

## GENOA - The Way It Was

The town of Milton was formed in 1789 and originally included the present towns of Locke and Summerhill and the Tompkins County towns of Lansing and Groton. In 1808 the name was changed to Genoa when it was discovered that a town near Saratoga, New York was also called Milton.

Elliot G. Storke's History of Cayuga County tells us that the village of Genoa is pleasantly situated in the north part of the town on Salmon Creek which furnishes a good water power. This was an important consideration in locating a settlement since water power was used to operate the mills so essential to the existence of the town. There was a flour mill located on South, Mill street owned by William Howe in 1859. The Genoa Roller Mill was located further up the Big Salmon Creek and in the early 1900's the two mills formed a corporation called the Genoa Milling Company. This company produced "Silver Spray" and "Perfection" flour, graham flour and they also ground feed. The lower mill (Howe's Mill) on South St. was torn down in 1919. The upper mill located where the Genoa Firehouse now stands was built by B. Holcomb May 1827 on property owned by Daniel Rose and Son. The last owner who operated it as a mill was Floyd Hoxie from Oct. 14, 1924 till 1935 using steam power. From 1935 till Dec. 13, 1952 it was not operating. Floyd Hoxie sold the property for \$ 1.00 to the Genoa Fire Dept.

There were saw mills in town and the first one was established in 1793 by David

Armstrong. A cider mill operated by Claude Wheeler was located south of East hill off Main Street near the railroad tracks in 1919.

Genoa started out with two churches, Presbyterian and Universalist. The Presbyterian church has become the United Church Of Genoa and the Universalist Church (1842) became a Catholic church (St. Hilary's) in 1910 and continued until 1983 when it closed and is presently a private residence. The First Baptist Church of Genoa was organized in 1881 and after uniting with the Presbyterian Church in 1929 was used as a meeting hall and for Bible classes. The Baptist Church which was located on the west side of Academy Street was torn down in 1982.

During the mid 1800's the Genoa Academy, located on Academy Street north of the Present school building was presided over by Robert Wanzer of Poplar Ridge. This was a private school and at one time had over 300 students. This building had two stories with a theater in the upper story. It was generally agreed that Robert Wanzer's success with the academy was a wonderful asset to Genoa, but the trustees of the school, thinking that Mr. Wanzer was making too much money, decided to increase his rent. Mr. Wanzer was outraged and went to Aurora where he made other arrangements for his school.

The academy was never as successful as it had been, so the trustees of the school decided to apply and become an accredited high school in 1918, the theater having been converted to classrooms. The building was torn down and the present brick building was built in 1939 ( Genoa Central School). The building stands today, no longer used as a school, a memorial to the superior craftsmanship of years past.

Grocery and dry goods stores were numerous in the past. Smith's Store operated by David W. Smith also had the Post Office located in the building. This business was started in 1890 in the Avery Block and in 1900 he purchased from Jesse B. Young the building where Smith's store has been in continuous operation by his dependents, D.W. Smith/ Gordon Smith/ Jack Woodhouse/Peter and Judy Signor/ Robert and Lori Backta, up and thru Sept. 2011.

The Robert and Harvey P.Mastin store was across the street from Smith's Store on main street. This store was rebuilt after the fire of March 1907 and in addition to groceries and dry goods had a clock repair shop upstairs. This building was converted to a feed mill and store in the early 1950's. It went out of business in the 1970's and purchased by Peter and Judy Signor in the late 1970's. It was torn down for the Signor's by Don Addy Sr.

Hagin's grocery store was located across the bridge heading East near the home owned by Freeman Hagin. This house is owned today by Randy and Cheryl Sheilds. This store was one of the structures rebuilt after the fire of 1907. It was a hardware store for many years and is now used for apartments.

The Banker Block (sometimes referred to as the Singer Block) located at the present Fire house lot, once housed many businesses including a meat market, shoe cobbler shop, clothing store, Mrs. Singer's variety store, millinery shop, Law office, drugstore, Post Office, grocery store. This block of building after all going out of business were owned by Tanny Ausborn and torn down in 1988.

Maple Street once had a skating rink and a brick and tile ( clay ) plant and was also the

location for the popular Genoa Fair in the late 1890's and early 1900's. A news article in the Genoa Herald weekly paper in 1886 announced the biggest crowd ever attending the event. Horse racing and other events featuring horses were very popular. Other livestock as well as flowers, vegetables and baked goods ( and don't forget the prettiest baby contest) were awarded prizes at the Genoa Fair. There is no doubt that until 1910 the fair was one of the most important events of the year in Genoa even drawing people from Auburn and Ithaca via the Shortline railroad.

In 1906 the New York Auburn and Lansing Railroad (known as the Ithaca Auburn Shortline) was built on the New York Oswego and Midland Line (also called the Murdock Line) which had been abandoned in 1891. When the railroad was built the stage coaches which had made daily round trips between Genoa, Auburn, Locke and Ithaca went out of business. The stage coach looked like a farm wagon with the addition of canvas curtains to protect the passengers from the weather. The first train from Auburn arrived in Genoa on May 13, 1907 and a celebration was held on June 6, 1907 at the Genoa Station which was located on route 90 (East Hill) where the present Genoa Highway Town barns are located. The first train to continue on to Ithaca was not until Dec. 15, 1908. The Shortline enjoyed a period of prosperity until the federal government took control during WW1. Eventually after years of operating at a loss, the Shortline abandoned the track in 1924.

In the early morning hours of March 1, 1907, residents of the village were awakened by shouts of fire! and an angry red glow from snow covered fields. Clothes were hurriedly thrown on and men, women and children rushed to the DeWitt House on the corner of Main Street and South Street west of the Salmon Creek. The Barns in the rear of the Dewitt Hotel

were fully ablaze with the fire spreading rapidly. By the time the fire was extinguished the destruction of the Hotel, the Carson residence and the Mastin Block which contained Mastin's general store and the office of the Genoa Tribune across the road was complete. The fire also spread east across Salmon Creek on the South side of the road consumed the Avery Block which included James Myers barber shop, Max Shapiro's clothing store, Hagin and Peck's Hardware, the Empire State Telephone Exchange and the second floor apartment of Mrs. B. L. Avery. In the rear of the block were a number of vacant shops which were also lost.

Most Cayuga County villages in the early 1900's did not have fire departments or equipment and Genoa was one of them. The Locke Fire Department was called to assist but because of the road conditions they did not arrive in time to help. So it was solely due to the heroic efforts of bucket brigades manned by men, women and children that the Genoa Milling Co. on the East side of Salmon Creek and Smith's Store on the West side were saved, thus stopping the spread of the fire. Thomas and John McDermott and Howard Bush who were painfully burned are credited with saving Smith's Store by standing on the porch roof, dousing the building and themselves with water. Another name that must be mentioned is Vito ( Curly ) Poso who, along with other Italian railroad workers, stood in the Salmon Creek for hours and passed water buckets until the fire was under control. The Fire was a terrible blow to the people of Genoa and though some businesses such as Mastin's store and Hagin's were rebuilt, Genoa was never quite the same.

After the fire in 1907 there were many articles in the Genoa Tribune urging the establishment of a fire department in Genoa and in 1910 two chemical engines were bought to fight fires.

The fire house was located east of Smith's Store next to Salmon Creek. A 700 pound bell was installed in the fire house in 1913. The bell rope hung just inside the door of the engine house and a key to the building was enclosed in a box with a glass front. This fire house stood by the bridge until a flood undermined it in June of 1922. It was repaired and moved to where it now stands, home to Pete Signor's grocery store museum. the bell is displayed near the present firehouse.

There is some difference of opinion as to whether or not Pete Signor's museum was the same firehouse that originally stood east of Smith's Store. Ward O'Hara's history of Genoa says it is. Les Bower's recollection is that the museum was originally a chicken house and the fate of the building near Salmon Creek is unknown. If you compare the photo of the cigar factory (Firehouse) you can see that the museum is not tall enough to have had a second story which the original firehouse had because there was a pool room upstairs.

Genoa no longer has its own newspaper but there was no shortage of them in the past. The Genoa Spy was the earliest paper, printed in the early 1800's. In 1885 the Genoa Herald was being published but by 1890 the Genoa Tribune had taken over the news reporting for the town. The first location in town was on North Street by the Waldo sisters, except for a brief stay on Main Street (the building was destroyed by the fire in 1907) operated from that location until 1931 when it moved to King Ferry where it was renamed the Southern Cayuga Tribune. After the Genoa Tribune moved to King Ferry, the Genoa Record was published in Genoa for several years.

In 1911 a house on the corner of Main Street and Maple Street served as a bank. J.D.

Atwater served as President from 1911 till its closing in 1931. The First National Bank of Genoa failed in 1931 due to the stock market crash in 1929 and the Great Depression during the 1930's. After the bank closed it became the home and office of H. Donald Stuard, M.D. Dr. Stuard left Genoa in the early 1960's and the house was a private residence with a snack bar owned and run by Mr. Dick Sill. The last family to live here was the Claude Zirbel's. In the early 1990's the fire department had a controlled burn of the house now owned by Jack and Bill Grant. The old bank vault did not come down and out easily. The Grant brothers tried several kinds of equipment before the vault would give way and come down.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's there were usually two or three doctors or more practicing in town. Doctor James Wallace Skinner is a name familiar to many older people in town. Dr. Skinner came to Genoa and stayed for almost sixty years, delivering over 3000 babies during that period of time. His other claim to fame seems to be that he owned the very first automobile in town. About 1916 Dr. Skinner had a hospital built connecting to his home on Main Street. It was three stories high with seven private rooms, a ward of four beds, an operating room, baths on each floor and running water. It had electricity and was steam heated. Doctor Gard was also practicing at this time and had patients at the hospital. His office was in his home ( which has been torn down) and was located next to the Genoa Bank on Main Street. The hospital was being operated as a nursing home in the early 1950's by Ed and Peg Murray when it burned. A new building was built by the Genoa Odd-Fellows by donations and many fish suppers. After the ending of the Odd-Fellows era, the building was sold and converted to the East Hill Apartments.

The Genoa Hotel is the oldest continuously operating business in town and has been known

under many different names such as the Sellen House and the Carson House, but has been run as the Genoa Hotel for the longest period of time. The hotel was built in 1885 by Frank "Dep" Sellen who was father to Louis Sellen and grandfather to Dick Sellen. Charles Smith owned the hotel in 1918 and remodeled the Stevens Thresher Works for use as a theater (The Gem Theater). Delmar Singer ( who seems to have been a jack of all trades) owned the hotel from about 1920 to 1930 during Prohibition. We aren't sure what might have been served in the bar at this time, but Mr. Singer who was the local undertaker used some of the rooms in the hotel for calling hours. Other owners include Al Slarrow who ran the hotel for a short time in the late 1930's. Charles and Grace Parker owned the hotel from 1941 until 1966 when they sold it to John McDermott. Mr. McDermott sold the hotel in the early 2000's to David Turke of King Ferry.

The Gem Theater was located east of the Genoa Hotel on the corner of Main Street and Stevens Street. The building had formerly housed the Stevens Thresher Works thus explaining how the street was named. The Stevens Thresher building was used for the Farmer's Supply House under several different owners ( William H. Hoskins, Bert J. Brightman and Jason G. Atwater and son J. Dwight Atwater). In 1919 the building was purchased by Charles Smith who also ran the Genoa Hotel and remodeled it for the Gem Theater. The theater was located upstairs and the John Mastin's garage below. Opening night at the Gem Theater was September 17, 1919. Tommy and his sister Elizabeth Connell who played the violin and piano respectively sometimes provided music since the movies at that time were silent. Various concert, minstrel and vaudeville shows with local talent were performed at the Gem Theater. There was also an electrically operated piano at the theater. Apparently there was an engine driven electric plant at the hotel since the power lines had not yet

reached Genoa. This building was also used as a skating rink before it was torn down in the 1940's. There was another skating rink and gym on the West side of Maple Street owned by Mr. VanMarter.

There was a creamery and cheese factory on South Street that was doing business in 1899 and owned by Selah Mastin. It passed through the hands of several owners until 1917 when the owners, the R.E.Stevens Company sold out to Borden Farm Products Company of New York City. By 1919 dairy farmers began delivering their milk to the railroad station instead of the creamery . In 1941 the Cheese Factory was again in operation until sometime during WWII. In 1957 Giovanna and Sally Masson sold the property to Carl and Myrtle Inman who had the building torn down.

The Fairgrounds were located at the end of Maple Street, about one third of a mile off Main Street. Many tents housed exhibits,merry-go-round, and entertainment and a large Grand Stand for visitors.

As you can see, at one time Genoa was a bustling little community. When the railroad came to town making it easier to travel to Auburn or Ithaca things began to change. The invention of the automobile meant that things would never be the same for small towns like Genoa.

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