

Just In Time For Christmas

by Lynne Belluscio

A couple of weeks ago, I received a phone call from Judy Jensen. "I'd like the Historical Society to have my collection of games and toys. I want to make sure they are played with. I don't want them just sitting around on the shelf." I didn't know what to say. This would be an amazing collection - - not antiques, but toys that have been played at Genesee Country Museum for over thirty years. Skittles, quoits, checkers, shut the box, the game of Goose, the game of Life, tops, Diablo, yo-yos, Whammy Diddles, Jacob's Ladders, knuckle knockers, shuttle board, nine pins, ten pins ...

The Historical Society has quite a collection of reproduction 19th century toys. We use them with the school groups, and this last summer we set up several of the toys on the back porch for our visitors. They are always popular. But Judy's collection is so much more and it would greatly enhance what we have.

Judy, this would be wonderful. Everyone enjoys playing with the games. We had families that stayed just to play skittles on the back porch this last summer. A few of my docents got hooked on "Shut the Box."

I've already planned to do an exhibit this next year and now we can set up games throughout the house. And we had already decided that at the 2014 Oatka Festival, we would set up our big tent with our games and now, there will so much more we can offer.

And so, a few days later Judy stopped by and we unloaded her car. There were wonderful things and Judy has told me that there will be more to come. She also plans to organize her research files and books and they will be coming to LeRoy House. This is truly a treasure and we are very fortunate that Judy believed that the LeRoy Historical Society would utilize her collection and share it.

I first met Judy - - Dr. Judy Jensen, professor of Physical Education, Brockport State University, in the late 1970s at Genesee Country Museum, while I was working there. She



introduced me to "town ball" and we organized the Slab City Sluggers that played exhibition games at Red Wing Stadium (the highlight of my baseball career) and Bison Stadium in Buffalo, and other minor league stadiums in Geneva and Elmira.

(It was also at this time that I came to appreciate the quote - A woman's place is at home - - and first, second and third.) She organized "Games Day" at Genesee Country, where folks rolled hoops, played croquet, walked on stilts, and played marbles. I learned about the "Turners" and other early exercise groups of the 1800s.

She had a very dedicated corp of volunteers, who made toys and introduced people to whipping tops and Diablo. My father became one of her volunteers and an expert on Cat's Cradle, a game played with a circle of string. My dad never went anywhere without a string in his pocket.

I heard Judy speak several times on the origins of baseball and other games. She taught sport history at Brockport and I called her when I needed information about the gymnasium at Ingham University. Ingham's modern gymnasium was built on the top floor of the new dormitory built in 1888. A recently discovered Ingham diary validates the importance of gymnastics at Ingham. The students also played tennis, which was introduced to the United States in 1874. One of my favorite photos of Ingham shows the women seated in front of the school, many holding tennis rackets.

Judy and I have talked many times about the idea of play. Playing is an essential part of life, both for children and adults. But it seems that many of today's kids don't know how to play. Their play is either so organized, or so dependent on the dexterity of their thumbs that they cannot pretend,

or make up rules. They have little imagination and are almost afraid of going out to play. Yet, when engaged with skittles, or shut the box, they seem to enjoy themselves.

So with Judy's generous donation, the LeRoy Historical Society will offer an opportunity for folks to come and play. We hope to collect some of your stories of what you played as you grew up in LeRoy ... games of tag, capture the flag - - - hide and seek - - - rainy day games - - blankets over the furniture - - - hopscotch - - - card games (were you allowed to play card games on Sunday?)

We'd also like to collect photographs of kids at play - - or even adults. In our files we have photos of company picnics with folks playing games. And what about church

picnics and scout events - - or family reunions. And I suppose birthday parties and baby shower games.

Does anyone know how to play whist or canasta? I had friends who almost flunked out of college playing pinochle. My dad taught me cribbage on the train to New York City and euchre at church while the men were waiting to do the dishes after a church pot-luck supper.

George Bernard Shaw is credited with the statement that, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

