still used as a barn.

At its height, it contained one-half dozen stores, all doing a profitable and successful business. Sixty years and more ago there were no mail-order houses where people could purchase any of the necessities of life, no autos to take them to the larger stores in the cities, everyone traded at home. There was a modern three-story hotel built, the third floor being used for social gatherings and political meetings. There were five blacksmith shops, one harness shop, one carriage-painting shop, one barrel factory and one and sometimes two barber shops, in fact, everything that people of that needed was made or could be purchased right at home.

But a great change came over all rural life. The necessities of life that were made in the little shops or factories in every rural community could be bought cheaper from large manufacturing plants in the cities and the little shops and factories were abandoned. The building of the railroad drew the population and business to the railroad towns. When the Buffalo and Jamestown Railroad was completed in September, 1875, quite a share of the business done in the hamlets of Villenova was transferred to Pine Valley, now South Dayton. This stage route between Silver Creek and Kennedyville was abandoned because the railroad carried the mail. The stage route was established from Hamlet to South Dayton that took the mail down in the morning to the postoffices of Balcom and Villenova, delivered it to the train and after the train had gone, went and again to these offices where a man with a cart took the mail from Villenova postoffice to the little postoffice at Wango, which was in the northeast corner of the town. When the rural routes were established over all of the township, the postoffices at Balcom and Villenova and
Wango were discontinued and now only the postoffice at Hamlet remains.

What a change has occurred in Villenova since the first settler came one hundred and twenty-nine years ago. Then it was a wilderness with a only a path through it worn by the Indians from their migrations from the waters of the Allegany to their village at the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek. Now an improved highway runs in every directions carrying autos at sixty miles per hour. The early settlers made all of their tools and utensils used in their homes and on the farms from the trees in their woods. Now they are purchased of distributors of distant manufacturers. Then all food used was grown on the farm or brought down by the settler's rifle, now it often comes from tin cans. Then the housewife got the dinner over a smoky fire-place, now it is often cooked over an electric stove.

One of the most interesting studies that one could engage in would be the cause of the decadence in rural life. Why is it that Western New York is not as thickly populated as it once was? Why have the people flocked to the city to starve while they could have an abundant life on the farm? I will leave that subject to someone to discuss who is more competent than myself.

I should like to name some of the old settlers who did so much to make our town what it is today, but time does not permit it. It would also be interesting to tell you of some of our native sons who have gone out into the world and made an outstanding success in the ministry, law and other professions, but I have already reached my limit of time.

In closing I desire to express the hope that the ideals of our citizens will always remain as high as they always have been in the past.