

Camillus, Birthplace of Republican Party

By Mary Ellis Maxwell

Camillus is a town of beautiful hills, and wherever one looks – to the north, south, east or west –its beauty is inspiring. With the vast improvement in motor vehicles and roads, these hills are not dreaded as they were years ago. In the first transcontinental auto race of 1909, the driver of the Ford said “On the heartbreaking Camillus Hill we actually beat the pacemaker.”

Camillus’ great pride is that it is the birthplace of the Republican Party. A strong antislavery feeling, with opposition to the admission of any more slave states, was very prevalent. Small groups met throughout the country protesting the issue. On Jan. 3, 1852, the following placard was posted:

PUBLIC SENTIMENT!

TO THE ELECTORS OF

CAMILLUS!

Those of you who are opposed to the Fugitive Slave Law – to the extension of Slavery over Free Soil – to the admission of any more Slave States, and are disposed to waive former political preferences and party predilections, and unite your strength that your influence may be felt in the cause of Freedom and Humanity, are cordially invited to meet with us at Rowe’s Hotel on the 27th day of January inst., at 2 o’clock P.M., to nominate officers to be elected at the next town meeting.

(Signed by 344 prominent men of the town.)

NOMINATED SUPERVISOR

From the above notice, the meeting held on Jan. 27, 1852 nominated David Allen Munro for the office of supervisor. At the annual meeting held in and for the town of Camillus at Rowe’s Hotel Feb. 17, 1852, for the office of supervisor, David Allen Munro received 395 votes, Terry, 1 vote; C.B. Wheeler, 4 votes. As far as is known, Camillus was the first to hold and win an election on the principles of Free Soil.

Thus, this New Party (Free Soil), which was born at Camillus on Feb. 17, 1852, and whose growth was fostered by small meetings held throughout the country, was christened “Republican Party” two years later, Feb. 28, 1854, at Ripon, Wis., and formally introduced at a convention June 6, 1854 at Jackson, Mich.

The first white settler came to Camillus in 1790. Isaac Lindsay and his three brothers bought land on lot 80 for which they paid 25 cents an acre. This proved to be a profitable investment for the first gypsum, commonly called “plaster,” discovered in the United States was on their property. A specimen

of this was sent to Europe and pronounced to be of excellent quality. A company was formed with Judge Forman as president and Josiah Buck as manager. "Plaster" mills were built and as early as 1810, the annual output was 100 tons.

FLOURISHED YEARS

The business flourished for many years, and people came with their teams from many miles around to get the "plaster" for their fields. Eventually the commercial fertilizer took its place, and after nearly a century of operation the Camillus plaster business went out of existence.

The good earth yielded excellent clay from which thousands of pipes were made. There were at least three clay pipe factories from the 1850's through 1880's. At the wakes held by the Irish, these pipes were much in evidence. It was customary for the person at whose house they were gathered to pass the pipes to the men. The girls eagerly sought them from their boyfriends to tie in groups with ribbon and hang on their walls as souvenirs.

The earth also contained the right clay for making bricks, and many millions of bricks have been made in Camillus from the earliest days until 1950. On the Bennett's Corners road are four brick houses supposed to have been built about the same time and by the same mason. The bricks were made on a nearby farm, and the owner of one of these houses, which was reputed to have been built in 1805, paid the mason \$100 for his work, plus a barrel of whiskey.

CEMENT MATERIALS

Deposits of excellent marl were mixed with clay and made into cement by the Empire Portland Cement Co. This was shipped by way of the Erie Canal, in barrels, then in bags to various parts of the country.

Today, clay which is found at Amboy, town of Camillus, is the basis for a thriving industry, the Syracuse Pottery Co. This clay is the only type which can be used in its pure state for making flower pots.

Camillus has ground grist continuously for 150 years. In the center of the village is a mill built by Abraham Drake in 1831, which has operated year after year in the past 122 years and is still grinding grain for the farmers.

Camillus had all the industries essential to the pioneer. Later it had cooper shops, knitting mills and chair factories. Today, the Camillus Cutlery Co., which began operations in 1894, is the main industry and support of the town.

AGRICULTURE IMPORTANT

Agriculture has had a large part in the history of Camillus, which was for years the banner town of Central New York for home produce and grain markets. Grain was transported as far as Albany – first by oxen, later by canal. One dealer alone in 1860 bought and shipped 248,000 bushels of barley in 60 days to Albany. In 1838 Camillus raised 55,205 head of Sheep. Twenty-five per cent of all sheep and 5 per cent of all wool in America was raised and produced west of Albany in New York State.

From 1808 the stage coach made regular runs and one favorite stopover was at Richard Lusk's tavern, which stood at Genesee and LeRoySts. In an article written by Anna Bagg Holiday upon "Notable Events in Onondaga County" is the following: "probably the first theatrical performance in the country, at least the first of which there is a recollection or data at the present day, was given in Lusk's tavern in Camillus in 1820, when Edwin Forrest produced Shakespeare's "Othello."

STAGE COACH CENTER

Camillus was probably chosen owing to its being a great stage coach center, no less than 15 stages passing through the place daily. The platform was at one end of a large room in the tavern and was provided with a red damask drop curtain and tallow candles for footlights. The men in attendance did not find it necessary to go out between the acts to see a man, as it was an ordinary thing to pass gin and water during the intervals."

The Erie Canal, which opened in 1825, did much for Camillus in shipping out grains and also in transporting passengers from one town to another and especially to the summer resorts on Onondaga Lake. The Syracuse & Auburn Railroad Co. was incorporated in 1834 and Grove Lawrence and David Munro of Camillus were members of this corporation. Stage coaches were used, equipped with wheels fitted to run on the wooden rails.

On Jan. 8, 1838, the road was opened with horse-drawn coaches. This was the mode of travel on the Auburn road for a year and a half, or until June 4, 1839. Fresh horses were used at intervals along the line, one change being made at the Munro barns. As the train came within hearing distance, the driver blew his horn, the hostler threw on the bridles, jumped on the back of one of the horses and galloped up the hill to the station.

IRON HORSE ADVENT

On June 4, 1839, the "iron horse" replaced the real horse. The primitive engine burned wood with no means of keeping the sparks under control. The wooden rails had a strip of thin steel on the top which was held in place by pegs at the ends. The pegs often came out, allowing the steel to work its way through the floor of the coach. They were called "snake heads." There was never a dull moment for the

passengers, who were either dodging a “snake head” or putting out a potential fire from sparks on themselves or those about them.

As does every community, Camillus had its amusing characters.

Philo Bromley, who ran the Hotel for about 20 years, was a great joker. Not only did he have a ready retort for adults but he delighted in frightening the children, chiefly to see them run away. His favorite pastime with them was to make a face and thrust out his false teeth just to see them scamper, and scamper they did. He was a master of the trick for rarely did he drop the teeth. One time, however, they dropped in the dusty road, whereupon he calmly walked over to the horses’ watering trough, rinsed them off and put them back in his mouth.

VILLAGE SHOEMAKER

Jerry Connelly, Sr., the village shoemaker, was a widely-known person about town. He always wore a Prince Albert coat which was much too small around the middle. He was a generous, good-natured Irishman always going for others. At the time there was no Catholic Church outside the village and people walked to Camillus for mass from Amboy, Oswego Bitter, Split Rock and Warners.

Jerry and his wife served lunch (gratis) to all those who walked, before they started on their trip back. He attended every funeral in town whether he knew the family or not and when asked whose funeral he had been to his reply was “the man in the coffin.”

Jabez Spicer was the first pastor of the Presbyterian Church. He was installed on October, 1817 and dismissed 1819. His salary was to be \$500 more or less according as it could be collected, payable one-half cash, one-half grain and produce. Mr. Spicer did not trouble to collect his small salary but would get into his wagon and solicit a little money from one, some wood from another, and butter and eggs from still another, keeping all accounts of this kind with his people and at the end of the year, settling any balance remaining.

REVERSED ORDER

As the sequel proved, Mr. Spicer reversed the usual order of the church contribution and made the actual amount received by him exceed the subscriptions, which does not appear to his discredit, although it displeased the trustees and caused his resignation. The Civil Courts sustained him in a suit brought against him by the trustees for the surplus.

Frank Strickland, who kept a tinsmith shop in Warner about 65 years ago, had a man working for him by the name of Clarkson. As people came into the shop he asked who they were. One time it was Ed Peck, the next day Will Peck, and then George Peck. Finally Clarkson said “For gosh sake, how many Pecks are there,?” and Mr. Strickland said “Oh, possibly 99.” Clarkson picked up a large piece of

charcoal and wrote on the back of a door in figures three feet tall "99 Pecks." They stayed on the door better than 50 years.

Dr. Isaac Magoon was the first physician to establish himself in Camillus (1808). The following story was told by Dr. John VanDuyn before the Onondaga Historical Association in 1896. "He was a good natured doctor. He was very fat and lazy and so fond of telling stories that he was often suspected of having forgotten the object of his visit."

"On one occasion when he was sent for, he entered the house, looked around, good naturedly accosted those present and proceeded to tell stories. Mrs. Monro, who was present, stood this as long as she could, stopped the doctor and bade him attend to the patient. He said "Yes-Yes" and drew his chair to the side of a crib, felt the pulse of the child lying there and said "Yes, it is very ill. I'll" – but there he was interrupted again by the statement that the child in the crib was only a caller and well, that another child was his patient."