

The Lathan Family

by Lynne Belluscio

Quite a while ago, Mary Katherine Hamilton stopped by with a copy of a photograph of Jay Lathan's family -- seven boys, three girls and their mother, Helen Lathan. Mary Katherine told the story of Charles -- "Jay" Lathan, who died in a terrible accident at the Jell-O factory on North Street, which left this family of ten children without a father. A couple of days ago, she stopped by with some additional information that she had gathered at the Woodward Library about the accident and some family notes. Like many other families who endured terrible hardships when there was no "Social Services" Jay's wife was determined to keep her family together.

Jay Lathan was born in Meredith, New York in 1872. Helen was born in 1878. They were married in 1896 and lived in Delhi near Meredith, raising their family until Jay decided to move to LeRoy in 1907. He was looking for a better job and was seeking work selling memberships to the Order of the Golden Seal, which was a beneficial insurance company based in Roxbury, New York. (The name was changed in 1919 to the Golden Seal Assurance Company. At the end of 1921, it had 9,742 members. It operated on a "lodge" system and had a secret ritual with signs to identify members.) The premise of these companies was to sell memberships in the organization, which in turn would guarantee survivors benefits or disability benefits to its members and their families. (One of the beneficial insurance companies that still exists today is the Modern Woodsmen, founded in the 1800s. At one time, it limited its members to rural "hard working" people and prohibited members from the city, as well as ethnic groups. The membership requirements have changed since then. In 2016, the Woodsmen had more than 750,000 members and total assets of \$15.4 billion.)

So in February 1907, Jay left his family and came to LeRoy. On February 19, he



Back row left to right: Calvin – Marshall – Charles – Fred – Edwin – Earl – Harold
Front row left to right: Helen – Mrs. Jay (Helen) Lathan – Mary – Dorothy

wrote to his wife: "I arrived here all safe and sound last night about ten o'clock but am feeling rather blue at present for I find that I shall have to go through a course of study before I can go out to earn anything but I am going to try my best for a while if I don't get too discouraged. I have been getting instruction from Ed all day and he has got me run clear over. I have just filled out an application membership form for him but he refuses to settle so I am not much better off except what I can --- Please let me hear from you and the boys soon but do not write anything to discourage me unless you want me to come home." Soon after he wrote the letter, Helen and the children moved to LeRoy. He continued his involvement with the Order of the Golden Seal, but in 1912, he secured a job at the Genesee Pure Food Company on North Street as a carpenter.

On November 19, 1914, tragedy struck. Jay was building wooden forms for a new cement floor on the second floor of the Jell-O factory. It wasn't clear how the accident happened, but he fell through an

opening in the floor and fell to the cement floor below, striking his head. He was rushed to the hospital in Batavia, where Dr. Johnson and Dr. Graney operated to relieve the pressure on his brain, but he succumbed to his injuries the next day. He never regained consciousness. He was only 42 years old. His oldest son Earl was 18. Harold was 16. Fred was 15. Charles was 13. Marshall was 9. Edwin was 7. Calvin was 6. Mary Jane was 5. Helen was 3. And the youngest child, a daughter Dorothy, was only three months old. (Mary Catherine Hamilton's husband, Tom, is Dorothy's son.)

Newspaper accounts mention that Jay's wife immediately received \$1500 from the insurance fund of the Order of the Golden Seal. (That would be over \$36,000 today.) She wrote a letter to the Order's leaders which was published in their newsletter. The newsletter reminded everyone that "Much as we all regret the early death of Brother Lathan, we cannot refrain from calling the attention of all our readers to the necessity of carrying insurance

protection, and this terrible accident serves as another illustration of the benefits provided by the Combination Certificate of the Order of the Golden Seal."

The oldest boys quit school and went to work. Folks in LeRoy probably remember Cal Lathan. He was the youngest boy and he was a State Trooper and served as a Genesee County Sheriff's Deputy as well as a LeRoy village police officer. He died in 1994. Fred Lathan was a truck driver for E.N. Rowell Company and was a member of the New York State Beekeepers Association. He died in 1970. Marshall Lathan lived in Lantana, Florida and died in 1991. The oldest daughter, Mary Jane Kern died in 1977 and is buried in Cowlesville, New York. Helen Frances Slocum died at the age of 22 after the birth of her daughter. Dorothy Daisy Hamilton, died at the age of 92 in 2007 and is buried in Mumford.

Helen Lathan, who persevered through tough times, died in 1946, at the age of 67 at the home of her daughter, Dorothy Hamilton, in Caledonia.