

The

Orangetown Crier

News from the Orangetown Historical Museum and Archives

FALL 2012

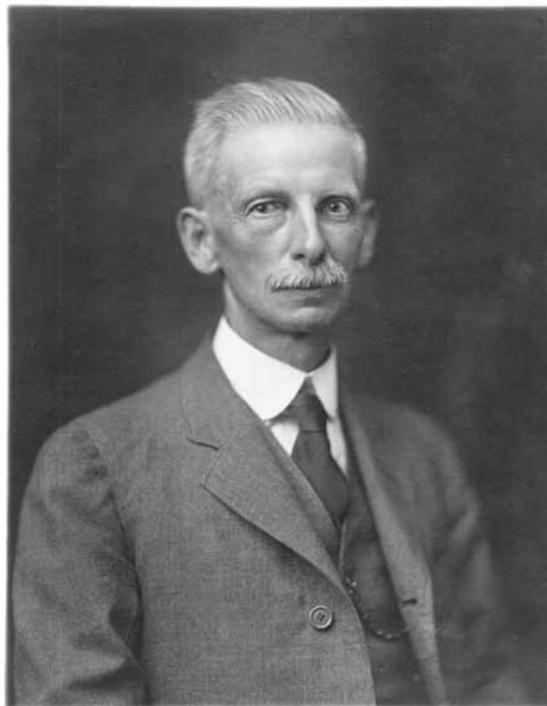
EXPLORING HISTORY

— with Harry Ryerson's Journal —

A significant amount of Orangetown's history might have been lost over time if it had not been for the work of a number of dedicated historians over the years. One such historian was Harry Ryerson, a native of Tappan who devoted much of his life to the study of local history. The Orangetown Museum is fortunate to have uncovered, as part of the Sally Dewey Collection, an extremely valuable journal written in Harry Ryerson's own hand. Scribed in pencil on yellow pads and bits of scrap paper, the journal mostly consists of entries detailing different aspects of local history. Many of these entries appear to be early drafts of historical articles that Ryerson may have ultimately intended to publish in some form.

While not every page of the journal is dated, most of the dates that are present range from October 1941 to June 1942. We would like to thank volunteer Henry Rennie for transcribing and typing the contents of this journal, thus making it possible for scholars to study Harry Ryerson's writings with greater ease.

According to his biography in Westervelt's *History of Bergen County*, Harry Ryerson was born on April 20, 1866 in Tappan, NY. He was the son of Henry Ryerson, a farmer who had at one point been the owner of the still-famous "76 Stone House," and Marie (Gecox) Ryerson. Harry Ryerson later married Maria Bradley and had two sons, Herbert and Edward. While he would spend most of his life working for a variety of railroad businesses, including the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad Company, the Erie Railroad Company, and the New York



Harry Ryerson

From the Ryerson Papers of the Historical Society of Rockland County, New City, New York

Central Railroad Company, he also devoted a substantial amount of time to pursuing his interest in local history. He was a prominent member of the Dutch Reformed Church of Tappan and of several historical organizations, including the Bergen and Rockland County (Historical) Societies, the latter for which he was the recording secretary for many years.¹ He also contributed articles on local history to a number of publications, including Bedell's *Now and Then and Long Ago in Rockland County*.² Upon Harry Ryerson's death on February 19, 1943, *The Journal News* wrote that he "was perhaps the authority on the history of South Orangetown," and credited him with helping to keep interest in "the history of the county at a high peak

despite depressions and wars."³

While Harry Ryerson was undoubtedly quite knowledgeable about Orangetown history for his time, and much of what he writes in his journal is indeed true, we cannot verify that every detail of the history related in his journal is accurate. However, we think that all of Ryerson's writings, even those portions which may fall more into the category of myth or legend than history, are valuable nonetheless because they provide a unique insight into the mind of an important local historian. Indeed, it is undoubtedly the case that myths and legends can have as much power to shape a community's image of itself as historical facts do. With this in mind, the following are some of the more interesting anecdotes described in Harry Ryerson's journal:

Ryerson relates that although Henry Hudson voyaged

continues on page 3

Take a Trip on The Time Machine!



Intern Christina Scilingo greets children at the Time Machine



Museum Curator Elizabeth Skrabonja with children before the puppet play begins

Have you ever wanted to travel back in time, mingle with our forebears and take a leisurely stroll through the farmlands in Orangetown? Or perhaps you would be interested in riding the local trains, visiting with the Lenni Lenape or hearing Maj. John Andre's side of the story? Just such an opportunity was presented to the children of our community on August 14th during an elaborate children's program designed to complement the museum's current exhibit, 'WE ARE ORANGETOWN'. Our young guests were first invited to 'activate the time machine'. They were later treated to a delightful puppet play featuring some Dutch wisdom and sent on a trip spanning many centuries within the DePew House walls. Included was a trip to the old Orangeburg Fair – where the children enjoyed some prize winning cakes before returning to our present day. The program was mentored by Museum Curator, Elizabeth Skrabonja and was conceived and played out by our summer interns, led by Christina Scilingo of Stonehill College with Anna Berent of Empire College and Haley Coopersmith of Brandeis University. Developed in conjunction with the Blauvelt Library; special thanks to Marybeth Darnobid and the staff of the children's room and Joe Barbieri, LIU Graduate Student for assistance with the brochure.



Blauvelt Children's Librarian Marybeth Darnobid, Interns Christina Scilingo & Anna Berent and Blauvelt Library Director Laura Gruwerg

A Special Scrapbook

We have often seen scrapbooks filled with photographs, lovingly chronicling a moment set in time, but nothing prepared us for the scrapbooks brought in by Louis Conway of West Nyack. Two full scrapbooks with 438 images that were taken and assembled by Mr. Conway's father defining his WWII experiences from boot camp through to Europe. PFC Conway was a part of the 273rd Medical detachment. His photographs include both formal and informal insights into the world of this all black unit, carefully annotated in white script. The scrapbooks were hand scanned this summer with the assistance of intern Justin Reiter of Northeastern University, and the museum has been in contact with the Smithsonian Institute in Washington regarding these intriguing images.

*Beware - This is War
These boys are dangerous*



Cpl. Suffie



Pfc. Conway

20th Anniversary Dinner



Craig Long, Rockland County Historian receives a citation from Museum Director, Mary Cardenas

As September 16th approaches, we here at the museum reflect on that afternoon in 1992 when the Spring Valley Water Company turned over the deed to the Michael Salyer House in Pearl River to the Town of Orangetown for \$1 to create a local museum. This milestone and other significant achievements were celebrated at the museum's gala 20th Anniversary Dinner sponsored by the Friends of the Orangetown Museum on June 10th. The 1776 House proved to be a perfect setting for reflecting on the past and planning for the future. Surrounded by many of our dedicated volunteers, board members and supporters, guest speaker and honoree Craig Long, the newly appointed Rockland County Historian spoke warmly of the museum, specifically hailing the book 'Orangetown'. He said it was an inspiration and called for neighboring communities to follow suit. Two special *Distinguished Member Service Awards* were presented to members of the 'Friends'; one to founding and still Chairperson of the Board, Catherine M. Dodge of Orangeburg and the other to long time member and supporter Jeffrey Keahon of Pearl River. Within the context of the various proclamations, raffles and general good cheer – it was with satisfaction that Museum Director Mary Cardenas cut the anniversary cake; ending this event sweetly while looking forward to the future. *EKS*

Exploring History with Harry Ryerson's Journal *continued from page 1*

northward along the river that he called the “River of the Mountains” in 1609, vessels only began to travel up the Hudson River with some frequency after the Dutch purchase of the island of Manhattan. Of the Dutch sailors from Manhattan who sought to explore the Hudson River, Ryerson claims that they were courageous but “superstitious as were the rest of the world for that time period” for they would “ask permission of the Spirit of the Mountains before they sailed through the Highlands” alongside the river. Ryerson also claims that they studiously avoided sailing on the west side of the Hudson River for fear of a “phantom ship” that supposedly sailed there. Nevertheless, these superstitions must have eventually been overcome as the Dutch would indeed settle in southern Orangetown, a region which had been part of the territory of the Tappan Indians.

Ryerson describes in great detail the trials and tribulations that these first Dutch settlers in southern Orangetown would have experienced. While they were able to take advantage of some cleared meadows and fields that had been used as farmland by the Tappan Indians, Ryerson notes that there were nevertheless many “Herculean” tasks that these early pioneers had to accomplish. This included the construction of farmhouses, wells, and enclosures to protect livestock from the wolves and foxes which roved the countryside. Despite these obstacles, Ryerson argues that these early settlers eventually thrived because their town was located where “the mountain was not a barrier and the river was a highway,” as ships carrying goods to trade in Manhattan would dock at the port of “Tappan Slote” in present-day Piermont. This observation provides a useful reminder to us all that, for most of its history, Orangetown was, at its very heart, a river town.

While these accounts are quite interesting, what is most apparent to the reader of Harry Ryerson's journal is the man's great love for Orangetown. While he acknowledges that his hometown might not be as lively as Manhattan or as famous as Yellowstone Park, he writes that, nevertheless, “here we may find much of the beauty, much that is wonderful and as much of the excitement and thrill as one would probably get in traveling over a great part of the entire country.” This thread of enthusiasm is a constant throughout Ryerson's journal, and it is a part of what has helped keep interest in the history of Orangetown alive throughout the years. At one point Ryerson mentions that “Commander Breckinridge at Ramapo Pass told us how necessary it is to look backward in order to look forward.” This is a good piece of advice to bear in mind for those individuals, like Harry Ryerson, who seek both to uncover and share the secrets of the past with their community.

– Jason Schachter

¹Ancestry.com. *History of Bergen County, New Jersey, 1630-1923* [database on-line]. Provo, UT: The Generations Network, Inc., 2005, Volume II: Biographical, pg. 24. Database derived from: Westervelt, Frances Augusta Johnson. *History of Bergen County, New Jersey, 1630-1923*. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1923

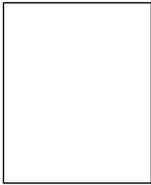
²Bedell, Cornelia F. *Now and Then and Long Ago in Rockland County*. New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1968 (originally published in 1941), 40, 137, 187, 296

³“Harry Ryerson Dies at Home in Tappan.” *The Journal News*. February 20, 1943

⁴Bedell, 173



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 Orangeburg, New York 10962
 Tel. (845) 398-1302
 www.orangetownmuseum.com



☛ at The DePew House
 196 Chief Bill Harris Way
 Orangeburg, New York
Office, Archives by Appointment
 (845) 398-1302

Closing on November 18th, 2012:
WE ARE ORANGETOWN
 Tuesdays 10 – 2 , Sundays 1 – 4
 Or by appointment
 Admission: your donation

☛ at The Salyer House
 213 Blue Hill Road
 Pearl River, New York
A Spy in Our Midst,
Our Dutch Sandstone Houses &
At Home in Orangetown
 Permanent Exhibit: Hours by appointment
 (845) 398-1302

THIS FALL AND WINTER:



Antiques & Collectibles Sale: Saturday October 6th, 10 am – 4 pm, Rain Date October 7th.
 The museum will be open free of charge! Enjoy a beautiful fall day with some fabulous Antiques, Fine Collectibles, Jewelry, Toys, Decorative Arts, Furniture, Fine Arts & Ephemera. Table rental for dealers is \$25.
 At the **DePew House**, 196 Chief Bill Harris Way, Orangeburg, NY



Holiday Open House – it's the 1950's!
 Five Fabulous 50's Sundays – November 25th, December 2nd, 9th, 16th & 23rd from 1 – 4pm at the Historic Salyer House, 213 Blue Hill Road, Pearl River NY Find out if Mommy really is kissing Santa Claus during our annual celebration, featuring presentations by the St. Thomas Aquinas Choir and the Devin Klos Trio among other surprises. We promise bubble lights.



Orangetown – 50's: Opening Saturday April 27th this exhibit will recall a decade of great change in Orangetown – the 1950's. From Shanks Village, to the construction of the Tappan Zee Bridge and the Palisades Interstate Parkway – life was never quite the same again. From pop culture to politics, come and remember these milestones with us, be it in Mom's kitchen or in the labs that helped to wipe out polio, it was all happening in Orangetown. Exhibit open through November 19th, 2013.



Get the book – ORANGETOWN. A perfect gift for the holidays!
 Pick it up at the DePew House, price: \$23.83 or let us mail it to you, price: \$25.00(price includes shipping & handling)
 Make your check payable to *Friends of the Orangetown Museum* and mail to the museum at
 196 Chief Bill Harris Way, Orangeburg NY 10962.

THE ORANGETOWN HISTORICAL MUSEUM & ARCHIVES
 Mary Cardenas, MUSEUM DIRECTOR • Elizabeth Skrabonja, MUSEUM CURATOR
 The Orangetown Historical Museum & Archives was founded in 1992 to acquire, preserve and exhibit objects which reflect primarily the history of the Town of Orangetown. The Museum's additional, but not lesser mission is to document, research, promote and publicize the town's rich, historical heritage of the town for the people of Orangetown.



Andrew Stewart, SUPERVISOR
 Thomas Diviny, Tom Morr, Dennis Troy and Paul Valentine, COUNCILMEN

FRIENDS OF THE ORANGETOWN MUSEUM
 Your membership in the Friends of the Orangetown Museum helps to collect and preserve the history of Orangetown. Members will receive notices of programs and events as well as free admission to the Museum's special exhibits and events. The Museum is a 501 (C) (3) organization and all donations are tax deductible.

STUDENT/SENIOR \$10 SINGLE \$15 FAMILY \$20
 LIFE MEMBER \$100 CORPORATE \$250