

Bean Sorting

by Lynne Belluscio

We all know about bean counters, but in LeRoy, one of the most lucrative businesses was dependent on sorting beans -- all kinds of beans.

In 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War, Nicholas Keeney started a small produce business in LeRoy. In 1872, his son, Calvin Keeney joined his father and the company became known as N.B. Keeney and Son. They bought grain, dry beans, apples, potatoes, wool and other agricultural commodities. Calvin was interested in developing a new variety of bean and after several years of selective plant breeding, he introduced the first stringless bean in 1884.

Between 1884 and 1911, he developed 19 new snap beans. The money was made by selling the seeds for the new varieties of beans as well as peas and corn. The seed was processed and packed into barrels in two huge warehouses on Lake Street, near the railroad tracks. Keeney also had warehouses in Cheboygan, Michigan and farms throughout the country where the seed was grown.

The Keeneys had over 6,000 acres planted to peas and beans. All of the seed had to be sorted by hand. In our collection are several "bean sorters" which have a hopper and a belt that the beans travel on. The one on exhibit in the basement, has a foot treadle. I have been told that many women in town who worked at the bean



Warehouse on Lake Street, circa 1920.

plant, took sacks of beans home and the whole family helped sort seed to make a little extra money.

We have several photos of the warehouse, but while going through a large collection of photographs that came from Elinor Townsend's house, we came across a couple of new ones, but the most interesting piece that Emma DeLooze discovered is on the back of an envelope. It is an engraving of the inside of the warehouse in the bean picking room. Men (many with hats on

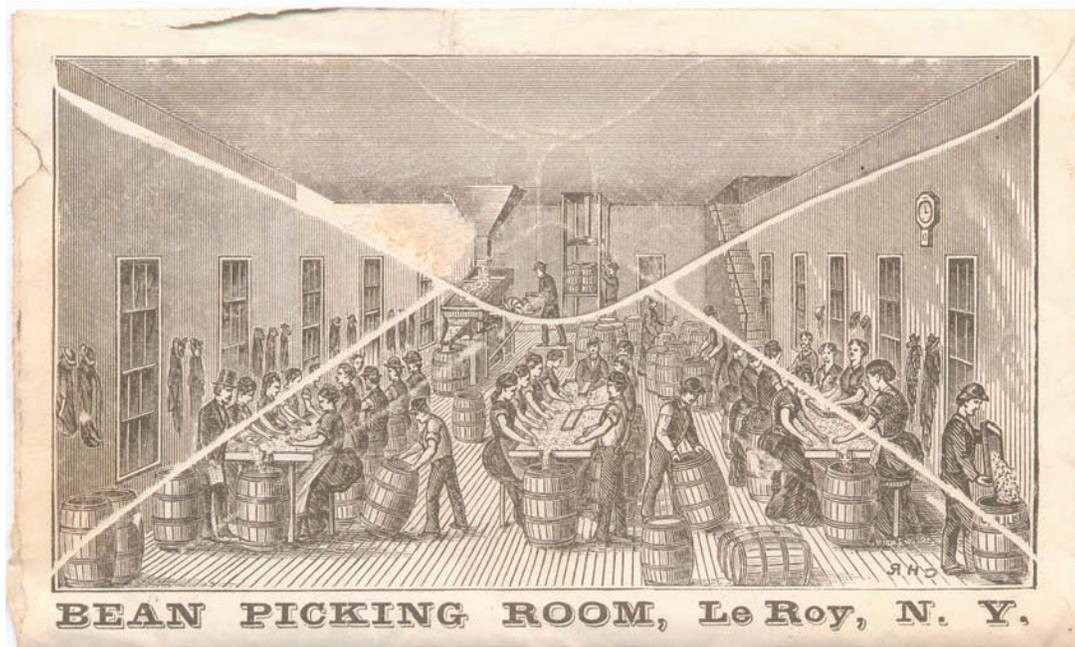
and women are seated at three long tables with a barrel at the end and an elevator at the back of the room seems to be hoisting barrels and a large hopper on the left of the picture in the back of the room fills another barrel. The envelope has been torn on the left, but the picture is almost complete.

Calvin Keeney was also president of the LeRoy Canning Company, vice president of the LeRoy Plow Company, director of the LeRoy National Bank and involved with the LeRoy Salt

Company. He had cattle farms in LeRoy and owned 2,680 acres of land in Yazoo, Mississippi, all planted to cotton. He owned two stone quarries in LeRoy and farms in Pavilion where he grew corn for the canning company. He owned a lumbering business in Kentucky. Once when asked he spread his business out over so much territory, he responded: "I am simply following my mother's advice to never place my eggs all in one basket."

In 1923, Calvin Keeney, who had no sons to carry on the business, incorporated his holdings. At the time he said "I turned it over to the boys (employees) who have helped me build it up."

In the fall of 1927, he merged with several other seed companies and formed the Associated Seed Growers, Inc, now known as ASGROW, a subsidiary of the Upjohn Company, a world class leader in the breeding and production of snap beans, sweet corn and peas. Calvin Keeney died in 1930. Although I am sure he relied on bean counters to keep his business solvent, he certainly had to rely on all the bean sorters that worked in the warehouse on Lake Street.



BEAN PICKING ROOM, Le Roy, N. Y.