

The Rensselaerville Press

📖 A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE RENSSELAERVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 📖

"Today is Tomorrow's History"

Winter 2019

Excerpts from an essay titled-

Doing Without Running Water and Electricity or Gas

By Hugh Elsbree

As a boy I lived in Preston Hollow when there was no running water, electricity, or gas. It is not easy for me to comprehend fully what that absence meant in everyday living. The deprivations resulting in isolation were minor compared to the hardships of life without any of the conveniences we take for granted. Try to imagine providing lighting, heating, cooling, cleaning, and preparing meals without electricity or gas.



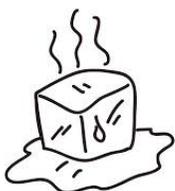
For lighting, the main reliance was on kerosene lamps. The lamps had to be filled with kerosene that was bought at the store, the wicks trimmed and replenished, and the lamp chimneys cleaned. With all this work the quality of lighting was poor at best. If you wanted to read in the dark, you had better sit as close as you possibly could to the lamp. If you had a fireplace, a lot of reading was done by laying on ones stomach in front of the fire.

Floors were swept with brooms, cleaned with mops, scrubbed with soap and water. In the absence of vacuum cleaners, carpets and rugs were cleaned with carpet sweepers, which could do a decent superficial job. For a more thorough cleaning, rugs and carpets were hung on a clothesline and beaten vigorously with a broom. Having no refrigeration, people kept food – vegetables, fruit, meat, jellies, jams, etc. – cool by storing them in the basement. Most families had gardens so they could have fresh vegetables during the summer and would can others for winter use. The stores could offer canned fruits and vegetables, but not having any freezers, they could not offer fresh produce or meats. The W. P. Elsbree & Sons store kept bananas, salt pork, and salted mackerel in its cellar.



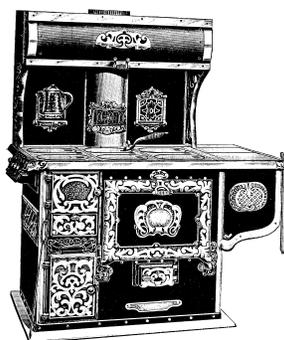
My Grandfather, Willard P. Elsbree, had an icebox in his house, supplied by ice my grandfather harvested.

Each winter he hired men to cut cakes of ice from a stretch of the Crick (Catskill Creek) above the mill dam, haul loads of ice cakes with a team of horses and sled to the ice house in back of the home, and then pack the cakes in layers, insulated from each other by sawdust hauled from the sawmill. Each



summer Sunday morning my father would wheelbarrow down to the ice house, climb up the ladder, dig out a cake of ice, and manhandle it with ice tongs into the wheelbarrow (a cake would be about 20 inches square and 15 inches thick), then wheel it back to the steps to the house, wash off the clinging sawdust with water, chop off a hunk with an ax, put it in burlap bag, pound it with the flat part of an ax head to provide crushed ice to use in making a freezer of ice cream. After that he'd wrestle the main piece of ice into the top compartment of the ice box. Except in the hottest weather, it would keep the contents of the ice box fairly cool until the next Sunday.

For heating, every family had a wood stove in a kitchen. The kitchen stove was all-important. All cooking, baking, frying, poaching, heating water, warming flatirons, everything required fire and



depended on the kitchen stove. First, firewood had to be obtained. A farmer would cut down a tree on his land, saw it into lengths to fit the stove, and use an ax to split the chunks into smaller pieces. The wood had to be stored in a shed to keep it dry and become seasoned and ready to use. The first chore in the morning was to start a fire in the kitchen stove. You had to stuff some kind of other

ignitable material into a cramped space, put on top of that several pieces of kindling wood or wood shavings, a small stick or two of firewood, and light it with an Ohio Blue-Tip match. Then you nursed it along and kept it going all day by adding fuel. This had to be done summer and winter. In some houses the kitchen stove provided the only heat in all the rooms.

In the absence of today's electric appliances – dishwashers, toasters, juicers, mixers, can openers, etc. – All kitchen work had to be done by hand – slicing, mixing, stirring, squeezing, washing, and drying.

Continued on page 2

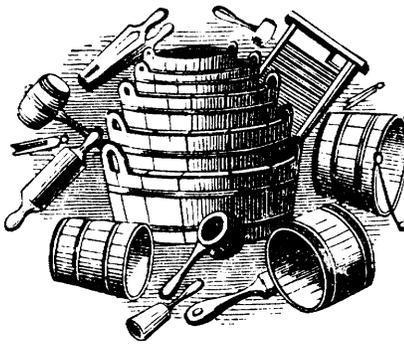
Doing Without *Continued from page 1*

For men, shaving was an ordeal. Shaving with a straight razor, a frightening looking object, was altogether a different process from shaving with an electric or safety razor. It was a tedious, painstaking task. When my father shaved, he first stropped his razor on a leather belt to sharpen it and carefully laid it on the kitchen table next to a small standing mirror. Then he heated water in a kettle on the stove, poured some into a cup on the table, and put a stick of Colgate's shaving cream in the cup and stirred his shaving brush around in it to lather it up. Then sitting in a chair at the table facing the mirror, he lathered his face and carefully and slowly started shaving with the razor. It was not easy to avoid cuts.



Before common plumbing and running water, all water was obtained from wells dug down perhaps 12 to 15 feet or more. An occasional farm might have "natural" running water in the guise of a spring. In the case of the more primitive wells, you retrieved water by lowering a bucket attached to a rope and then hauled it up, hand over hand. Most wells had a rope and a pulley arrangement whereby you lowered and raised a bucket with a crank. A pail of drinking water would be kept in the kitchen or pantry, a dipper in or next to it. It wasn't ideal for sanitary purposes, and the water didn't stay cold very long. There was always the chance that the well would go dry or become contaminated with ground water or waste of some kind.

To wash dishes, a pan of water would be heated on the kitchen stove. You could either wash your hands or face in cold water or heat some water on the stove. Water left in a bowl or pail overnight in the winter might well have a coating of ice when you went to wash in the morning. You couldn't take a shower, of course, and it was quite a task to get and heat enough water for a bath. Not surprisingly, even a Saturday night bath in a shallow tub was sometimes too much trouble. Only very small children could sit in the tub. Others stood in the tub and washed themselves off with a face cloth. The boys in the village took their baths in the summer by swimming in the Crick. Our stove had a compartment, or reservoir in which a substantial amount of water could be heated and kept warm.



To wash clothes, they would be soaked, scrubbed on a washboard, rinsed, wrung out by hand, and hung out to dry on clotheslines. In winter they could be frozen stiff. To iron, a flatiron would be warmed on the stove. If used directly on clothes it could scorch them, so they had to be ironed through a thin cloth.

Since there were no bathrooms and no indoor plumbing, outdoor privies, or "back houses" (in Preston Hollow language), were used. For nighttime, or in severe weather, chamber pots and slop pails were used. These had to be

emptied and cleaned every morning. Around 1915 or 1916, as nearly as I can remember, my father converted my bedroom with its Murphy bed into a bathroom. He had piping laid from the Crick and pumped water to a tank in the cellar and from there to the kitchen sink and bathroom. The waste was piped to a cesspool in the back yard. What an advance!



Photo from Nancy Lynk

Bayard Elsbree and his wife Lyra Edwena Hubbard celebrated the birth of their son Hugh Langdon Elsbree on February 24, 1904, in Preston Hollow, New York. Hugh attended a one room grade school in Preston Hollow and then went to Middleburgh High School for two years. In 1921 he graduated from Andover Academy. Hugh received his bachelors degree in 1925, where he graduated Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard. He received his masters in 1927 from Harvard Shelden Traveling Fellowship, in Sorbonne, Paris. He then received his Ph.D in Government from Harvard. From 1931-1941 he was an Instructor of Government at Harvard, department chair of Political Science at Dartmouth, plus he worked for Wayne State University. Hugh worked for the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. where he rose to become the director of the Congressional Research Service from 1958-1966. Hugh married twice and had four children. His son David remained in the Preston Hollow, Greenville area. Hugh died on August 30, 2004 in Potomac, Maryland.

Irene Marie Olson 1935-2019

By Rose Kuhar



Irene Olson
Photo from her family

Irene Olson was the youngest of four children born to Einar and Eveleen Bergwall Olson. The family was raised on a farm on Wilsey Road, Medusa, where Irene lived most of her life. She attended school in the old Rensselaerville Academy building known as Rensselaerville Free School and graduated from Greenville High School in 1952. One of her memories of the old school was how the floors were coated with oil from all the years oil stoves heated the building. Irene was a bright student and skipped a grade, which made her very young when she graduated in 1952 as a National Honor Student.

Irene played the trumpet and performed in school concerts as well as the Rensselaerville Baptist Church on Sundays. She was athletic and loved to play basketball and softball. In her later years nothing made her happier than to be able to watch professional basketball games on TV.

Because she lived on a country road, the feeder bus that transported her to school couldn't drive to her home in heavy snow, so she was left at the intersection of Rugg Road and County Route 351 with a young Ed Joy to walk home. Her classmates on the bus would serenade her with the song "Good Night Irene", which made her mad and I am sure Ed continued the singing as she stomped her feet in the snow.

After graduating, Irene wanted a life away from the farm, so she headed to the Adirondacks to attend Paul Smith College. Her next stop in life was joining the Air Force in 1954 where she was stationed in Mississippi and Texas. She represented the USA as she toured with the Air Force Softball Team. So for a northern country girl this must have been a life changing experience.

After leaving the service, Irene worked for OGS at the State of New York where she learned computer skills and retired in 1998. Even though she was proficient using the computer she wanted nothing to do with emails and the internet. The one time her Historical Society friends saw her amazed with the internet was when she logged in Ancestry.com and found her Grandfather's name and boat he immigrated on from Sweden. After retiring, Irene's newest passion was local history and she served the town of Rensselaerville in two ways. She became the Town Historian in 2006 and served the town with honor and only resigned when her eyesight began to fail. She really believed in preserving the history of Rensselaerville and volunteered every Wednesday for the Rensselaerville Historical Society. She enjoyed receiving documents, deeds and photographs donated to the Society and adding them to the collection. For years she was the membership Secretary and when the treasurer retired, she took over that job, too. Irene took the newest volunteers under her wing and taught them the importance of preserving Rensselaerville history for the next generation. Irene was always happy to guide visitors through

the Grist Mill and explained how it worked.

Irene never missed a Historical Society Trustees meeting and she regretted when she had to stop attending because of health issues. Irene supported her community in small ways, baking apple pies for the Medusa Fire Company Turkey Dinner and never missing their breakfasts. Irene was a dedicated member of the Medusa Cemetery Association as well.



Photo courtesy Diana Fritz: These are the Swedish Olson Girls, dated 1944, Leslie Brand offers the following identification: Standing Irene Olson, Hazel Olson Ford, Sitting Claire Olson Leber, Janice Olson Brand, baby Cynthia Olson Jones, June Olson Milburn

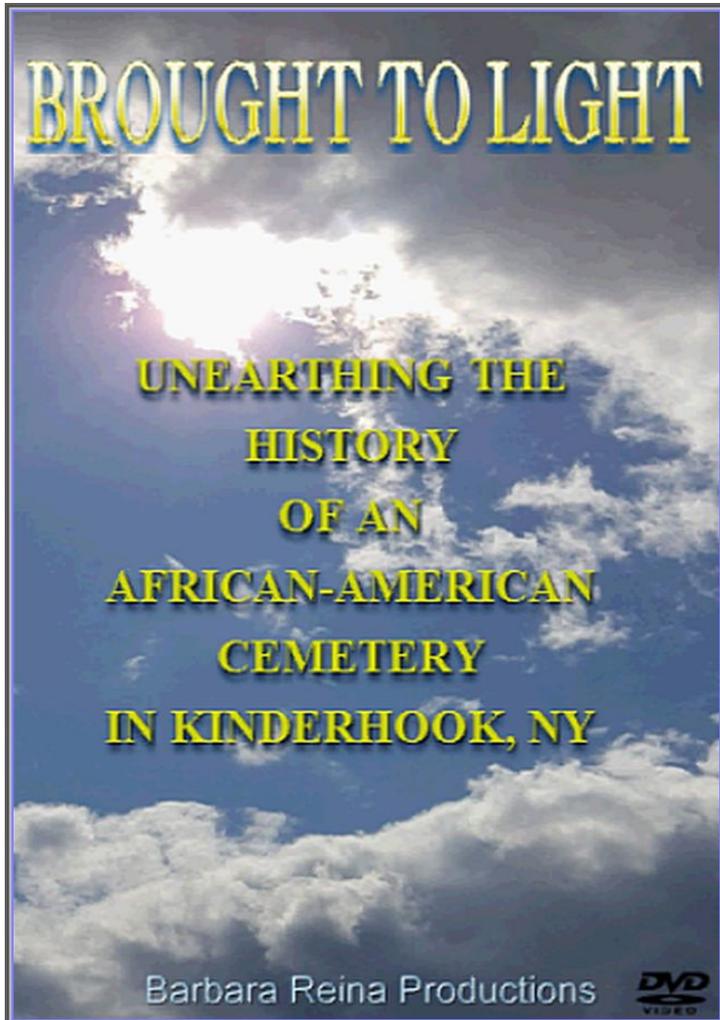
Irene was very loyal to her family and proud of her Swedish heritage. Families frequently found themselves at the old farmhouse. Christmas Eve was special as the family celebrated with a Swedish meal. Irene made Sil Salad every year, which was a herring and beet salad. She was proud to see her great nieces and nephews taking over this tradition. On Fourth of July family would gather in the backyard for brunch and in February they gathered to celebrate many birthdays. Irene's favorite gifts were jigsaw puzzles and Charles Shultz characters, especially Snoopy.

To describe Irene was to honor her Swedish heritage, which she was so proud of. Irene was methodical, stoic, determined, opinionated, and above all stubborn. But family and friends quickly learned the way to bring out that smile and change her mood. That was just to offer her chocolate, especially Chocolate Kisses. Every nephew and niece knew where she kept her jar of Chocolate Kisses and she always shared.

Irene is survived by her sister Claire Leber and three generations of nieces and nephews, whom she spoke of fondly. She enjoyed their visits. Irene's supportive and best friend of over 60 years, Mary Brunot, spent every weekend at Irene's home in Medusa. When Irene needed assistance at home, Mary moved in with her and they became inseparable. She was predeceased by her parents, her brother Robert Olson, her sister June Olson Milburn and a niece and three nephews. Irene died on February 3, 2019 surrounded by family. Her funeral was February 9 at A. J. Cunningham Funeral Home in Greenville; a burial will be in the spring. The family has requested donations in her honor go to the Rensselaerville Historical Society at P.O. Box 8, Rensselaerville, NY 12147.

Hudson Valley Documentary Uncovers Black History

SAVE THE DATE – SUNDAY, MAY 5 at 3pm
Conkling Hall, 8 Methodist Hill Rd, Rensselaerville



The Rensselaerville Historical Society, The Rensselaerville Library, and Conkling Hall are sponsoring the viewing of the documentary *Brought To Light*. Filmmaker Barbara Reina, the content writer, photographer, and videographer of *Brought To Light* will provide background on the documentary and answer questions. This documentary is about unearthing the history of an African-American cemetery. It is a story of rediscovery, respect, and change in Kinderhook, NY, where a few villager's efforts to clean up some stone markers in an overgrown field lead to the rediscovery of a forgotten, "slaves cemetery" in which hundreds of African-Americans were buried in the 1800s. The documentary is a portal to the past on the lives of Kinderhook's lesser-known non-white population. The documentary, *Brought To Light*, has brought to light an interest in rediscovering slave history in the Town of Rensselaerville. Not much is known about this local population and we are hoping YOU can help us to identify: How many slaves were in

Rensselaerville? Do you know of any families that had slaves? Have any stories been passed down through your family? If so, would you please share any information with Rosie Kuhar at Rensselaervillehistoricalsoc@gmail.com.

Looking for Artists

Over the last three years the Rensselaerville Historical Society has hosted an Art Show for two weekends during the summer at the Historic Grist Mill on Main Street in Rensselaerville. We are again looking for artists who would like to display one or more pieces of their work. The Historical Society would like to have artists that represent the whole township including Preston Hollow, Cooksburgh, Medusa, and Potters Hollow, as well as the Rensselaerville village. Amateurs and professionals, students, anyone is welcome! The only requirement for participation is to live in the town of Rensselaerville now or sometime in the past. Relatives or friends are



encouraged to honor the artists who are no longer with us by submitting their work. All mediums are welcome. Last year we had paintings and sketches, carvings, needle work, large metal sculptures, photographs, and more. This year's show is planned to take place July 19 to July 28. Please share this information with Rensselaerville artists. We need contact information from all interested parties; more details will follow later in the Spring. Please send the artist's name, email address, telephone number, and mailing address to the following email or post office address. There is limited exhibit space. so don't delay, sign up now!

Rensselaervillesitoricalsoc@gmail.com
Rensselaerville Historical Society
P. O. Box 8 Rensselaerville, NY 12147

Research Group

The research group has been busy answering genealogical requests. We have assisted two people looking for family history for Thomas Watson and his wife Sally Jenkins and their children. We have two requests with which we could use some help; does anyone know anything about Ellenor (Lena) Hagadorn born October 21, 1775 in Rensselaerville and married Jacob Coons in 1795? We are looking for their fourth child, Simeon. Also we are looking for information on Evelyn Willsey who married Harold Herrington. If anybody has any information on either of these two families please let us know at Rensselaervillehistoricalsoc@gmail.com.



Also, if anyone has history on the Race Track at the Preserve, or anything about the E. N. Huyck Preserve, please share that with us. Thank you!

Barry's House Accident

By Rose Kuhar

Once again another house in the village of Rensselaerville was the target of an out-of-control vehicle. On January 9, 2019 a driver lost control at the intersection of State Route 85 and Main Street. Even though there was a dusting of snow during the night, the highway department had already treated the roads, so slippery conditions were not a factor. This time it was faulty brakes and bald tires. The driver was headed for the small pocket park but realized that she was not going to be able to stop at the intersection. She reacted by attempting to make a sharp right hand turn at the stop sign, but the car was traveling too fast and skidded left, hitting the center of the house. This old house had its center doorway demolished and the car was buried deep inside the interior. The good news is no one was hit or hurt, but the bad news is all the new windows, siding, stone wall, and wrought iron fence are now gone, plus there's damage to the fireplace and flooring!



Photo by Micah Kuhar

Here's a little history of that building. A survey map, dated January 1820, included a house on that lot belonging to Apollas Moore. Deeds as early as 1830 called it "The Grocery Building". It is a two story structure on the street side, with three stories facing the creek. It sat between what was known as "Sill Lot" on the west, and "The John Niles Shoemaker Shop" on the east. On the south side was Gideon Conklin's mill privilege and Moore & Colvard's "tenter" bar lot. What was a "mill privilege"? When Stephen Van Rensselaer opened up the western part of his manor for settlement, that which he called Rensselaerwyck, he leased the land but kept the water rights. He gave only to certain individuals the privilege to build a mill on his waters, in this instance the Ten Mile Creek.

The grocery building that was hit has two front doors. The one on the right was the entrance to the store, or shop, which was a large room on the first floor facing the turnpike. This room contained a fireplace. The left door led to two sets of stairs. One set of stairs led to the basement room with a fireplace and would have been used for cooking and a family would have lived on this lower level in the winter. The other set of stairs took you to a large room over the shop. This room had hip walls with eyebrow windows that faced the highway and was used as a warehouse for the grocery store. Off of this room are several small rooms that the family may have used for sleeping in the warmer months.

A deed dated April 1832 shows Nobles B. Raymond owning a grocery in this building. Nobles and his wife Hannah Wood had eight children born between 1816 and 1833, and they may have all lived there. The 1854 village map has the building listed as the N. D. "Reymont" (Raymond) Market. Raymond's oldest son, Philander, married Elizabeth Fox, and then owned this building after his father. Philander Raymond sold the building to William Golden in 1876. In 1878 Elizabeth and Lucy Golden had a dressmaking and milliner shop in the building. In 1940 the heirs of the Golden estate sold the building to John Haley, who moved from a small house on Hale Road. John had only one light fixture that hung from the ceiling and no other modern conveniences. He lived there until the 1950s and in 1963 Haley's heirs sold the building to Lloyd and Grace Filkins. It was used as a storage building for Filkins's electric, plumbing and appliance business. After the death of Grace Filkins the building was found in great disrepair, since no upkeep had been done probably since the 1800s. After removal of storage supplies, the Filkins heirs put the house up for sale. Several local residents were worried that a new owner might just tear it down, even though it was the only building in the village with such unique architecture.

What Barry Kuhar saw in this old dilapidated building was a wonderful unique structure that needed to be saved, and so he bought it in 2011 from the Filkins family.

What would this new owner find when he entered the two doors? The first thing he noticed was that if just one more severe snow storm came, it might have been too late to save the building. The back right corner of the house had actually collapsed and from the basement, if you looked up, you could see daylight! Kuhar's immediate concern was the shoring up the structure, stabilizing the sills, and replacing the roof before it all fell in.

The building was originally designed using modified Dutch post and beams, which made the structure able to support the building even with the major damage. One indicator of the age of the building was the accordion lath in the ceiling and walls. This technique was used before circular saws were in wide use. Boards were split by hand with an ax then pulled apart. The flooring appears to be hemlock boards that were milled in a pit mill, which predates circular saw mills. When Barry opened the attic space he found an old spinning wheel, and various wool implements. He also found in the building a sign for CROSS & GOLDEN. Mark S. Golden, one of the owners of the store Cross and Golden, was the son of William Golden who owned this building in the 1870s. The Cross and Golden Store was located in a brick building that was torn down to build State Route 85.

A slow process of renovation was already underway, but now there was a gaping hole from where the car had crashed through! As winter fades away to spring, plans are in place for this building to be completely repaired, and hopefully, renovations will move forward without any more difficulty!



Photo by Micah Kuhar



Photo by Bud Rivenburgh 1960's

Membership Year July 1 to June 30

Membership (new or renewal)

Check off what you are sending

Individual Membership

\$10.00

Family Membership

15.00

Sponsorship Membership

30.00

Life Membership

150.00

Donation to Paint the Mill

Other Donation



Name: _____

Street or PO Box: _____

Town, State, Zip: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail: _____

Alternate Mailing Address and when to use this if you are a "seasonal" resident (the Post Office will not forward our Newsletter or other 3rd class mail): _____

Name: _____

Street or PO Box: _____

Town, State, Zip: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail: _____

◆ **Officers** ◆

President Matt Mulholland
Vice President Ken Storms
Secretary Joyce Chase
Treasurer Leah Waldron
Membership Sec'y & Photographer Diana Fritz

◆ **Newsletter** ◆

Editor Janet Haseley
Graphics Dennis Murphy

◆ **Trustees** ◆

Tony Campo (20) Barry Kuhar (19)
Janet Nelson (20) Matt Mulholland (19)
Joyce Chase (19) Gerritt Platel (21)
Tom Delp (19) Linda Mornile (21)
Diana Fritz (20) Cynthia Willis (20)
Tom Snyder (21) Evan Willsey (19)

The Rensselaerville Press is published quarterly by The Rensselaerville Historical Society
P.O. Box 8,
Rensselaerville, NY 12147
Headquarters at the Rensselaerville Grist Mill Museum, Rensselaerville

VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT:

www.rensselaervillehistoricalsociety.weebly.com

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 6
RENSSELAERVILLE, NY

The Rensselaerville Historical Society
PO Box 8
Rensselaerville, NY 12147
Return Postage Guaranteed