

Panting Beneath the Heat

by Lynne Belluscio

Anyone who enjoys living in Western New York will tell you that one of the things that makes it interesting is the change in the weather. "If you don't like the weather, wait fifteen minutes." Well, we've been waiting weeks for a change in the weather. Hot and 90-degree weather wears pretty thin, especially if your favorite season is the cool spring or fall, and you look forward to the first snowfall.

As I write this, the rain is coming down at a pretty good rate. My rain gauge is broken, so I don't know how much rain fell, but I do know, that it's not enough to break the drought. In fact I was making plans this morning about what to do in case my well went dry and I still may have to deal with that.

According to one account that I have read, the early 1960s were a period of drought for the Northeast, which was followed by a relative wet period. We came to LeRoy in 1969, apparently during a wet season. Our well is relatively shallow and it has never gone dry, but I do remember at least twice wondering if we would be hauling water to horses and having to take clothes up to town to wash. I don't even want to think about an out house.

Recently I purchased a small collection of "New England Farmer" magazines from 1825 and 1826. They are fascinating to read and I discovered that in 1825 the Northeast was coming out of a five-year drought. One article about the drought mentioned how difficult the hot weather was on horses. The article begins: "In this season while all animal and almost all vegetable nature to pant beneath the heat ..." It's hard to imagine the difficulties of dealing with a drought nearly two hundred years ago. Almost everyone relied on hand-dug wells. Some houses, like LeRoy House, had cisterns which stored rain water for washing clothes, but during a drought, those cisterns were probably dry.

Low water meant that millponds were low, and flour mills might not be operating. The articles in the *New England Farmer* are written in a style unfamiliar to a modern reader. From the July 1825 issue, the author writes about trying to sleep at night in a "tegment of gossamer would prove a burthen too grievous to be bourn" and the leaves of corn "curled like a manuscript of Herculaneum."

"Hot weather papers from all quarters speak in glowing terms of

the late visitations of high temperature and the deadly consequences to men, women, horses, fishes etc. such a series of very warm and still warmer days; and nights in which a tegument of gossamer would prove a burthen too grievous to be bourn, is not remembered nor recorded - - - Moreover the country in this neighborhood is parched with drought. The leaves of the Indian corn are curled like a manuscript of Herculaneum, the ears seem half roasted, more or less, in the husk, and the puny potatoe appears in a far way to be baked in the soil before it is dug. We are happy to learn, however, that the drought has not been general or at least universal. Timely and copious local showers have favored some parts of the country, and in others some of the most important crops were gathered before the dry weather had injured them."

The ground was so hard, (the author described the ground as

"adamantine") that some farmers could not plow. "It would take your mighty plough and 8 oxen to tare it up without rain. The corn is about entirely withered up we won't have as much as will fatten our hogs."

The drought continued in some places into 1826: "In this neighborhood they have been very severe and we believe, unparalleled. We may have had as dry weather, but we have no recollection nor any account of such extreme drought so early in the season. It of course becomes to our farmers to use the best means which human industry and ingenuity can devise to provide some substitute for the deficiency of our usual crop of hay and to prevent hoed crops from being dried up or blasted by the withering influence of a cloudless sun and a sky and atmosphere which afford neither dew nor rain."

Consider that during this time, women did not wear shorts and t-shirts, but rather corsets, petticoats

and long skirts. Electric fans – much less air conditioning were not an option. There were no showers, and if during a drought, the farm pond dried up, there wasn't a place for the boys to go swimming. (Ladies and girls would have never gone swimming in 1825!) There were no ice cooled drinks or ice cream. And food spoiled quickly in the hot weather, much less, food was prepared over an open fire or in a wood stove. If the well went dry, there was no bottled water for sale at the general store. If the creek went dry, there was no way to get water to the livestock.

Western New York seems to be in the worst part of the drought this year. One report mentions that Avon is particularly hard hit. Erie and Niagara Counties are not seeing much rain in this recent batch of storms. The meteorologists are saying that this is the worst drought since 1943. Let's just hope it doesn't last for a couple of years.

