

# TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

## **"TURNPIKE TALES" #18**

*(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 Madison Anti-Larceny Society**

In the first decades of the history of the Town of Madison, there were many instances of burglaries, horse thefts, mysterious fires, and counterfeiters. By the mid-1800's, the additional depredations of the notorious Loomis Gang added to the concerns of the citizens of the Town. The formation of an Anti-Larceny Society seemed to be the solution. Over the years, the Society became so effective that horse thieves and robbers tended to steer clear of the Madison area. Let's look at the story of how Madison took steps to protect their homes and property.

### **THE SOCIETY BEGINS**

At a meeting of inhabitants of the Township of Madison, held at the home of George Goodings, the subject of pursuing and detecting horse thieves and regaining stolen horses came under discussion. After deliberation, a Society was formed and attached to themselves the name – "Anti-Larceny Society of the Township of Madison."

“Officers were elected and a preamble written, in addition to resolutions and by-laws. Riders were selected by the trustees, funds were collected to defray expenses and now we have sufficient horsemen to pursue the unfortunate man or men who may wantonly disregard the ownership of property not belonging to themselves. We will also detect and bring to justice the burglar, incendiary, counterfeiter, and other trespassers.”

- W.P. Tanner, Secretary – Dated, July 9, 1845

The record books of the Society have come down to us through the Edgerton family and list the following examples of claims brought before the Society –

January 12, 1852 – George Goodings, one-half day's pay for helping C. Crain find his horse.

George Foot, E.S. Root and Hamilton Brownell received expenses incurred in finding Mr. Brownell's harness.

In 1860 claims amounting to \$17.50 were paid to five different men for their services in the case of a bale of stolen hops

### **DOLLY WELCH'S MARE (An example of the Society at work.)**

Early one morning Dolly Welch, of Solsville, found his mare missing from her stall. Without a moment's hesitation he reported his loss to the Captain of the Riders of the Anti-Larceny Society, who decided that Stiles Curtis should lead and direct the search.

By piecing together scraps of information that came to his intelligence, Curtis learned that the mare had been taken west as far as Syracuse and then north by the Pulaski-Watertown Road. He set out to track down the scent.

Posing as a cattle buyer, Mr. Curtis followed the clues all the way to Central Square where the scent smelled unmistakably strong. So he put up for a day or two at the local hotel.

The curious hours observed by the proprietor in his comings and goings from his barn aroused Curtis' suspicions. There wasn't a horse in the barn that tallied with Dolly's because he had already had a look.

Still, it didn't hurt to be extra sure. So one day he secreted himself in the loft and waited. Finally, the big door creaked on its hinges and in stepped the innkeeper with a sack of oats.

But he didn't feed his regular horses. He stepped down a trap door, disappeared, was gone a few minutes, reappeared, and closed the creaky door behind him. Mr. Curtis slipped down from his hideaway, discovered a secret stall beneath the barn floor and there, before his very eyes, stood Dolly Welch's mare.

The rest of the story, except for just how much the proprietor had to pay to keep him from being temporarily removed from circulation, is well known. Dolly Welch was so glad he belonged to the Anti-Larceny Society of the Town of Madison that he must have handed down this happy tale from generation to generation, where it is now preserved in lore.

(Whether this was the work of the Loomis Gang we don't know, but all indications point to their involvement in some way, especially the place where the mare was found. That area of the state was a favorite ending destination for the Loomis' stolen horses.)

Complaints coming in from various parts of the state must have prompted the State Legislature to pass Chapter 530 in the year 1865. This gave organizations, like the Madison Anti-Larceny Society, the right to track down missing or stolen property. With their actions deemed legal, the Society set out to rid the Madison area of the above-mentioned crimes.

A committee was selected in 1874 to revise the Constitution of the Anti-Larceny Society. By 1875 their work was completed and a special meeting of the group was called. The name of the group was changed to the Legal Protective Society and the Society was to appoint a number of members as a "Vigilance Committee" in addition to the regular riders. This appears to be evidence that thieves in the area were getting out of hand and stronger measures had to be devised to combat them. The strongest was yet to come.

In 1878, by a special Act of the New York State Legislature, Chapter 530 of the laws of 1865 was amended.

Section 7 stated: "The Directors of said Society are empowered to appoint twelve of the members "Riders" and to designate one of their number "Captain" and it shall be the duty ... on loss of any property by theft belonging to any member of the Society, to arrest upon his own authority and without process, the thief and regain the stolen property." Call it unconstitutional today. But in those days constitutionality was never questioned. The law now had some teeth!

Whereas before the Anti-Larceny Society sent out riders to find stolen property and return it to the owners, now the group became a legal rural police force. Even though the name of the group had been changed to the Madison Legal Protective Society, the old name was frequently used.

### **THOSE STOLEN HOPS**

In 1884, the Waterville Times reported the theft of seven bales of hops. This story is another example of how the Society worked to track down the perpetrators.

A Solsville correspondent says: "H.B. Phelps, W. Burns, and Wm. Warren each had hops stolen from their kilns, seven bales in all, Tuesday night of last week. One of the gentlemen being a member of the Anti-Larceny Society, riders were at once sent in search of the missing property, and they were successful in finding both thieves and hops. The former were proved to be residents of Augusta. The boys and the hops were found at Munnsville depot having been sold and delivered there. One of the boys was arrested and released on bail. We do not know about the other young man."

Many articles have been found in local newspapers which tell of the annual meeting of the Society and election of officers. The meetings were frequently held at the Madison Hotel. A full meal was served to the members and their wives, with election of officers following the meal. Dancing or other forms of entertainment were often enjoyed. To give an idea of just how big the annual event was, 225 dinners were served in 1909 and 350 dinners in 1919. Businessmen and prominent farmers of the community and surrounding area, as well as their employees, were listed on the membership rolls of the Society.

In 1914 there were 190 men listed on the roll. In some years the membership was said to be over 200. Over the years prominent men of the Madison area such as State Senator John W. Lippitt of Solsville, the Hon. Samuel Rogers Mott of Bouckville and Mott's apple fame, and Arthur Wiltse, also of Bouckville, appeared on the list of members. Arthur Wiltse was the Madison County Treasurer and also the brother of major league baseball players George "Hooks" Wiltse and Lewis "Snake" Wiltse. It would seem that if you were not a member, you opened yourself up to suspicion if an illegal event occurred.

In 1917 the need for the Society started to diminish with the formation of the New York State Police. Their main assignment was to patrol the rural areas of the state. By this time the group had become mostly social. The last recorded instance of the group bringing a law-breaker to task occurred in 1927, when a Madison garage was robbed of tires and valuable accessories. The Captain of the Riders called on his men, and the property was recovered in Waterville.

Membership and interest in the group faded until 1938 when a revival of the group took place. An article in the January 28, 1938 edition of the Cortland Standard stated:

Madison – Horse stealing and highway robbery of a century ago was recalled today following a vote of 22 Madison "Night Riders" to attempt to revive its 93 year old Anti-Larceny Society. One veteran "night rider" said the Society could be helpful to law-abiding citizens because "some men can change an ear tag on heifers quicker than you can think."

The Society seems to have continued with limited numbers until our nation's entry into WW11. All efforts around the community were now focused on the war effort. The Society was certainly another interesting chapter in the history of the Madison-Bouckville-Solsville area.