

The Pioneers

by Lynne Belluscio

This afternoon I met with the History of Art Club at LeRoy House. They asked if I could give them a glimpse into LeRoy in 1812, during the formation of the town two hundred years ago. I had to take them on a journey in time. It's hard not to romanticize about the pioneers and it's very hard to know the truth. Sometimes called the "Golden Age of Homespun" I suspect that those who lived at that time, would not have considered it to be golden.

LeRoy - - or the Ganson Settlement as it was first known, and then named for the Goddess of War, Belonna was truly on the edge of the wilderness. The first settlers had arrived little more than fifteen years before. Charles Wilbor had built a little log cabin in the middle of nowhere. By 1812, there might have been 50 families in the area. Bears and rattlesnakes were frequent visitors. Bears attacked 300 pound pigs and carried them off into the woods. The cries of wild cats pierced the night. Wolves preyed on sheep. And no one could keep chickens safe.

Few settlers had cleared more than a few acres of land and most were living in small log cabins that were neither weather tight nor cozy. The diet consisted of ground corn flour and salt pork. There was some game - - deer, squirrels, pigeons and rabbits, but hunting took time away from clearing the land and by their own admission, these early settlers were not very good with a gun. What you fed your family depended on what you could grow and preserve. Some root crops could be buried in a root cellar while others could be dried. If you were lucky to get to Salina to get salt you could salt your own cabbage and make sauerkraut, forestalling disease.

There were no mature apple trees, since orchards were started by seed. Without apples, there was no cider and no vinegar an important ingredient for preserving. One account mentions that the early settlers, who could easily get whiskey, put down an abundant crop of pickles in whiskey. In the spring, the settlers dug wild leeks and in the late summer they picked high bush cranberries. But if the crops failed



or the rabbits ate all the beans, then your family would have to subsist on what you could provide - - - milk if you had a cow and maple sugar if you tapped trees in the spring. Stores - and in 1812 there seems to be only one or two stores in LeRoy - - did not sell much in the line of food and even if they did, there was no money to buy anything, only credit. The store might carry tea, coffee, sugar and whiskey.

The region was known for a sickness - sometimes called the ague or Genesee Fever. It was malaria and it devastated entire families. People would take to their beds and stay there until the heavy frost of the fall. Doctors were ill prepared to deal with most illnesses. The lancet which was used to cut the skin to "bleed" a patient of the bad humours did more injury that good. "Cupping" which raised blisters on the skin was another cure attempted by the early physicians. The Stoddard family was saved by the help of the local indians, who built a sweat lodge for them. Women were often unattended in childbirth and were susceptible to a myriad of dangers, not to mention raising children in cabins with dirt floors and open fire places. Both men and women who lost their partners, remarried quickly in order to have help raising children and continuing with the hard work of settlement.

The settlers depended on their religious faith to sustain them

in these trying times and small groups would meet to read the bible and to "keep the Sabbath." One year was particularly hard during the wheat harvest and the men had not been able to get into the fields, but the weather broke on a Sunday and there was much consternation about those farmers who chose to cut wheat on the Sabbath. Yet with the devotion to their religion, the early settlers chose to build schools before they built churches. By 1812, there were at least four schools in operation. These rude log buildings were also used for church services. In the Fort Hill settlement, a small singing school was formed and pioneers joined together to sing hymns.

Almost all of the early pioneer accounts include reminiscences of "Training Day" - a day when

all the able bodied men gathered to drill for the militia. The kids tagged along and watched with excitement. There was usually a liberal amount of whiskey passed around.

In 1812, there was good reason for the militia to gather, for within days of the establishment of the new town of Belonna, the United States declared war on England. And within the year, the militia would be called out to defend the Niagara Frontier. It was a time of great trepidation and anxiety. Those who were here in 1812 and survived to tell the story were true pioneers and certainly not the faint of heart. This next year, their stories will be told.

*Jell-O will be featured
on CBS Sunday Morning
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