

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #3

(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.

WHEN HOPYARDS DOTTED THE LANDSCAPE

When the first settlers to our township arrived in the 1790's, they set about clearing a few acres of land and became subsistence farmers; that is, they grew enough food to support themselves, their families and a few animals. As time went on however, their thoughts turned to making a profit from the rich land of the region.

At first the growing of grain crops dominated the scene. Since roads were scarce at this time, the grain was sold to the local distilleries where it was made into whiskey and sent in barrels to regional markets. The building of the Chenango Canal through the township in 1833-36, made this a more profitable venture.

James D. Coolidge, who owned the land that is presently behind Troop's Scoops Ice Cream, was the first person in our area to realize that another crop could be planted in the Town of Madison and would bring a sizeable profit when taken to market. That crop was hops.

Mr. Coolidge knew that hops were being produced in the lower Hudson Valley region of our state and reasoned that hops could be grown in our area as well.

He obtained some root cuttings and set out the first hop yard on a portion of his farm in 1808. Although it was difficult for him to get the hops to market in the pre-canal and railroad days, he was successful in the venture and is credited with being the first person to grow and market hops in Upstate New York. That sale took place in 1816.

Other farms in the area saw the potential of hops and had established yards of their own. A neighbor of Mr. Coolidge, a Mr. Solomon Root, raised and sold two tons of hops in 1818 for \$1,000 per ton. This sealed the idea of the profitability of hop production. Entire farms could be paid for with the profit of just one year's worth of hop sales.

As a side bar on the Coolidge family, James D. Coolidge had two sons. William Coolidge ran the farm after the retirement of his father and James E. Coolidge was the designer and owner of the building that is now the Landmark Tavern.

So now we would have to ask ourselves why hops would be so profitable to grow. The answer to that is for the brewing of beer, which was very popular with the early American population and continues to be popular today. Hops were also used in medicines and in some cooking recipes. For example, hops placed in a pillow would emit vapors which helped with congestion from a cold.

Let's look at some "Fast Facts Concerning Hops" –

- Hop plants were brought to America from Britain.
- The plant, which is a vine, can grow to 20 feet in height.
- Hops grow in hills and a pole is inserted into the hill on which the vines will grow.
- At harvest, you just pick the blossoms.
- In certain years hops sold for as little as 12 cents per lb.
- In 1882 they sold for \$1.00 per lb.
- The average yearly sale price was closer to 20-40 cents per lb.
- A hop yard was usually from 5 to 10 acres.
- Rich well-drained soil was needed and manure, lime and ashes were added as fertilizer.
- Rows were set out in a grid pattern – 8 to 10 feet apart.

- Hop hills were “grubbed” in the spring; that is, they were dug into to expose the roots. These roots would then grow up hop poles in the new growing cycle.
- Extra roots could be sold to neighbors.
- Only the female plants produce the hop blossoms.
- One male plant was placed in the hop yard for each 64 female plants. This insured proper pollination.
- Hops were picked in late August through the month of September.
- Workers were hired from neighboring villages and cities.
- Long sleeves, hats and gloves were needed in picking hops as they are very scratchy.
- Some of the male workers, known as “pole pullers,” took the poles with the hop vines still attached to the waiting pickers at the hop box.
- The hop box had four compartments, one for each of four workers to deposit their blossoms into. Most of these workers were female.
- A good worker could fill two compartments per day and be paid 50 cents for each.
- The poles were then stacked tepee style in the fields for use the following year.
- The workers were well-fed with meats, vegetables, biscuits and of course, pies, cakes and cookies.
- The hops were sacked when the compartments were filled and taken to the hop kiln. Sacking the hops, transporting them to the kiln and the work in the kiln were usually jobs for the men.
- The kiln had a stove room and baling room on the first floor and a drying room and “sweating” room on the second floor.
- When properly dried, the hops were baled and were ready for market.
- A bale of hops often weighed 200 lbs.
- Hop dealers came to the farms to inspect the crop while it was growing and also at harvest time.
- Prices for the hops were offered depending on the quality of the hops that year and the quantity that was reaching the major markets.
- Hops were shipped on the Chenango Canal from 1837 until the canal closed and on the railroad beginning in 1870, the year that it opened in our area.
- The female workers often stayed at the farmhouse during the hop season, while the male workers slept in the barn or other farm buildings.

- Dances were held for the hop pickers at the farms or at places such as Madison Lake, the Solsville Hotel or the Bouckville Hotel.
- Fortunes were made or lost in hop sales. If you waited for the price to go up, you gambled on the fluctuations of the market. Sometimes you lost as the market became saturated.
- Hop culture finally succumbed to a mold that attacked the leaves of the plants and stunted them.
- Prohibition also hurt sales. This was the Volstead Act.
- Today you may still find a hop vine in a farm hedgerow.
- Microbreweries have sprung up in the Central New York region.
- And some people are again starting hop yards of their own such as Larry Fisher at the foot of the Bear Path Hill near Munnsville.

Just think, a crop that had its origins right along our own "Turnpike" made a huge difference in the fortunes of the Madison-Bouckville-Solsville area.

Enjoy your visit to this year's show and think about what it must have looked like to see a portion of each area farm set out in "yards" of hops.