

# LeRoy Salt

by Lynne Belluscio

Salt has always been important to human civilization. It was extremely important for food preservation at a time when canning was not an option. Butter, cheese, meat, and cabbages needed salt.

Early settlers in this area often relied on a winter trip east to the Onondaga salt springs where brine was pumped up in wells and the water boiled off in huge iron kettles. One account noted that the usual winter trip wasn't made because of the weather and the settlers in the area were in desperate need of salt.

In 1823, Charles Hill of LeRoy wrote to his parents in Connecticut that "Mr. Graves near us, has dug a well and bored last fall about fifty feet for salt water, which he has obtained, and when boiled makes good salt. But we believe it not of sufficient saltness to make a profitable business. Yet it is believed that if he should go to the depth of 100 feet there would be water found worth boiling, as it increases in strength as he goes deeper." Once the Erie Canal was opened in 1825, the salt from Syracuse could be shipped much easier and salt production increased.

It wasn't until 1878 that the brine that lay beneath LeRoy would be tapped. Nicholas Keeney and others furnished \$1,500 for C.M. Everest of the Vacuum Oil Company to come to LeRoy and sink a well.

On December 4, 1878 "after a great deal of difficulty, the well was sunk to a depth of 620 feet, where salt was found. "The well was sunk another thirty feet and stopped. Vacuum Oil was looking for gas, oil or salt, and apparently they found all three on the Lent farm.

Everest continued drilling wells and on February 21 he reached a depth of 450 feet. But instead of brine, Everest has struck gas. "Gas commenced escaping and continued to increase at an incalculable rate when as if from the bottomless pit, it rushed up and about, and filling the atmosphere and, taking the responsibility of the affair, started out to celebrate the occasion independent of orders from other sources.

From the well about ten feet distant was a stove. Here the gas took fire and soon enveloped the workshop, with the men, who were so taken by surprise they

barely succeeded in saving themselves. With lightning speed the derrick was surrounded by flames, took fire, and only for the next freak of nature it would probably soon have been in ruins.

At this critical moment an immense volume of water, impregnated strongly with sulfur, rushed fifty feet into the air, saving the property. Columns of water and waves of gas continued alternately to appear until about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, when brine leaped upward seventy feet in the air and so increased in force



that at 7 o'clock it was at the height of 110 feet, the brine being free from the sulfur."

This was the beginning of a fairly prosperous salt industry in LeRoy. Last year I met geologists, David Gnage, Peter Smith and Dr. Goodman. They are in the process of writing a technical paper on the LeRoy salt industry. As they have told me, the story of the LeRoy salt industry has been overlooked. Dr. Goodman told me that very little known about brine deposits like those in LeRoy:

"The combination of water (brine) and salt is unique to what we geologists call "the up-dip terminus" of the salt beds. Very little is known about the hydrogeology of the up-dip terminus. We don't know if the water is very ancient (preglacial), Pleistocene (glacial) or Modern. We don't know for sure how much brine is present or at what rate it could be pumped.

The shallow brine is part of the

overall story. The hydrogeology is complicated. In some areas, the Onondaga Limestone can supply large volumes of very good quality water. There is a convergence of local and regional flow systems near the foot of the escarpment. The local flow system is fresh. The regional flow system is more saline."

The other part of the LeRoy salt story is the men, like Nicholas Keeney, S.C. Wells, and A.E. Miller who invested in the company. Unlike many other salt companies, LeRoy salt was controlled by local investors. But there were buy-outs, take-overs and corporate wrangling.

The salt industry in LeRoy ended in 1928. The LeRoy Salt Company was sold to the Watkins Salt Company and they closed the LeRoy plant. But it should be known, that at one time, LeRoy salt was considered some of the best in the country.