

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #9

(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

Grove Hinman – Businessman And Local Legend

Perhaps no other person in the Madison-Bouckville area has generated more interest and more stories than Grove Hinman. His exploits, from the 1920's until his death in 1961, have fascinated generations of local citizens.

Grove Wood Hinman was born and raised in the neighboring community of Deansboro. He was one of eleven children, all of whom became successful in later life. Grove developed a keen business sense at an early age; a sense of daring and risk-taking which carried him successfully throughout his career.

Leaving Deansboro at age 25, Grove already had experience in the raising of vegetable crops and the buying and marketing of calves and cows. He bought a farm on what is now the Solsville-Augusta Road, outside of the Hamlet of Solsville, and began marketing cattle in our area. Soon he was in trouble for selling "bob veal," that is, calves that were too young for the market. He had already been arrested for this while living in Deansboro.

Not to be deterred, Grove soon expanded into the feed business and bought the mill in Solsville. By this time he had married his first wife, Josephine Eisinger.

The marriage lasted but a brief time. One story was that Josephine could not stand the fact that Grove often came home with blood all over his hands and clothing from the butchering of the calves for market.

Grove had a number of serious accidents during his lifetime. He drove fast cars and exceeded the speed limit repeatedly. An early example was in 1914 when he was bringing in a load of dead calves to Solsville depot. He lost control of the vehicle and it "turned turtle," meaning upside down. He escaped with minor injuries because the dead calves, which were in the back seat of the car, cushioned the crash.

Grove never seemed to enjoy the laws of the day. In response to numerous tickets for speeding, he joined with Henry Miner, of Oriskany Falls, and purchased an airplane. The airstrip was on the road to Oriskany Falls, near the present village reservoir area. The Central Aviation Company flourished for a number of years.

Grove's career was just beginning to take off. He soon purchased the Lee Canning Company structure in Hamilton. This was behind the present Ray's Wayside building. A feed mill was established there and soon the former canning plant was converted into a basket factory. How convenient for Grove, who had by then established himself as one of the area's top producers of peas and beans.

In 1922 Grove purchased the Madison Lake property, which included the Leland Hotel and the Lewis Pavilion. The Leland Hotel served fine foods and offered rooms for rent, while the Lewis Pavilion had a spacious dance hall. The property was improved and soon bands from as far away as New York City were being booked. It became the place to go during the 1920's-1940's in the Central New York region. However, like Grove's other ventures, he had to test the limits of the law. This time it was in the sale of alcohol, which at the time was in violation of the Volstead Act, more commonly known as "Prohibition."

Grove was raided in 1922, just two months after opening the hotels for the season. He was raided a second time that same year and again two years later. In addition, he was raided by the police for illegal cockfights at the hotel. All of these incidents have led to many of the classic Grove stories from the past.

During the 1930's, while the United States was in the throes of the Great Depression, Grove operated the very successful Madison County Construction Company. Headquartered in his new structure on Rt. 20 in Madison, his bid was often the one accepted by the government. Twenty-five families were very grateful for the employment during those lean years.

During this same time period, Grove began to buy farms in earnest. He owned more than 50 farms over the years, although not all at the same time. The area from the present Troop's Scoops Ice Cream, south to Rt. 46, was entirely owned by Grove. He not only hired families to work the dairy farms, but used the acreage to grow peas, beans and cabbage. At one time, he was raising more than 1000 acres of peas and beans.

Not to be idle at this time period, Grove also had an ice cutting business, a coal yard, a slaughter house and a trucking company. He was never afraid to take a chance on a business idea if he thought it would lead to a profit. His success made him a lot of friends as well as enemies.

When we travel on Rt. 20 through the Village of Madison, we see the lovely Madison Central School set back from the road. The land was purchased from Grove Hinman and at a later date, the land for the current athletic fields was also purchased from him. A lasting story is that when he was approached for the land now used for the athletic fields, he stated that he would donate the property if the school was renamed Hinman High School. By then his reputation had precluded such an agreement.

In 1933 Grove and his brother, Claude formed Hinman Farm Products, Inc., headquartered in Deansboro. Milk was processed at their plant and shipped to the New York City market. They also were licensed to make butter and cheese, as well as sell fruit, grain, poultry, feed and fertilizer, along with many other products.

Soon after 1935, Grove transformed his new building on Rt. 20 into a car dealership. He sold Studebaker and Cadillac vehicles. The structure is still standing today and is located across the road from the Town of Madison offices. Inscribed on the top of the building is – G.W. Hinman 1935.

Trips to Florida became a yearly event for Grove and his bookkeeper, Agnes Pilbeam. These excursions began in the mid-1930's. The two would be married in 1943. Grove and Agnes loved the Florida area so much that he eventually purchased property there, including the Ft. Pierce Hotel in 1946.

Many stories concerning Grove are related to migrant workers. Originally his labor force consisted of Italian families brought to the fields from Utica. As the years went by, labor was secured from the south, especially African-Americans from Florida. Crude shacks were provided for these workers and their families. The work was hard, the pay was low and fights often broke out following payday.

During the mid-1930's roller skating began at the dance pavilion at Madison Lake. The popularity of skating continued through the 1960's. Many of us still fondly remember our evenings skating at the lake.

In 1949 the State Senate unveiled plans for the addition of an eighth horseracing track for the State. Grove was certain that he could get his site approved. This was to be on the former airfield across from Troop's Scoops Ice Cream, used as a training field for Navy pilots during WW11. His confidence led to the bulldozing of an oval for the track and the purchase of bleachers from a firm in Massachusetts. A group from Vernon, however, obtained the bid and Vernon Downs has been a racing venue ever since.

Grove Hinman died in March of 1961. He had certainly left a legacy of business acumen. His entire estate was left to his wife, Agnes. One stipulation of the will stated that his farms had to be sold within one year of his death. It certainly explained the flurry of farm sales during the next twelve months.

In 1963 the Hinman home was robbed. Agnes and her sister were out for a ride on a Sunday afternoon and returning home, they discovered that a safe in the basement had been opened and \$250,000 stolen. The rest of the story occurred when investigators discovered an unopened second compartment which contained another \$351,875 left untouched. Mrs. Hinman explained such a large amount of money in her home as necessary because "there is no bank in Madison." The mystery of the robbery is still unsolved.

Agnes Hinman died in 1970. Dictates of her will left bequests to more than 80 individuals and groups. However, the formation of the Grove W. and Agnes M. Hinman Charitable Foundation has perhaps benefitted our area the most. The Foundation Board of Trustees gives out annual scholarships to area high school seniors to help with their college expenses.

To summarize Grove's life, perhaps this statement given to Frank Scarpino, of Oriskany Falls, two months before his death will complete the story. Grove told Frank that he had spent his entire health trying to gain wealth. Now he was spending his wealth trying to gain health – and he was losing the battle.

The complete story of Grove, including more than 90 "Classic Grove Hinman Stories," is found in Jim Ford's new book entitled – Grove: His Life and Legacy in the Madison Area. It may be purchased in the Madison-Bouckville area at Cider House Antiques, The Gallery Antiques, Kountry Kupboard II or at the Madison Town Offices. The price is \$15.00.