

A Missed Opportunity

by Lynne Belluscio

I read in the morning *Democrat and Chronicle* of the passing of Oscar (Ossie) Wieggen, 96 of Rochester. Ossie was the photographer for the 1940 *LeRoy Book*, a compilation of over 550 photographs of the people, organizations and buildings in LeRoy. In fact the *LeRoy Book* was mentioned in his obituary.

Ossie was born in Grant Park Illinois, October 20, 1914. He moved to Rochester as a young man and took photography courses at the Mechanics Institute (now R.I.T.) In 1939, Schuyler Wells from LeRoy, spearheaded a project that would collect and preserve the photographic record of the community. He interviewed Ossie and decided that the young man would be the official photographer for the project.

Ossie moved to LeRoy and boarded with a family on East Main Street. The photograph sessions were scheduled one per hour, but the project became so popular that Ossie had to fit two sessions in an hour. He had to move all his equipment and set it up for each photograph. He told me that he had a touring car that he could borrow. Because he didn't have a dark room, he had to process all his photographs at night in the science lab at the high school. The school had given him a key to use. The photographs were mounted on parchment paper and Ossie said that it took forever to dry mount the images.

Ossie was the featured speaker at the annual meeting of the LeRoy Historical Society in 1991. He told stories of the project (but we never thought to tape record his comments). He remembered taking the picture of the Olmsted family on Lake Road, (on page 234) Young Robert Olmsted had forgotten that he had to be home for the photographer and rode up late on his bicycle. He didn't have time to change into his good clothes and his father was so mad. When the picture was taken, there was the bicycle on the lawn and young Robert - with his eyes shut. Ossie looked through all the negatives and the boy's eyes were always shut, so Ossie had



to touch up the photograph and draw in Robert's eyes. When Ossie showed up at 1 Main Street to photograph Harold Cleveland, he said that there wasn't much to photograph. Harold's room was pretty sparse. So he posed Harold next to the radio, with his dog on his lap.

After hearing Ossie's anecdotes, I vowed to make an appointment to sit down with him again, with the huge 1940 Book in hand and listen to more of his stories. I never did. Several years ago, I gave a talk on Jell-O in Rochester and his wife, Thelma, came up to me and reintroduced herself. Ossie was a little unstable on his feet she told me, but his mind was as sharp as ever. I thought I would take Seely Pratt with me to see Ossie, and we talked about it, but we never did. Then this year, when Jim Delooze started to inventory and scan all the LeRoy 1940 photographs, I told him about Ossie. "We need to go see him." But we never did.

I have told many people about the wonderful photographs in the 1940 Book. A friend of mine who worked at the Henry Ford Museum, saw the book and remarked that it was probably one of the best photographic documentations of a rural community before World War II that he had ever seen. I have told people at the George Eastman House and R.I.T about the collection. Someday, someone will appreciate the

remarkable photographic record that Ossie assembled.

Ossie became a photographer with Eastman Kodak and then served in the Research Department and helped develop Ektachrome film. Later he was the Operations Manager in the Midwest Sales Division. Another photograph project that he was particularly proud of was a state-of-the-art photo of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City.

There were two 1940 *LeRoy Books* created. One was in the Woodward Memorial Library for many years, but Marion Russell

discovered that an entire page had been removed and was concerned about the future of the book. She had the book and the negatives as well as the layout book brought to LeRoy House.

For many years the book was in the back parlor, but when we moved the library to the Academic Building, the book and its stand was moved to the new facility. The negatives were rehoused in archival envelopes. The layout book photos were placed in three archival notebooks. (which were replaced this year with enclosed archival boxes.) A second book had been placed in the vault of the Bank of LeRoy. It remained there for safe-keeping until 1991, when the Bank of LeRoy changed hands once again and the safe was being cleaned out. The second book came to the Historical Society. For the first time in fifty years it was opened, and then put into another archival box.

I cannot think of anything that I regret more than not getting to talk with Ossie and it only serves as a reminder that we all need to talk with those folks who hold the key to our past and are willing to share the stories behind the photographs.

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