
Spindle City Historic Society

Volume 2 Issue 4

Winter 1999/2000

DID YOU KNOW THAT IN 1899.....

....Cohoes building lots were advertised in the paper for a down payment of \$2 and 50¢ per week on a total cash payment that ranged between \$26 and \$48, depending on the lot?

....thirty-four years after the Civil War, a memorial consisting of a cannon was dedicated at McKinley Square, at the head of Oneida Street next to the Cohoes Music Hall?

....men's suits were selling for as little as \$3.90, but no more than \$12.00?

....the first Gideon Bible was placed in hotels?

....Congress Street was extended to Lincoln Avenue, thus creating a thoroughfare?

....the Harmony Company began to install electric motors in all of their mills, thus signaling the demise of water power?

....toothbrushes, talcum powder, and bars of soap sold for 4¢ each?

....St. Marie's first school was erected on Vliet Street across from the church?

....Corned beef or stew beef was 6¢ per pound, and all types of canned vegetables were priced at 3 cans for 25¢ ?

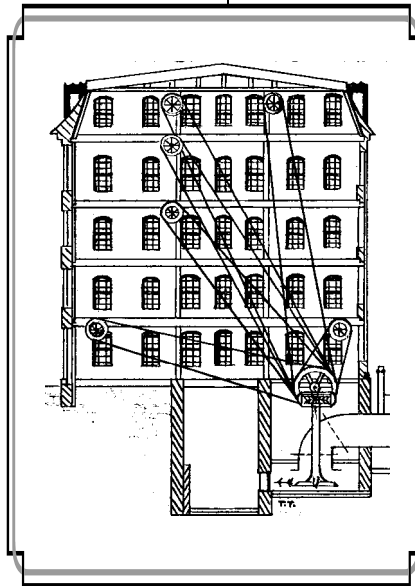
....Congress approved the use of voting machines for federal elections?

WE'RE ON THE WEB!

The Spindle City Historic Society now has a website at <http://www.crisny.org/not-for-profit/spindle/>. The website is very much a work in progress and any comments or suggestions would be appreciated. We are also seeking volunteers with interest in webpage design to help with updates and other changes to the website. If you would like to be involved, please send e-mail to the Spindle City Historic Society at spindle@knick.net or leave a message at 237-6643.

HISTORIAN'S NOTEBOOK

This past June, the lot referred to as 2 Summit Street was sold at public auction in the Common Council Chambers. 2 Summit is the nondescript wedge of land located at the foot of Summit Street, briefly fronting Vliet and at the beginning of the path to our Lock 15 clean-up site.



In my opinion, this small plot is one of the most significant and historic lots in the city. Why? Because Robert Johnston, the "genius" behind the development and expansion of the Harmony Mills, lived on this site in his "villa", built to his specifications by the Garner Company in 1856. He lived there with his family, pursued the human indulgences of an extremely energetic mill superintendent, and died there in 1890 at the age of 83.

In 1866, he teamed up with his son David (whose mansion still stands at the crest of Summit Street) to expand the fortunes of the Garner Company,

owners of the Harmony Mills, to forge one of the largest producers of cotton print cloth (calico) in the nation.

Odds are, if it wasn't for Robert Johnston, this newsletter wouldn't exist, and perhaps you would not be here to read it.

2 Summit Street has been devoid of Mr. Johnston's villa for years. After gradually falling into neglect and disrepair, it finally fell to the wrecker's ball, fitting into what seems now to be a longstanding and shameful pattern in Cohoes.

Walter Lipka

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Spindle City Historic Society welcomes new members *Tony and Peg D'Angelico, Timothy and Annette Heilman, Frank Kennedy, Milton Kopcha, Diane Morgan, Ann Marie Nadeau, Theresa Page, and William Renaud.*

CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Linda Christopher

Every season has its special traditions, foods, objects, and activities passed down for generations, adapted or developed anew in each family. Preserving these stories in Cohoes is an important part of the work of the Spindle City Historic Society.

When I was a little girl, December was a joyful month of snow, bells ringing, stores decked out in holiday cheer, children building snowmen and throwing snowballs, joy and peace on earth. That's how I remember the holidays when I was a little girl. We used to live in a 100 year old two family house at 12 Congress Street. It was a three-bedroom house with a living room, dining room, bath and large kitchen with tall clear kitchen cabinets – the kind you could see the dishes through. My Grandfather came from Calabria, Italy and my Grandmother from Formia, between Naples and Rome.

Christmas was one of the most important holidays. The Christmas season started on Thanksgiving Day and lasted until January 6, when we celebrated "Little Christmas". Every day we had to stay dressed until at least 10:00 p.m. since we never knew who would stop in for a Christmas visit. After all it was the time of year when you would see relatives and friends that you hadn't seen in a long time.

Our house was filled with wonderful smells – apple or pumpkin pies, cookies, the scent of pine, etc. My Grandmother (affectionately called "Nunny") was a superb cook and baker. Like most women of that time, her recipes were basically in her head something that would drive Mom and me nuts in later years when we were trying to write down her recipes. When I was old enough, I'd help her put the frosting on her anise cookies and the sprinkles too. Sometimes when Nunny wasn't looking I'd stick my finger in the bowl and eat the dough itself – it was that good.

While Nunny was baking, Mom and I cleaned the house. Mom was not a perfectionist, but when she said she wanted the house clean "for company", it was **clean**. In order to fit our Christmas tree in the corner, we always had to move the furniture around to make room for the tree. I remember a beautiful large round black mahogany dining room table and chairs. That was my Grandmother's set. We also had a long black buffet table with a long bevelled mirror and, of course, a china closet in the Hepplewhite style.

Like most people, we had a real Christmas tree. We wouldn't put it up for at least a week. After all, we wanted it to stay as fresh as long as possible. Mom, Uncle Ed, Grandpa and I would pick out our tree about 2 weeks before Christmas, but we usually ended up with a tree that was so tall we had to have a few inches cut off the top and bottom. It was Uncle Ed's and Grandpa's job to put the tree in the tree stand, bring it into the house and put the lights on it.

After that it was up to the women of the house – Mom, Nunny, Aunt Dot and me to decorate the tree. In our family we used silver tinsel. It seemed to take forever because we couldn't use more than 3 or 4 strands of tinsel for each branch. Of course, if you had a silver tree, then you didn't have to worry about the tinsel. There was a brief time when we had a silver aluminum Christmas tree. To make it feel more like a real Christmas tree, we had a light that rotated with 3 or 4 different colors on the tree. Whether the tree was real or silver, when I was a little girl, Grandpa or Uncle Ed would put me on their shoulders so I could put the Angel on the top of the tree. Then on the floor underneath, I would set up the Nativity scene and an old fashioned village that we bought from Woolworth's on Remsen Street.

It was our custom not to eat meat on Christmas Eve; we always had fish and pasta. For those of us who couldn't eat fish, there were other delectable dishes.

I remember getting up very early on Christmas morning to open our presents and then get dressed to go to Christmas Day Mass. As a child, there were 2 Christmases in particular that I enjoyed. In 1959 Santa left a train set for my cousin David and I enjoyed playing with it as much as he did. The next year Santa gave me a beautiful dollhouse, which I liked even better.

It was our custom to invite the bosses over for Christmas dinner. Mom's boss, Arthur Mann and his wife Marie, came to our house for dinner almost every Christmas. Grandpa was a track foreman for the D&H Railroad and his boss, Ted Hassingler and his wife, Anna, were also regular visitors for the holidays.

Our Christmas dinner would be around 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. It would be at least 3 or 4 courses starting with a fruit cup or soup. Then came the turkey and all the trimmings; including white and sweet potatoes, Italian bread, corn or mixed vegetables, and lots more. After eating all that dinner and doing the dishes, we would play penny ante poker or 500 rummy. I knew more about how to play poker at the tender age of 9 or 10 than I do now.

Christmas was a special family time. One of the most important customs in our family was to light bayberry candles on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. We would light them just before midnight and make a wish. Some of our wishes came true and some didn't. The point is we had hope that the New Year would be a better one for us.

Even though the members of my family are no longer with me in person, every time I set up the nativity scene or light the candles, I know they are with me in spirit. I still light the Bayberry candles and make a wish for the New Year.

Happy Holidays, Everybody. May this Season be filled with traditions that you remember fondly from your past. May your New Year be filled with love, joy, laughter and good health.

(We welcome your stories and your memories of Cohoes for our newsletter. Send them to: P.O. Box 375, Cohoes, NY 12047)

COHOES in 2000? – Some Predictions from 1901

During the middle months of 1901, the editor of the *Cohoes Republican* newspaper, John Spence, published a series of wordy tongue-in-cheek, satirical predictions of what Cohoes would be like in the year 2000. He directed his visionary sarcasm at the conditions of the city, and the people and politics of 1901 Cohoes. His prophecies, in an installment format, extended throughout the months of May and June. The young city, vibrant with industry, was filled with hope and optimism and ready for such fanciful speculation.

The author began the series with the introduction: “The following story is a prophesy of what will have happened a hundred years from now, when the writer, after a sojourn in a brighter and better land beyond the clouds, shall have returned to earth and revisited Cohoes. This story is absolutely true or at least not to be contradicted for a century to come.” The following is an abbreviated account of these prophecies.

CHURCHES will be extinct by 1950. Instead, Sundays will be filled with leisure activities such as “ballgames, championship golf matches, polo games, horseracing, merry-go-rounds and boat racing.”

CITY GOVERNMENT will shift to Van Schaick Island “because the people of the Sixth Ward have pull.” City Hall, the Chamber of Commerce building, the Art Gallery, the Library and the Mormon Church will be located there. In City Hall, the “Lord Mayor”, elected by the people, will govern on a full-time basis; “very dignified in appearance, about 60 years of age and a retired manufacturer.”

THE COMMON COUNCIL will be changed to a Cabinet of Commissioners, appointed by the Lord Mayor. Each commissioner will chair a separate city department – Accounts, Charities, Fire, Health, Schools, Police, Public Streets and Buildings, and Water comprise the list of commissioners.

FEDERAL LAW will greatly affect marriage. In order to marry “a minimum of one year waiting period, and a medical examination as to their physical health, mental balance and hereditary traits must apply.” Also, married women will be arrested for non-support of their idle husbands if they claim sickness. When sick they therefore renege on their duties to work in the mills, do housework, prepare meals, and provide child care. Noted was the fact that a husband could forfeit up to two weeks of beer if placed under such neglectful circumstances.

HEALTH CARE will be administered in the Cohoes Hospital. [Presumably at its 1901 location, at the present-day site of the Price Chopper supermarket on Lincoln Avenue.] Upon entering the hospital, a patient will be sent to the X-ray department where an examination and an analysis will take place; the appropriate medical treatment will then be administered. A disease, such as consumption, will be cured with the intense electric “vitaray” procedure. Patients needing an operation will be sedated by hypnosis operated on, sewn up, and then sent to the hospital cafeteria for lunch. Patients needing an extended stay will convalesce in the hospital while enjoying its ample shaded grounds

FOODS will be reduced to flavored tablet form, that when placed in the mouth “melt, thus producing the proper flavor.” Meat, fish, soup, and grape jelly were cited as examples.

MAJOR INDUSTRY will be centered on the site of Harmony Mill #3, where a new structure, “three times the size of the Mastodon Mill” will house the “Co-Operative Knit Goods Company.”

LONGVIEW [or what is popularly known as the Johnston Mansion, on Summit Street] will become a museum “to house the ancient relics of Cohoes.” Display cases will feature miniature dioramas of old Cohoes, with “old mills, one-story houses, four-story brick buildings with realistic details of mud, horse-manure, fruit and vegetable carcasses and waste paper.” The petrified heart of the manager of the United Traction Company will also be encased under glass. He was well known for his policy of not permitting the motormen and conductors to seek the shelter of enclosures during harsh weather. Framed and hanging on the wall will be a letter from Andrew Carnegie pledging \$25,000 to start a new library if the city provided the land on which to build it. [Alas, there is no Carnegie library in Cohoes!]

WEST END PARK will finally be developed into a fine facility replete with “monuments, spraying fountains, and a band playing every day.” One of the several monuments will be dedicated to the taxpayers, with its inscription reading: “**THE PUBLIC IMPROVEMENT COMMISSION SWEARS TO DO THEIR DUTY WHETHER IT PLEASE THE TAXPAYERS OR NOT.**”

THE ERIE CANAL will be filled in, becoming “a magnificent boulevard with a roadway as smooth as a politician’s tongue, stretching from Watervliet to Fonda Road.” It will be used by “ladies and gentlemen who noiselessly skim along in their swiftly gliding vehicles.”

REMSEN STREET will become “a magnificent thoroughfare on either side of which are immense twenty and twenty-five story buildings made of platinum.” Smooth as a billiard table, the street will contain absolutely no dust, dirt, or waste paper.

TROY will be in ruins, as is its ancient namesake, because Cohoesiers will decide to spend their wages in Cohoes.

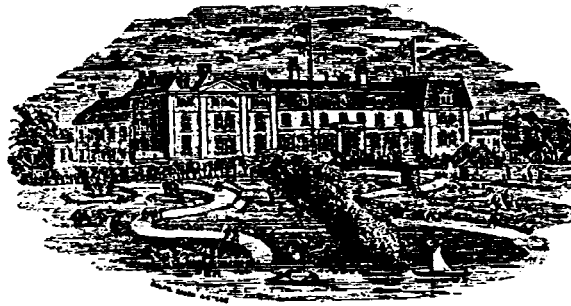
THE COHOES FALLS will have an uninterrupted flow of cascading water as a result of the abandonment of waterpower and the destruction of the Cohoes Company's dam. A new hotel on the site of the Cataract House will be the center of a flourishing tourist trade. The falls will be illuminated by festive colored lighting to "enhance their beauty a hundredfold."

Mr. Spence's last installment was published in the Wednesday, June 19, 1901 issue of the *Cohoes Republican* newspaper. It concluded with the words "to be continued." The column, however, had apparently run its course as it was never revived, or shall we say "reincarnated."

A NOTE TO OUR READERS: The editorial staff of this newsletter is very interested in learning of your thoughts on the fate of Cohoes by the year 2100. We will enthusiastically read your predictions, and will publish them in future issues. Send them to: COHOES 2100 A.D., P.O. Box 375, Cohoes, NY 12047. We look forward to hearing from you!

ST. CATHARINES, HISTORIC CANADIAN SPA CITY

SPRINGBANK HOTEL



A few members of the Spindle City Historic Society visited Ontario, Canada early this July. While in the city of St. Catharines, we happened upon a group from the St. Catharines Historical Society, just beginning a morning walking tour to former spa hotel sites. We were warmly welcomed by the Canadians, and were invited to come along for the tour.

St. Catharines, on the shores of Lake Ontario, was once home to several spas popular during the mid to late 19th century. People visited for the supposed salubrious effects of the waters from nearby springs, much as others journeyed to our local spa sites Saratoga Springs, Sharon Springs, or Ballston Spa. We visited the sites of four former spa hotels, including the Stephenson House, the first spa hotel in St. Catharines, opened in 1855, the Springbank Hotel, the Welland House, and the St. Catharines House. Unfortunately, only the Welland House, now used by a school, remains standing. The other great spa hotels have been lost to fire or demolition (a problem, alas, clearly not confined to Cohoes). A history of the heyday of the city's spas, titled *Taking the Waters: A History of the Spas of St. Catharines*, has been written by Sheila Wilson, and provided a nice complement to the tour. We also visited several other historic sites in the city during the morning's walk.

We found the tour quite interesting and appreciated the welcome we received from members of a fellow historical society. We joined the St. Catharines Historical society and now regularly receive the group's newsletter, and send them copies of our own. We hope that they enjoy reading it as much as we enjoy their publication!

EVA TANGUAY 1878-1947

Eva Tanguay, who made the song *I Don't Care* known the country over, was one of the outstanding headliners in the days of "big time" two-a-day vaudeville. In her heyday, her salary ranged from \$2500 to \$3500 a week and everywhere she played, she attracted capacity audiences. Her act was unique because of her songs, her madcap humor, her freakish costumes, and her crop of tousled hair.

Eva was born in Marbleton, Quebec, in 1878, of French-Canadian parents. Her family later moved to Cohoes, New York. Reminiscing about Eva in 1970, Mrs. William McKee remembered the backyard shows in which Eva was always the star. She recalled the great gatherings outside the Tanguay home at 177 Congress Street on the day of Eva's departure for New York City. "Mother, I'll make good," Eva said as she left. And make good she did. Eva first starred in an amateur hour at the Cohoes Opera House. (Her obituary in the *New York Times*, January 12, 1947, says that she made her debut in an amateur night in a variety house in Holyoke, Massachusetts.) Mr. John Van Bramer, remembering Eva in 1970, had this to say about her:



She had blonde stringy hair that didn't look like much.
She wore a yellow flowery print dress with short sleeves.
Her Skirt was just below her knees. She had a funny voice
And the audience booed her so that she got the hook.
They let her come back later but she wasn't much better.

Eva reached stardom in 1904 when she introduced the song *I Don't Care* to Broadway audiences who flocked to see her in a play called *The Chaperones*. Dr. Raoul Hebert of Cohoes remembered one of Eva's performances after she had become a star and remembered her as "short and plump...with bleached blonde hair." Although he enjoyed her performance, "she had no voice." A recording of Eva singing the famous song proves Doctor Hebert right. Yet, in 1909, she was the only person starred by Florenz Ziegfeld.

She did much to bring vaudeville out of its decorous front. She sang songs that were daring for the time such as *I Want Someone to Go Wild With Me*, and *It's All Been Done Before But Not the Way I Do It*. However, the great favorite with her audiences always remained *I Don't Care*. One of her most profitable acts was in *Salome* in 1908. She once said that her entire costume consisted of "two pearls." Censors complained loudly while the act rolled up a record gross at the box office.

In 1910, at the height of her career, Miss Tanguay said that the secret of her success lay entirely in her personality, and she always exploited that personality to the utmost. At times, she was as mercurial and temperamental off stage and in her business relations as she was behind the footlights. In Evansville, Indiana, she cut a stage curtain to shreds with scissors because the house manager fined her for missing a matinee. In Sharon, Pennsylvania, she once chided the house manager from the stage because he had refused to put a large mirror in her dressing room.

Eva appeared in the following plays: *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886, 1887?), *My Lady* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II (Feb. 11, 1901), *The Chaperones* (1902), *The Office Boy* (1903), *The Sambo Girl* (1904), *A Good Little Fellow* (1906) as well as some of Ziegfeld's *Follies*. She made at least two films – *Energetic Eva* in 1916 and *The Wild Girl* in 1917. She may have made others during the 1930's depression. She did a number of recordings besides the famous *I Don't Care*. In 1913, Eva recorded *Go As Far As You Like, It's All Been Done Before, but Not the Way I Do It*, and *I Want Somebody to Go Wild with Me*. In 1916, Eva recorded *I May Be a Nut, But I'm Not a Crossword Fan*. In 1921, she recorded *Tune in on Eva*.

Although she had made several fortunes on the stage, Miss Tanguay spent freely and was equally liberal in helping out friends in financial trouble. She lost a fortune in the stock market crash of 1929, some estimates of her losses running as high as \$2,000,000.

Miss Tanguay was first married in 1913 to John W. Ford, a dancer from her company. They separated in 1914 and were divorced. Later she married Roscoe Ails, a vaudeville actor. This marriage also ended in divorce, as did her third marriage to her pianist, Alexander Rooke.

In 1933, Eva went blind. Her friend, Sophie Tucker, paid for the operation that restored her sight. For most of the last two decades of her life, Eva was a lonely but courageous invalid. Afflicted with arthritis, failing vision and strained resources, she nevertheless kept up a brave front. Forgotten by the world except for periodic visits by reporters, she always managed a cheery greeting "for the people who still remember me." She suffered a stroke on January 11, 1947 and died the next morning. She was 68 years old. At the bedside of the onetime favorite of millions were a niece, a nurse, and a neighbor.

Spindle City Historic Society

OFFICERS

Linda C. Christopher, President
Craig Bock/Helena Keilen, Secretary
June Cherniak, Treasurer
Daniele Cherniak, First Vice President
Dennis Rivage, Second Vice President

NEWS & UPCOMING EVENTS

Congratulations to Peg McCrea, winner of the afghan in our raffle. The drawing was held on November 27 during the Cohoes tree-lighting ceremony. Thanks to all who participated.

The society is seeking information about the history of the West End Drum Corps. Please contact 237-1675 if you have any information to share.

2/26/2000 *Ah Cappella* Chamber Chorus, Flute, and Classical Guitar, performing Selections from the Centuries, conducted by Robert DeCormier. Cohoes Music Hall, 8 pm.

The Historical Society thanks Dr. R.G. Biv for sponsoring this issue of the newsletter.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

<input type="checkbox"/> Individual Membership	\$10.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Institutional Membership	\$25.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Senior Citizen Membership	\$ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Contributing Membership	\$35.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Student Membership	\$ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Membership	\$50.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Family Membership	\$15.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Tax-Deductible Donation	_____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY, STATE, ZIP CODE _____

TELEPHONE _____ e-mail _____

Mail completed form with membership fee, payable to Spindle City Historic Society, to:
June Cherniak, Treasurer, 415 Vliet Boulevard, Cohoes, NY 12047

Spindle City Historic Society

P.O. Box 375

Cohoes, New York 12047