
Spindle City Historic Society

Volume 3 Issue 2

Summer 2000

DID YOU KNOW

....that in 1875, a National Guard Unit, later known as Co. B was formed by a group of Cohoes' young men? Its history continued into 1944 when Co. B. came under Japanese attack in Saipan. Later, they were among the first troops in occupied Japan.

....that three Cohoes mills, Star Knitting Co., Cohoes Knitting Co. and The Glove Knitting Mill produced high quality knit underwear that was distributed throughout the United States?

....that in 1934, clinics were held in Cohoes City Hall to administer treatments to protect the city from a diphtheria epidemic?

....that the Keveny Memorial Academy Band served as the official band for the Cohoes Centennial and was a regular participant in New York City's St. Patrick's Day Parade?

....that the Matton Shipyard supplied tugs and barges for the movie "A Girl on the Barge"? However, since the Erie branch of the Barge Canal was not picturesque, filming was done at the Champlain Canal in Whitehall?

....that the bricks that built Harmony Mill #3 were made in the Hamilton, Jay Street area with clay that was strip-mined at the site?

....that gangster, Dutch Schultz, hid out in the old Harmony Hotel in the 1930's?

....that the August 30th meeting of the Spindle City Historic Society will be held at the Waterford Emergency Team Building, First Ave. in Waterford?

....that we're on the Internet? Our E-Mail address is spindle@knick.net and our Web site is www.crisny.org/not-for-profit/spindle/

Thank you to Steve Schonwetter and the Bilinski Sausage Mfg. Co. for their contribution toward underwriting our Summer Newsletter. We greatly appreciate their support.

HISTORIAN'S NOTEBOOK

Backyards in the old downtown section of Cohoes more than likely contain buried treasure and it's even in a "vault".

"Vault" was the term applied by the Health Officer, at the turn of the century, in reference to backyard outhouses. These privies, once a universal necessity, were being "condemned as a nuisance". Water closets were ordered installed and the privy pits filled in. No longer useful they now became a convenient short-term backyard dump. Anything found its way into the "vault" before it was neatly capped off with dirt – effectively becoming a time capsule.

Urban archaeologists, while excavating backyards in famous Lowell, MA found rich evidence that profiled lifestyle, social levels, eating, drinking and even leisure time habits of 19th century mill households. Wouldn't it be nice if Cohoes could become another Lowell?

Walter Lipka

CELEBRATE HISTORIC COHOES

Celebrate Historic Cohoes at the Kiwanis sponsored festival on Sept. 15th, 16th & 17th. Enjoy concerts, rides, an antique car show, flea market, vendors and more plus fireworks on Saturday night. Mark your calendars for what's sure to be a fun event!!

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Spindle City Historic Society welcomes new members *Joseph Amorosi, Ann Dinardo, Patricia Flavin, Helen Fleming, Jean Frament, Albina Grignon, Sharon Holmes, Joseph & Carolyn Koval, Elaine Leonard, Dennis Magin, Barbara & John McDonald, Jean Olton, Don Rittner, Jeanne Rysedorph and Donna Wagner.*

BILINSKI SAUSAGE MANUFACTURING CO.

In the early 1900's, Joseph Bilinski emigrated from the Ukraine and established a farm on Wade Road in Colonie. It was here in the farmhouse kitchen that the kielbasa was first made from animals raised on the property. The family moved to Cohoes around 1924 and established their business in their home on a 10 acre plot at 41 Lark St. A smokehouse was purchased for \$5.00 and kielbasa was made in the kitchen for about 8 years.

The family included sons, John and Walter and daughters, Olga, Millie, Pauline and Adele. All family members worked at the business. By 1931, due to an increase in business, a sausage kitchen was added to the smokehouse and the product line expanded to include frankfurters and bologna. A walk-in refrigerator was added in 1933 and the retail business was conducted in the Bilinski house. The sausage kitchen was enlarged and by 1940 a 40' x 80' brick building, was constructed around the original site, with space for trucks and wholesale delivery.

Products were sold at 41 Lark St. but deliveries were also made, beginning in the late 1930's, to local meat markets and to their store on Willow St., jointly owned with Mike Stemsky. By the 1940's the products were being delivered to Troy, Waterford, Watervliet, Mechanicville, Green Island and Albany.

Unable to obtain meat products during WWII, cows and pigs were penned on site for slaughter to maintain the business. Neatness and cleanliness were always of primary importance, both at the production site and on the trucks - "a matter of personal pride".

After their WWII service time, John and Walter resumed work at the business. John was involved in the manufacture of the products and a working supervisor of a staff of five. Walter assumed the duties of driver/salesman and supervised others. The women of the family also worked in the business along with their husbands and grown children. Olga's daughter Carolyn worked in the office while her sons became driver/salesmen. Millie and Adele also worked in the office, as did Walter's daughter Janice. In the 1950's, packaging was introduced and others were recruited to work for the business, such as neighbors Mike and Kay Boyus and Al Lajeunesse, a full-time mechanic.

In 1950, Joseph Bilinski developed lung cancer. After his death the business became incorporated with John Bilinski as the CEO. Eventually, the younger members of the family lost interest in the business and in, 1983, sold it to Steve Schonwetter, today's owner.

John Bilinski was not yet ready to retire, so he founded "Johnny B's" in Pittsfield, MA. Wohrle's did the manufacturing using John's recipes and made the deliveries. In August 1992, John suffered a stroke and his son Joseph took over "Johnny B's". The product was now being manufactured by new owners, but the original kielbasa recipe is still being used and their hot dogs produced for such establishments as Hot Dog Charlie's.

Today's owner Steve Schonwetter is president of Schonwetter Enterprises, Inc.d/b/a Bilinski Sausage Manufacturing Co. His wife is also involved in the business in the office. Upon taking over, he installed new roofs as well as well as a high powered electrical service. The existing space was expanded to accommodate new equipment and larger trucks. A new packaging area to accept additional products was added in 1990, doubling its size. A separate packaging area for roast beef and hams was added in 1986. Large computerized stainless steel ovens capable of accepting 5,000 pounds of roast beef were purchased and installed. Overhead rails for product transport were in the original structure but new overhead rails were installed in the additional rooms. A special cooler and freezer for raw materials were housed in a separate room. The sausage kitchen remains in the original site, but with \$1 million of new equipment.

In the early 1990's, in response to the interest of consumers in healthier foods, poultry products were introduced and gourmet chicken sausages were manufactured. The original fresh sausage cooler now houses vegetables required for the process. The smokehouses in the cooking area are the original pieces, but they have been repaired and steam cookers added. Housed in the building is an office for quality control and the USDA inspector.

The basement contains the refrigeration system for the whole building, newly purchased in 1998, as well as a 35,000 gallon vinegar tank, a boiler for all the steam in the building, a compressor and new machinery designed to reduce moisture in the lines. There is also a workshop for a full time mechanic/inventor, where a package labeler was invented and a jar lid tightener is being developed.

The business has grown from \$650,000/yr to \$5 million/yr with approximately 160,000 pounds of product produced per month. The products are distributed to all local supermarket chains as well as out of state to the Carolinas, Minnesota, Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, Texas and Washington State. From Seattle, the products are shipped to Hong Kong for gourmet supermarkets.

Under the new management, the old formulations have been maintained from the original Joseph Bilinski family kitchen. The only changes have been updated equipment for manufacturing. This small hometown business has been able to compete with much larger companies because it offers high quality and innovative new products for health-minded consumers as well as traditional consumers.

In the July/August 1998 issue of the *Nutrition Action National Health Letter*, the Bilinski chicken sausages were ranked highly by the Center for Science in the Public Interest in their survey of lower-fat sausage products.

Bilinski conducts tours for local schools and groups. Some have made their visits a tradition, such as the Niskayuna 5th grade, which has come to tour for the past 15 years. Tours are encouraged and everyone is welcome.

The Troy and Schenectady Railroad Forgotten Transportation in Cohoes?

When one thinks of early transportation in the City of Cohoes, the Erie Canal comes immediately to mind. Without a doubt, the Erie enabled Cohoes to grow and prosper in the early and middle years of the 19th century, but Cohoes was also served by two very important railroads during that time. These railroads not only helped bring raw materials for Cohoes' mills into town the year round, they also provided a relatively cheap method of shipping finished products to customers much faster than the Canal ever could.

One of these railroads was the Troy and Schenectady. If residents of Cohoes were asked today about this railroad, it's doubtful that many would know where it was located. The last remaining remnant of this road is now known as the Cohoes portion of the Albany/Schenectady bikeway. The line entered the city south of present day Alexander Street, meandered northwest over Columbia Street, under Johnston Avenue and Vliet Street, and finally crossed Manor Avenue and exited the city into the present day Town of Colonie.

The Troy and Schenectady (or T&S as rail historians know it) had its origin with the businessmen of the City of Troy. Troy was just beginning to feel the effects of rapid industrialization and needed to move goods and people quickly. In particular, Troy needed to send finished stoves and knit goods to the West. Since there was intense competition between Troy and Albany, the astute businessmen of Troy wouldn't hear of sending goods through a rival city and possibly enhancing the fortunes of the Corning and Pruyn families.

Schenectady seemed the logical place to send their goods. A railroad to Schenectady would be preferable to Albany and would move goods and people faster than the Erie Canal. The main problem with the Erie was the day's time that was lost while going through the flight of locks at Cohoes. The delay could be avoided by a railroad that would link Troy with the western railroads, especially the Utica and Schenectady Railroad. It would be slightly more than 20 years before Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt would combine the numerous short line railroads west of Schenectady and roads between Albany and New York City into the powerful New York Central.

The T&S was incorporated in 1836 and opened for operation in 1842. It was the first American municipally owned railroad, having been constructed by the City of Troy in an effort to obtain some of the business which Albany was getting over the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad (the present day Amtrak line near Everett Road in Colonie). It was the first railroad in New York State which did not begin its life with rails constructed with a strap of iron bonded to a wooden beam! It started with 56 pound "H-rails" fastened to wooden ties with modern hook headed spikes made by Henry Burden of Troy. The railroad cars used by the T&S were made by the Gilbert and Eaton Car Company of Troy (present day Green Island). These cars were reported by the American Railroad Journal of 1843 to be "such as a weary man delights to find", being sustained by "atmospheric springs" and being "well-ventilated". George Westinghouse, delayed by a train collision on this railroad, got his first inspiration to invent the railroad air brake as a result of the accident.

On November 4, 1837, a committee appointed by the Common Council of the City of Troy voted to issue stock in the amount of \$300,000 for a "railroad to be built from this City westward toward the City of Schenectady". Surveys of proposed routes were made, and on February 1, 1841 the Troy Common Council adopted the report of the surveyor for a "route not to exceed 50 feet of elevation per mile". A route 17 miles in length was found that met this requirement, but it would have been too costly. An easier route was found parallel to the Erie Canal through Cohoes, although the total distance of the road would have to be increased to 20 miles.

This survey report showed that "about 9 miles of the Troy end of the railroad was divided into ten sections for grading". This division was deemed necessary due to the difficult digging conditions the crews found in Cohoes. There would have to be many fills made necessary by several creeks flowing eastward to the Hudson. Cuts in the heavy clay soil were also necessary north of Alexander Street, behind Imperial Avenue, and cuts would have to be made where the railroad passed between Johnston and Manor Avenues. One example of the costs incurred was for section 5 (Cohoes). The cost for removing one cubic yard of material by a workman with a team of mules and a wagon was set at 12 cents! A common laborer's rate was fixed at 75 cents a day and a mason's rate was fixed at \$1.50 a day.

The railroad was finally opened for operation on or about November 1, 1842, nearly 5 years after the idea was first proposed. Almost immediately the road ran into financial trouble. By this time, a railroad was constructed from Albany to Schenectady which effectively funneled a lot of passenger traffic away from Troy. In addition, the textile mills in Cohoes were just starting up and hadn't reached the output levels that would ultimately make railroads successful after the Civil War.

In spite of these difficulties, the railroad did haul increasing numbers of passengers as well as coal and other commodities to Cohoes. The T&S came under the corporate ownership of the New York Central Railroad

just after the Civil War. With ownership by the New York Central, many improvements were made. A new depot was constructed at the foot of Younglove Avenue, replacing the original station that was located near the intersection of Trull and Columbia Streets. A large passenger platform was constructed there to handle the longer trains that ran daily between the Troy Union Station and the Schenectady Union Station. The remains of the platform, as well as some of the foundation excavations from the station, can still be seen today. The rail yards at High Street were enlarged after the city filled in the gully that ran where Garner Street is today. Increased freight and passenger traffic on the railroad often prevented horses and wagons from crossing the tracks at High Street. As a result, a bridge was constructed in 1903 to place High Street under the railroad to eliminate the steep road grade encountered between the Erie Canal and the bottom of Younglove and McElwain Avenues.

The Peterson & Packer Coal Company, Cooley's, F. M. Marsolais Coal Company, and the Younglove & Humphries Coal Company kept the Garner Street yards relatively busy right up to the 1960's. During the 1940's and 1950's, a circus train ran occasionally from Troy to Schenectady during the summer months. The freight house on Garner Street (on the site of the present Convenient Food Mart) also saw freight deliveries at least once a week into the 1960's. During the 1960's and early 1970's, one freight ran two or three times a week to supply Reepmeyer's Feed Store on Fonda Road in Colonie as well as the Ford Tractor plant on Route 9. Other on line manufacturers that used the old T&S were the former American Soap and Washoline Factory on Central Avenue and the Carey Brickyard off of Manor Avenue.

Activity on the railroad declined precipitously after the completion of the Adirondack Northway (Interstate 87) in the mid-1960's. At the time the Interstate was completed in Albany County, the T&S crossed the road at grade. The railroad has the distinction of being the only such railroad that crossed an Interstate at grade in the entire United States! Needless to say, it required the services of the New York State Police to stop traffic in both directions whenever a train crossed the road. There are several recent accounts of retired railroaders who had close calls with cars and tractor-trailers just missing the caboose of the train as it slowly crossed the Northway.

With the absorption of the New York Central into the Penn Central, and the subsequent bankruptcy of the Penn Central, operation of the railroad was taken over by the Delaware and Hudson. The Northway crossing was eliminated in the interest of safety, the tracks were pulled up west of the Northway, and a bike path was constructed in the Town of Colonie westward to where the railroad entered Schenectady.

With the railroad now a "dead end" from Troy through Cohoes to Colonie, it was common to see D&H engines creeping slowly along the now dead end and long neglected, dangerous roadbed. I can remember hearing radio transmissions of D&H trainmen hoping they could get home on time after passing over some particularly hazardous sections of track near Vliet Street and Alexander Street. Springtime mud was a common sight on engine running gear where the weight of the locomotive and cars pushed the rails into wet clay soil.

The remaining rails were finally torn up in the late 1980's. The D&H turned control of the railbed over to New York State and ultimately the City of Cohoes after salvaging the remaining rails and ties. This section of the bike path was joined with the older Colonie portion to enable cyclists and hikers to go uninterrupted from Albany, through Cohoes and Colonie, to Schenectady.

Few landmarks of the railroad remain in the city. One of the more interesting relics is the milepost that still stands at the site of the original station on Trull Street. The milepost showed the distance of 12 miles from that spot to Schenectady. Another remaining site is the "wye" at the now filled in Garner Street bridge. The "wye" was a track arrangement that was necessary to reverse the direction of steam locomotives. Steam locomotives couldn't be run backwards as can today's modern diesel electric locomotives. This "wye" also serviced a mill located near Hamilton Street. The old sidings that once serviced the American Soap and Washoline Factory on Central Avenue and the Peterson & Packer Coal Company on Garner Street are still visible from the bike path.

Like many other railroads in the latter half of the 20th century, the T&S finally died due to a combination of dwindling passenger and freight traffic. The last major customer the railroad had was the Ford Tractor plant on Fonda Road in Colonie (now the U.S. Postal Service facility). During the 1960's, one train a day supplied tractor buckets and assemblies to the plant for final assembly. Once this plant closed one of the main reasons for the railroad's existence ceased.

The railroad's namesake cities also entered a period of decline during this time, further eliminating any need for the railroad. During its heyday, the T&S provided much needed passenger and freight service to a growing Cohoes. Now, it stands as another reminder of the importance of the 19th century industrial revolution in the Capital District.

The Amyot Legacy in Cohoes Dentistry

Bruno Amyot, a blacksmith, came to Cohoes in 1852 from Vercheres, Quebec, married Cohoesier Zoe Ducharme, and had nine children. Their three sons, Bruno, Joseph and Peter began a history of well over 100 years of dentistry in Cohoes. Bruno and Joseph practiced in the city for a total of about 90 years. Peter began his dental practice in Cohoes but eventually moved it to Schenectady.

Two of Bruno's sons, Louis and Bruno, continued the dentistry tradition with Bruno practicing on Remsen Street for decades.

The photo shown was taken in September 1915 at the Saratoga Avenue residence of Dr. Bruno E. Amyot on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of his dental practice.



Standing: Israel Belanger, Esq., Frank Tessier, Fr. Arthur Desautel, Evelina Tessier Amyot, Francis M. Tessier, Fr C. Ernest Perrin, Pierre A. Amyot DDS, Lucille A. Amyot, Joseph William Racette, MD, Dorilda Amyot Racette, Fr. Harvey Baillargeon, Irene A. Amyot, Rudolph F. Tessier, Eva Pude Amyot, Azilda Moquin Chamberlain or Hermina Amyot (?), Joseph A. Amyot DDS, John N. Blais, Bruno E. Amyot DDS.

Seated: Albina Amyot Belanger, ?, Mabel Mitchel Amyot, Hermina Blais Tessier, Rose Mitchel Blais, Fr. John Tetrault, Zoe Ducharme Amyot, Louisa Amyot, Yvonne Racette, Georgiana Amyot.

On the porch: Rudolph F. Amyot, Ulderic Lajeunesse, Bruno E. Amyot Jr., Louise B. Amyot, E. LaSalle Amyot.

Spindle City Historic Society

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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

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