

Screens

by Lynne Belluscio

LeRoy House is ready for visitors this summer. Today, Sam Leadley and I put up the screen door. It was in pretty rough shape after the winter and it needed painting so I called Ron Paganin and he came over and scraped off the old paint and then took a paint chip up to Crocker's to have the dark blue paint matched. Several years ago, we removed paint from the front door to find out the original color, and discovered it was a very dark, almost black-blue. We decided to paint the screen door the same color.

Originally, when the LeRoy family lived here, and even for several years later, there was a louvered door on the front. The heavy front door could be open, but the louvered door allowed air to circulate inside. With the back door open, there was a nice breeze through the hall. Exactly when LeRoy House got its screen door is not known. And what happened to the louvered door is a mystery.

Wire screens were not very common in the early 1800s. There was an advertisement for "wove wire for window screen" as early as 1823 in the *American Farmer*. And wire screens were exhibited in Boston in 1839 but the manufacture of wire screen material was difficult. Screens were used for sieves and flour sifters, but the early ones were woven of horsehair.

The Gilbert and Bennett Company in Connecticut manufactured horse-hair sieves but the

sieves were fragile. So Gilbert and Bennett acquired carpet looms and started weaving metal wire which was placed in wooden hoops. During the Civil War, the company lost the southern market and there was a surplus of woven wire cloth. The story is told that an employee painted some of the screening to prevent rust, and sold it for window screens. Later the company introduced steel wire screen which was rust resistant.

Wire screen was used not only for windows and doors, it was put on pie and cheese cupboards to keep out flies. And it was used for fly domes, to put over food, and to make fly traps. Apparently, screen was also used for making sheets of rag paper.

When I was in Europe a couple of years ago, we went to a museum where they were demonstrating making rag paper. The rags are pounded into a pulp and then mixed with water. Wooden trays lined with sieves are scooped into the pulp mixture, and then as they are brought out of the mixture, the water drains through the sieve, leaving a layer of rag paper, which is dried and pressed into paper sheets.

Wire screens were also used on railroad passenger cars. In fact a patent was taken on screens for the upper windows in the passenger cars, that allowed people to lower the windows, but to prevent hot cinders from the engine blowing into the cars.

The importance of screen windows and doors was a health



Screened pie safe in Mrs. LeRoy's kitchen.

issue - - keeping flies and mosquitoes out of the house. Some people hung the herb tansy on the windows to discourage bugs from coming in the house. Other people stretched cheesecloth across the windows. *The Genesee Farmer* magazine, suggested that at night, folks could leave their windows open to let bats come in and eat the flies. Obviously, if you could afford screens, that was a better option.

When screening became affordable, people had screened porches. My in-laws' house in Rochester had summer sleeping porches off the upstairs bedrooms that could be screened. In the fall the screens would come down, be cleaned and put in the garage. Then the storm windows would be put up.

When I worked in the Jones Farm House at Genesee Country Museum, many years ago, I remember coming into the kitchen in the morning and seeing hundreds of flies on the ceiling. Then as the day wore on, they would come off the ceiling and start buzzing around. It wouldn't have made much difference if there were screens on the windows and



Large brass wire drive and two small horsehair drives.

doors, because after hundreds of people come through the house, it is pretty hard to keep the flies out. And you couldn't yell, "Close the screen door, you're letting in the flies!"

Some days I would watch a white faced wasp come into the kitchen. He would drop down from the ceiling, grab a fly and then take it back up, and rip off the wings and then wrap the live fly in a little cocoon. I'd be working at the kitchen table and little wings would come floating down from the ceiling.

So if you stop by LeRoy House, come in the front door and close the screen door behind you in a hurry. It's really hard to clean fly specs off the ceiling.



Left: fly trap made of wire and on right a food dome to keep flies off food.