

I Never Knew That

by Lynne Belluscio

Our education committee met a few days ago, and one of the topics of discussion was what are the things that kids should know about their community's history. For that matter, what should anyone know about LeRoy's history. Of course from my point of view, there are a lot of things that people should know. And I'm always surprised when someone who grew up in LeRoy and whose ancestors arrived in LeRoy by ox cart will say - "I never knew that!" The committee wanted to narrow the list down to "just the facts." So here's the first draft. I'm sure there a lot of things that aren't on this list, but it's a start.

LeRoy is the name of the Town AND the Village. The Town is governed by a Town Board, which is led by the Town Supervisor. The Village is governed by a Village Board, which is led by the Mayor. LeRoy is in Genesee County and the County "seat" (or government) is in Batavia.

The proper pronunciation of LeRoy - based on the family who the town is named for - is "luh roy" not "lee roy." (I know there are those of you who say LeeRoy, but don't say that in front of the family. I don't think they like to hear their name mispronounced!)

Some people spell LeRoy with a space between the e and the R and some people don't. I really don't know what the official spelling is - with a space or not, but as I tell people, the tombstone in the cemetery in New York City doesn't have a space, so as far as I'm concerned, it's written in stone. However, LeRoy is always spelled with a capital L and a capital R.

LeRoy is named for Herman LeRoy, a very rich man who lived in New York City. Herman LeRoy never lived in LeRoy, but his son, Jacob lived in LeRoy House, which is now a museum. A historic marker is in front of LeRoy House. (Not all the information on the historic marker is true.) Herman LeRoy owned a large tract of land known as the Triangle Tract. It contained over 86,000 acres of land, and extended all the way north to

Lake Ontario. The point of the triangle is marked with a plaque on a large boulder on South Street.

Main Street in LeRoy was an Indian trail. Two hundred years ago Main Street was part of the road that connected Buffalo and Albany and was known as the State Road. It is now New York State Route 5.

LeRoy was settled over 200 years ago, after the American Revolution. A historic marker near the golf course on East Main Street, commemorates the first settlers. Another marker on East Main Road commemorates the first school. The Town of LeRoy is older than the Village of LeRoy. The town was established in 1812. A historic marker on Trigon Park commemorates the Bicentennial of the Town of LeRoy in 2012. The Village was officially formed in 1834. A marker on the front of the Eagle Hotel commemorates the 150th Anniversary of the Village of LeRoy in 1984.

The Oatka Creek was very important to the early settlers. It provided water power for the first flour and saw mills. A historic marker is located near the Post Office which explains the history of the LeRoy mill. Oatka is an Indian word for "coming from the highlands." A very large waterfall, known as Buttermilk Falls, is located north of town.

Farming is very important in LeRoy and is the largest economic factor in the town. Limestone mining is one of the oldest industries in LeRoy. Many buildings in LeRoy are constructed of local limestone. Limestone from the quarries in LeRoy is crushed for gravel to build roads. It was used to build the New York State Thruway and the Mt. Morris dam. (A historic marker will be placed near the Marion steam shovel on Gulf Road to commemorate this early industry.)

Jell-O was invented in LeRoy in 1897 by Pearle Wait. A historic marker on Lake Street marks Mr. Wait's factory. He sold Jell-O to Orator Woodward for \$450 in 1899. The Woodward family

became millionaires. The factory was on North Street. A historic marker is in front of the factory. The Jell-O Factory closed in 1964 and moved to Dover, Delaware. Today, the history of Jell-O can be seen at the Jell-O Museum.

Ingham University was the first women's university in the United States to give four-year degrees. It was located on the corner of Main Street and Wolcott Street and was founded by Emily and Marietta Ingham. The school closed in 1892. The Woodward Library is built of stone from the University Art College. There are three historic markers. One inside the entrance to the Superintendent's office; another on the corner of Wolcott Street; and another in front of the Woodward Library.

The Underground Railroad passed through LeRoy for a few years. The "conductor" in LeRoy was Daniel MacDonald. (Soon the historic marker, which is not in the correct place, will be moved to the corner of Keeney Road and Route 5.) Slaves came through LeRoy on their way to freedom in Canada.

Some other LeRoy facts that might be a little more obscure include (in no particular order): Calvin Keeney was pioneer in plant breeding and developed many "stringless" bean varieties. John Lapp founded the Lapp Insulator Company in 1916 which produced porcelain high-tension electrical insulators. The company introduced many innovative designs, including

equipment used on the Manhattan project during World War II.

North of the Village of LeRoy is an outcropping of fossilized coral reefs that are included in a National Survey. At one time, LeRoy had the largest malt processing plant, and the largest stone crusher. Amelia Earhart visited LeRoy in January 1929 to visit her airplane the Friendship, in which she became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. The plane was located at one of the best private airports in the United States and it was owned by Donald Woodward, youngest son of the Jell-O millionaire, Orator Woodward.

LeRoy was first named for the goddess of war, Bellona. LeRoy was the home of many patent medicine companies; Rough on Rats poison; LeRoy Salt Company; LeRoy Canning Company; LeRoy Cotton Mills; the Upham Carriage Company which manufactured railroad cars; LeRoy Plow Company; the LeRoy Paper Mill; and the Bacon Foundry which made cast iron stoves.

At one time LeRoy had a radio station. Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, Daniel Webster, and Eleanor Roosevelt visited LeRoy. The LeRoy Municipal Building was designed by noted architect, Claude Bragdon. LeRoy has New York State's largest barn quilt trail. Henry Ford was arrested for speeding in LeRoy.

So study hard. There will be a quiz next week.



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