

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #30

(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.

The Robert Fraser Picnics At Madison Lake

Imagine an employer who was so intent on rewarding his workers for a job well done that he organized an annual picnic at a popular resort with a band, sports, food, and fireworks. That employer was Robert Fraser of Utica, New York and the event was held annually at Madison Lake during the years 1895 through 1903.

Robert Fraser's store was located at 177-179-181 Genesee Street in Utica. He established one of the most prominent mercantile stores in the city and was known as a man of generosity and loyalty to his workers. We will now look at the 1903 picnic at Madison Lake to get an idea what that annual outing looked like. The article has been paraphrased from the one published in the Utica Herald Dispatch in the July 8 and 9 editions.

FRASER'S DAY AN IDEAL ONE

This was the day of the ninth annual outing of Fraser's employees at Madison Lake. The affair was larger than in previous years because the staff of the store was considerably larger due to increased business. The total number that went on the trip was over two hundred fifty.

As early as 7 o'clock this morning the youngest cash boy employed in the house arrived, followed 10 or 15 minutes later by some of the older boys and then came the more sedate clerks who tried to appear calm in the face of the joy which they knew was soon to come.

At 7:30 all employees of the store had assembled and Bergner's Band of 25 pieces was discoursing its sweet music. At 8:00 the company was formed in line and with flags and banners flying, began their march to the train station. The men and boys walked and the young ladies and girls rode in carriages trimmed with flags. It required 18 carriages, seating four in each, to convey them.

The party traveled to the lake on a special train of four cars, leaving Utica at 8:30. Bergner's Band accompanied the excursionists to make things lively. A cheering crowd filled the depot platform and shouted their good wishes to the Fraser employees.

The train made stops at Clinton, Deansboro, and Oriskany Falls and reached the Solsville depot about 9:30. The party formed in line at the depot and led by the band, marched over the hill to the picnic grounds. The lake was quickly dotted with row boats, the dancing pavilion filled, and the joys of the day were in full swing.

The program given at Madison Lake comprised athletic events, dancing, boating, bowling, etc. All of the privileges of the resort had been purchased for the day. The athletic events of the day comprised a sack race, pie eating contest, 100 yard dash, obstacle race, tug-of-war, shoe hunt, and a boat race. Handsome prizes were offered for each contest.

Dinner and supper were served at the Leland Hotel and an elaborate menu had been prepared. The supper menu included soups, relishes, and main dishes of beef, lamb, turkey, and chicken, served with five different vegetables. This was followed by four different kinds of pie, ice cream and other fruits.

The train bearing the employees left the Solsville depot about 8:00 for the return trip to Utica. The band played many selections on the way. At Oriskany Falls, Deansboro, and Clinton brief stops were made while the band played and fireworks were discharged.

When the train reached the Utica station, the employees organized in procession, paraded to Court Street and returned to the Fraser store, where a band concert was given and a pyrotechnic display set off. The crowd was so dense that trolley cars could not move along the street.

Bombs, rockets, and Roman candles soared into the heavens. It was the greatest display of fireworks ever set loose in the Mohawk Valley and much appreciated by the citizens of Utica and those of surrounding areas who had come to Utica to witness the spectacle.

In our days of corporate profits and bottom line accounting it is refreshing to go back in history to take a look at an employer who had the welfare of his workers at heart. He had great loyalty to them, and they in turn to him. A severe fire occurred at the store in 1905, but true to form, Mr. Fraser rebuilt a larger and more extensive store and soon returned to business.