

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #26

(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.

Things Seen Along The Turnpike Part 2

We continue with more things seen along our historic highway in the Madison/Bouckville area. I think you will agree that we have had a rich variety.

BALES OF HOPS BEING TRANSPORTED – The hop industry in Central New York was started by James D. Coolidge of Bouckville. His farm was located on what is now Rt. 12B, just behind the current Troop's Scoops Ice Cream stand. Hops grew well in our local soil and it was soon realized that a large profit could be made by selling the hops to the Albany and New York City markets.

The hops were harvested in early September, taken to the hop house, dried thoroughly, baled, and placed in hop sacks for shipment. The shipping points were originally on the Chenango Canal, either at Solsville or Bouckville. With the construction of the railroad through the area, and following the route of the canal, hops continued to be shipped at those two locations. Seeing the wagons loaded for shipment traveling down the highway would give area residents the knowledge that the sale of this valuable crop would again bring prosperity to the area.

BANDS OF GYPSIES – During the mid-1800's to the early 1900's, traveling bands of gypsies would visit the area. The groups were always viewed with a certain amount of wariness. Gypsies had the reputation for making "shady" deals that you had to be careful of and also for being a little light-fingered with the property of local citizens, especially feathered property.

The gypsies would arrive in highly decorated wagons loaded with goods that the women of the group would endeavor to sell to the locals. The men would want to do some horse trading and would also entertain with lively music. However, it was said that all the citizens of Madison or Bouckville, as well as the chickens and ducks, breathed a little easier when the gypsy wagons moved on.

CONCERTS AT THE CORNER – In the early 1920's a bandstand was constructed on the northwest corner of the intersection in Madison, just in front of the Madison Hotel. Band concerts were offered each week to a large and appreciative audience. The Madison Military Band performed the music for the concerts. The street would be crowded with people and also with vendors selling their wares.

With the opening of the new Madison Central School in 1932, it was decided that the bandstand should be moved to that location. In 1933 the move was made. Unfortunately, the crowds were never the same at the new location and the bandstand soon fell into decay. Of course, the Great Depression might have had something to do with it also.

THE BICYCLE CRAZE – During the 1890's the bicycle craze hit the United States. Up to that point, bicycles had a large front wheel and a much smaller back wheel. A new look in bicycles, called the safety, featured two wheels of the same size. Just as we are in the cell phone craze today, everyone at that time had to have this new bicycle style. Bicycles were seen on the streets of Madison and Bouckville and all points in between. Sometimes the younger riders made a nuisance of themselves by riding on the sidewalks at high speed and disturbing those who were going in and out of the stores.

Contests were held to see who the fastest rider was over a set distance. One bicycle course used the old towpath of the Chenango Canal. Riders would start in Hamilton and finish in Bouckville. In 1891, one rider made the five mile distance in 18 minutes, 15 seconds. Pretty impressive! As we know, bicycles have continued to be a big part of a child's early life and the lives of adults who want to use the bike for recreational or competitive purposes.

HOP PICKERS ARRIVE – We have previously mentioned the hop industry brought prosperity to our area. The hop yard in many cases covered a number of acres. The crop had to be harvested during a brief period of time and that required many workers. There certainly were not enough local workers, so the farmers hired workers from the cities surrounding Madison and Bouckville.

Workers came from Utica, Syracuse, and Rome and arrived by wagons or at a later date, on the train. The streets were crowded, hop dances were offered at the hotels, and many people made a sum of money that would help with their expenses during the remainder of the year. On many farms it was a festive occasion when the workers arrived and in order to keep the best workers coming back year after year, plentiful amounts of food were served and adequate sleeping accommodations had to be provided.

BEAN AND PEA PICKERS ALSO – From the late 1920's to the 1960's, the growing of peas and beans joined the dairy industry as income crops in the area. The decline in the demand for hops because of Prohibition and the devastating blue mold disease, led many farmers to increase the size of their dairy herd or begin to grow peas and beans for the city markets.

In our area three men were prominent growers, Fred Howard, Grove Hinman and Morris Sherman. Mr. Howard grew up to 500 acres of peas, while Mr. Hinman and Mr. Sherman grew an estimated 2,000 acres of peas and beans each year. In the past, workers had been brought to Madison and Bouckville by wagon or train, now the workers arrived by truck. Hiring would take place in Utica for example, and the workers would stand in the back of a flatbed truck to be brought to our pea and bean fields.

Originally the workers were Italians, but at later dates the workers were African-Americans from the Deep South. These workers, typically from Florida, would work their way north harvesting crops and at the end of the season would go back to Florida. The area of Belle Glade, Florida seemed to be the place where many of our workers came from. Conditions were harsh for the workers and the pay was low. Children of these families received a very scanty education.

THE MOTT COMPANY FIRES – The company that was known as Mott's originally and later Duffy-Mott, suffered through three major fires over the years. The first was in 1891 at their mill located just to the south of the turnpike on Canal Street. The second and third fires were at their later location where the Cider House Show Field is located today. The cider mill complex was extensive in size and scope. Barrels were produced on site, and cider, vinegar, and apple champagne were produced at mill, while vinegar was produced at their original canal-side location.

The second fire was in 1910 and destroyed the bottling plant. The scene must have been confused and frustrating because fire equipment was scarce. The citizens of Bouckville formed bucket brigades to try to extinguish the massive blaze.

The third fire was even more frustrating because a massive water tower had been built near the cider mill in 1910 with a capacity of 600 barrels of water. When fire broke out on January 9, 1931, the temperature was 14 degrees below zero. The tank was quickly run dry and the efforts of the firemen were foiled because in their efforts to pump water from the canal, the water froze in the lines.

This must have been a scene of great panic because not only the cider mill was going to be lost, but nearby homes were also endangered. The scene of those two fires along the turnpike was never to be forgotten.

A CEMENT HIGHWAY – The Cherry Valley Turnpike had been a dirt road through our area until 1914. In that year, the State of New York constructed an experimental road from Morrisville to Bouckville and another from Madison to Oriskany Falls. The area between Bouckville and Madison would be paved at a later date.

A stone crusher was brought to a site near Madison, and cobblestones obtained from nearby farm fields were crushed to make a hard roadbed. Then a layer of concrete was placed on the crushed stone. A 14 foot road was created, with the cement being five inches deep on the outside and seven inches deep in the center. Poured sections of concrete were 60 feet in length with a tar composition separating the sections.

The work crew consisted of 120 men, hired by the State, and while being mostly Italian laborers, the crew also consisted of Poles, Portuguese, Spanish, and Chinese. Many were recent immigrants to the country. The pay was \$1.75 per day.

A later road project in 1931 created a cement roadway connecting Bouckville and Madison. The new section of road was 30 feet wide, with cement poured to a depth of 8 inches. In later years, the entire section of the road was covered with blacktop. No wonder that this section of the highway needs very little maintenance attention.

MADISON'S CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION – The Village of Madison was incorporated on April 17, 1816 and when the centennial of that event occurred in 1916, it was seen as a special occasion and worthy of a wonderful celebration. The streets were decorated with flags, bunting, and special lights. A parade began the festivities, followed by a carnival, drills by area firemen, ball games, music by military bands from Hamilton and New Hartford, horse races, and a car show. These events were scattered throughout the week.

We will continue our "TURNPIKE TALES" events in "TURNPIKE TALES" #27.