

# Fat, Short-Legged Flamingoes

by Lynne Belluscio

It's that time again when the flamingoes will appear on the front lawn of LeRoy House. For the rest of the year, they are jammed into cardboard boxes in the basement of LeRoy House. It's a shame that they can't enjoy the fresh air a little longer, but it's the tradition that they appear early in the morning and then fly away in the afternoon.

Most of you probably don't know that the LeRoy flamingoes have an unusual lineage. There are actually three distinct family lines. And there is an ironic twist. The earliest flock of flamingoes were here when Charles Wilbor and his family arrived in 1797. This flamingo group was known to the Seneca Indians who camped along the creek. The birds were sacred to the Indians and were never hunted.

When the early settlers arrived, they tried eating the long necked birds, but discovered that they tasted fishy so instead they collected the large eggs to feed their families and the flamingoes almost became extinct.

Jacob LeRoy came to town in 1823, and he noticed that the flamingo flocks were small, so when his son Edward accompanied Commodore Perry to Japan, he instructed Edward to bring back a mating pair of flamingoes from Hong Kong. That pair was brought to LeRoy and they bred with the early pioneer flamingoes. The cross-bred birds looked the same, but the eggs were very round so they were the eggs that were used for the first Easter egg roll held on the lawn of LeRoy House by Jacob's wife Charlotte.

By the time Ingham University was founded in 1837, the number of flamingoes in LeRoy had increased significantly. The birds often climbed up on the creek bank and fed on the lawn of the University, right in front of Emily and Marietta's house. Unfortunately, the flamingoes left behind what they had processed and it was quite a mess. The Chancellor of Ingham University, Rev. Samuel Cox, who knew more about everything than anybody in town, suggested that a wire, a foot off the ground, should be run

all along the creek-bank. It would keep the flamingoes in the creek. Unfortunately the long legged birds just stepped over the wires.

When Emily Ingham's husband, Phineas Staunton traveled to South America for the Smithsonian Institution, he learned about the short-legged South American flamingoes and he sent back two breeding pairs. Unfortunately, Staunton died in Ecuador and never saw his flamingoes integrate with the local birds. It took several years before the South American flamingoes were accepted by the local birds.

In LeRoy, flamingoes nested on top of chimneys. It was considered good luck to have a flamingo nest on top of your house, although a little messy. The South American flamingoes nested on houses south of town near Red Bridge (now Munson Street). The local birds nested near Jacob LeRoy's mill at Red Mill Road north of town.

On Sunday afternoons, all the flamingoes would gather at the Main Street bridge and feed on the fresh water shrimp. People from Buffalo, Pittsburgh and Rochester would take the train to LeRoy and walk from the B.P.&R Station on Lake Street to the scenic overlook to watch the flamingoes wading in the water. There were excursions which included train tickets and lunch at the historic Eagle Hotel.

Fred Farquar's Flamingo Factory created beautiful flamingo decoys which were hand-painted by Fred's daughter, Fern, a graduate of Ingham University, Class of 1862. The decoys were sold as souvenirs.

But for many years, the two groups of flamingoes never interbred. The short legged flamingoes remained south of the bridge and the long legged ones stayed north of the bridge. Calvin Keeney,



who had success breeding the stringless string bean, thought he could solve the problem. He hired some adventurous boys from the LeRoy Academic Institute and told them to steal eggs from both groups. This was dangerous work, because the nests were located high on chimneys, but also because the birds guarded their nests and could become very aggressive. The boys took eggs from one flock and exchanged them for eggs from the other flock. When the eggs hatched, the unwary parents didn't notice that their off-spring had the wrong legs.

Keeney's experiment worked and within two years, all the flamingoes had medium length legs, except for one unfortunate pair of flamingoes, who produced fledglings with one short leg and one long leg. It wasn't much of a handicap, since they spent most of their time standing on one leg - because the water in the creek is so cold. They just had to remember to stand on the long leg.

It was about this time, that a

curious change took place. Most people thought it was a mutation. The birds started to change color. When they molted, some of the new feathers were grey. A strip under their chins was white. They even had black feathers on their heads. From a distance they looked like flamingoes, but up close it was easy to see that they weren't pink. Then another change took place. They started to put on weight - a lot of weight. For flamingoes, they were obese! The Village board suggested that a law should be passed, forbidding people from feeding the grey flamingoes. A special tax was imposed on high fructose flamingo food. Some people even thought it was because of global warming. But all the laws couldn't prevent the flamingoes from changing.

For many years, it has been believed that the flamingoes just flew away and never returned. Now it seems that they have been here all along, it's just that we can't tell the difference between fat, short legged, grey flamingoes and Canadian geese.

