



Orleans County Historical Association

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and others



Orleans County Historical Association

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW

Mrs. Nettie Goodwin Ferris
Route #98
Albion, New York

Nettie G. Ferris was born March 10, 1904.

The interview is conducted by Marjorie C. Radzinski, Albion.

F Ferris

R Radzinski



Mrs. Nettie G. Ferris



Orleans County Historical Association

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to collect information about the historical development of Orleans County by means of tape-recorded conversations with people whose experiences reflect the county's growth.

These tapes and transcriptions will be preserved as educational resources and possible publication (all or in part).

I hereby release this tape and transcription to the Orleans County Historical Association.

Nettie B. Ferris
Signed

September 2, 1980
Date

Understood and agreed to:

Margaret C. Badzynski
INTERVIEWER

Sept. 2, 1980
Date

September 2, 1980 - for the Orleans County Historical Association
Marjorie Radzinski of Albion, New York is interviewing Nettie Goodwin
Ferris at her home on Route 98, a short distance south of the Five
Corners in Albion, New York.

F I was born March 10, 1904, in a cobblestone house on the Miller Road
in Barre. The house had been built some years earlier by my grand-
parents, and they had helped pick up the stones which went into its
building. My father, Artemas James Goodwin, was born in the same
cobblestone house some forty years or so before me. At the time I
was born, my mother (Alice Porter Goodwin) had a dressmaker working
for her, making clothes for the last month or two of Mother's
pregnancy. I happened to put in my appearance about that time.
The dressmaker kept my young three-and-one-half-year-old brother,
Artemas Porter Goodwin, busy by scraps of cloth she'd cut for him
or produced for him, so that he would have something to do. I
weighed only four pounds. In fact, the doctor questioned whether
I was big enough to function properly and even grow up. I fooled
him! I've been fooling them ever since. I asked my mother what they
did with me. She said, "Well, you were rolled in a blanket, put in
bed to keep warm, and you were fed barley-coffee". This must have
been some type of formula, but I never had the sense to ask Mother
of what it was composed. I do know that barley has a great nutritive
value.

One thing in the area that might be of interest to present-day
people is a country school nearby known as the Burma Schoolhouse.
This is located on Maple Street between Johnny-Cake-Lane and the
Miller Road. One of the early teachers was a young woman by the
name of Clarissa B. Lee. Years later, she became one of my
grandmothers; my mother's mother. She taught at \$2.50 a week and
boarded around. This meant that she lived with different families
at different times during the school term. When my father, as a
young man, went to the same school, they had two terms; a winter
and a summer.

The school winter term usually had a man teacher because young men
could not work outside and went to school, some of them being in
their early twenties. One of their early teachers, and one whom
my father admired very much, was Mr. Alvin Allen. He was a little

man, but a person who had complete control. I have heard my father say that, at some times, there were as many as at least 50 who went to school in the winter time. They had quite advanced teaching, including higher mathematics and some of the other rudiments of education.

In the summertime, the teacher was usually a woman because, at that time, it would be only the little girls who went to school. About this time also, Johnny-Cake-Lane, according to story, received its name, or at least had a reason for its name, because some of the children who came to school carried Johnny-Cake in their lunch buckets.

When I wasn't quite three years old, we moved to Lee Street, which is now #31A. The farm had belonged for many years to some member of the Loveland family who were my father's ancestors. We bought the farm from my father's brother-in-law, Lewis Morgan. For my period of time, my education was more advanced than many. I started out by attending a country school; in fact, District #8, Barre. One of the teachers whom I admired most, Miss Mabel Warner, happened to be my first and last country-school teacher. She was a particularly fine person. She not only taught in the country school, but was a fine seamstress and used to do sewing for my mother during the summertime. It was from her that I learned many of the rudiments of sewing which I have used and enjoyed all my life. At the time I was in the country school, the older boys and girls would go to Albion to try Regents, and I reached the point where I lacked only two subjects of being in high school. Those were History and English. So I went to Albion and entered what was called 'Preparatory', a portion of the school where one could take subjects to compete for high school and start high school courses. I was in Miss Ethel Thorpe's room, a tremendously fine person; one whom I have always admired. I did pass my required Regents in January and was then a full-fledged freshman in high school. It was always a little bit difficult having entered at mid-year because I was always in the middle of courses, so that it took a bit longer to complete the school work. In due time, in 1922, I was graduated from high school.

Because I could not enter college and live on campus in the fall, I learned that, from high school, one could attend Geneseo State Normal School for six weeks and secure a license to teach in a country school for two years. This I proceeded to do and hired out to teach in my home district, Barre District #8, that following year. When I think back to a person of 18 teaching a roomful of about 19 youngsters who were in all grades but one, I wonder how I ever had the nerve, and I wonder whether I ever taught them anything! I made that remark one day, not too long ago, to a former pupil. He said, "Well, perhaps we learned in spite of you". And I think that may be true.

Needless to say, I did finish the school year. I had earned \$25.00 a week in salary. And that was the time at which 4% was deducted toward a teacher's salary for retirement. That was the first it had been done. Also, I was able, since I lived at home, to save sufficient money from that low salary to pay my college expenses for my freshman year.

In 1927, I finished Elmira College. Elmira College happens to be the oldest women's college in this country, having been founded in 1855. It is now a co-educational institution, and this year, 1980, is celebrating its 125th anniversary. I am proud to have been graduated from that college. From college, I started teaching in high school. During the period of ten years that I taught in high school, I did Graduate study in History at the University of Rochester. This was done at summer sessions and with Reading courses during the school year. My teaching experience was done at Marathon, Clyde, and Waverley, New York. On July 1, 1937, I was married to Arthur James Ferris of Albion, and we were fortunate in having had 23 happy years together.

Going back to my earliest childhood: I was a little girl who enjoyed the out-of-doors. My sister, Ruth, was much older than I and helped Mother in the house, and I became my father's and my brother's shadow. I know I got in their hair a good many times, and we got into all manner of scrapes, but we managed to survive. My father loved fun and very often, he entered into the fun with us. He was a kindly man, strict in discipline, who had great patience.

How he ever put up with my continuing asking of questions, I don't know. One thing he did insist: he loved tools; he loved to do carpentry work, though he was a good farmer, and he would let us kids use his tools under the conditions that they were cleaned when we finished and were put back where they belonged. But he never questioned our using them, and he usually taught us how they should be used properly. It was from him that we learned a great deal of the out-of-doors. We learned from him about flowers, birds, animals, and so forth. He always had time to show us things, to point out things. The love of nature which I have at the present time can be attributed greatly to him. All manner of things we learned. He was working in the fields one time and found a baby woodchuck. Apparently its mother had been killed. He put the baby woodchuck in his frock pocket and went on working to the end of the field. In a little while, he found a second baby woodchuck, which joined the first. Those two woodchucks, whom we dubbed "Chuckie and Susie", lived with us for at least three years and were great companions of ours.

Father loved our mother very, very much, and one of the little ways he showed her his feeling was by taking little things to her from the field, and we picked up the same habit. Hardly a day went by but what one of us would take to her a little flower ... it might be a dandelion, a little grass, a pretty leaf, a little bird feather. She had long hair, coiled in a knot on the top of her head. I can see her now, pulling out a hair-pin, putting a little object in its crook, and shoving it back in her hair. That is one of my fondest remembrances of my mother.

Speaking of animals, I shouldn't let it go by without telling you about another pet that we had. We had white rabbits, and two of these rabbits were great pets. One of them had the habit, by the way, of going into the garden and breaking off the top of my mother's cosmo plants and scratching her chin on the stub. We called her "Funny". The other rabbit we called "Bunny". As it happened, the dogs killed "Funny", and my brother and I, who were just little tykes, felt very, very badly. Even back in those days, my brother must have had some inclination toward being a minister some day

because we decided we should have a funeral for "Funny". In the garden, Mother had a great many astors because that was the time in the history of this locality that there used to be an Annual Astor Sunday when people took astors to the cemeteries. It was made a great occasion in the area, and people vied with each other to have the nicest flowers. So we usually had quite a number in the garden. Mother told us that we could have astors to put in "Funny's" coffin. The coffin was a cardboard fruit-jar-box which we lined with the astors and placed "Funny" inside. Like many farm families that had pets, we had an animal cemetery out back of the barn; so we prepared a place for "Funny's" burial. At the time this was all happening, my sister had a girlfriend visiting her, so they were invited to attend the funeral with my brother and me. Being older, they didn't take it as seriously as my brother and I. The sermon was preached by my brother and was a very serious affair to us, and we wept copiously. However, the two older girls laughed their heads off which didn't make us feel any better. But, in due time, "Funny" was buried.

As time went on and I grew a bit older, it was my desire and willingness to help outdoors, and I have enjoyed working outside to the present time, not because I have to, but because I want to and do like it. Back in those early days of farming, it was very different from the present time. There was no work done with tractors or combines; there was no electricity or appliances, and so on. It was a rather crude period of existence. At that time, we children each had certain ways of earning money. The principle way of which I had to earn money in the summertime was by driving on the horse-fork by picking up apples and potatoes. My pay was five cents for each load of hay and five cents for each bushel of apples or potatoes. I couldn't pick up potatoes very much because I was affected by the smell of the new skin of the potatoes. I've found since that I am really allergic to that and to quite a number of other things. But I happily picked up apples and didn't do too badly.

One of the things that I have just mentioned that I did was driving on the horse-fork; also driving on the hay-loader. The horse-fork, in case you don't know what I am talking about, was like a very large grappling hook. Think, for instance, of the utensil we use nowadays, like a pair of scissors that is used in serving salads, where the tong part of the server opens. That is very much the way the horse-fork works. It was attached to a long rope which was long enough to be hitched to a whipple tree on the horse, go to the wagon, go all the way to the peak of the barn and back, and anywhere around the top of the load of hay which would be on the barn floor underneath. It was arranged by pulleys so that, as the horse started to pull, it would tighten the tongs on the grapple and raise it to the roof of the barn. There was a track attached to the peak of the barn. When the fork reached a certain point at the peak of the barn, it swung off to the right or left as the operator designated, out over a hay-mow, and could be tripped to unload at a specified point. The person driving the horse continued to drive away from the barn until the operator of the fork hollered "Whoa". Then, you turned your horse around and went back to the barn, ready for the next load. I was able to acquire quite a little money from that because, very often, we would have as many as 60 loads of hay during the summertime, and, at five cents a load, it counted up!

R What did you call that?

F The Horse-Fork.

R I would think it would be called the Haying-Fork.

F I suppose it was a Hay Fork, but I suppose we called it a Horse Fork because you think of a regular fork with a handle which a person uses. This was a fork which was operated because it was pulled by a horse. In some cases, a team of horses was used. Also, out in the field, a hay loader was used to elevate the hay from the ground in the winter on the field to the load, and a person was required to drive the team on the wagon while the man was spreading the hay in his place on the wagon when it was brought up. It was my job to drive the team, and I always enjoyed doing that.

Another important part of the harvesting season was the threshing which was done by a huge machine which was placed on the barn floor, operated by pulleys and a belt from a steam engine that was set at some distance outside. Help was provided by farmers changing help. They were provided their dinner by the farmer at whose home they were working. The purpose of the threshing machine was that of a modern combine which separated the kernel from the chaff, and the straw was blown through what we call a blower, a tube, into the barnyard at the back, or into a mow in the barn. If it went onto a stack in the barnyard, there were men who piled it to make a straw-stack, and this was used for bedding for the livestock during the winter period.

Many people, when they are working these days, plan on having coffee breaks, morning and afternoon. Coffee breaks actually are nothing new. During the harvest season on the farm, we always had coffee breaks. If the men were working in the barn, it was usually after a load of something had been finished. If it were in the field, one of us children usually took the food and beverage to the field where the men were working. That would be mid-morning and mid-afternoon. My mother found that, very often in the morning, the men found fully as much enjoyment from a hot drink as a cold, so it was very often either hot tea or hot cocoa. I can't recall that it was ever coffee. In the afternoon, it was apt to be one of two beverages: either lemonade made from fresh lemons (of course), or, what we call "switchel". I've been tempted to try switchel someday to see if it would taste as good as it used to. It probably wouldn't, but it was good.

R What was it made of, Nettie?

F It was made basically of ginger, brown sugar, vinegar, and then cold water. No ice water because there was no refrigeration for ice. Usually there was water pumped from the well so that it would be as cold as possible before it was added to the beverage. I remember it was very often my task to help prepare the lemonade or switchel, unless I was helping outdoors.

You may be wondering what we did as recreation because, of course, in that time, there was no television or radio, and automobiles were just coming into existence. In fact, I was driving a car to high school at the end of my school year in 1922, which wasn't usual. One of the great enjoyments in my family was reading, frequently reading aloud. I should indicate one thing here. We had lighting on the farm which many people didn't have. We didn't have kerosene lights. Our father had installed an acetylene gas plant, with a plant in the basement which was operated by carbide as a source of fuel, I guess you'd call it, and it was piped throughout the house. We even had a two-bruner hot-plate in the kitchen which was very handy on hot summer days or evenings. But we did have lighting throughout the entire house, and this included a nice reading lamp on our library table that sat in the middle of the room. This made for good vision, and usually, people who were reading and sewing sat nearer the light so that they had good light with which to see. We also had a water system in the house, which wasn't usual. The water of this system was contained in two big iron tanks in the basement, each of which would hold around 20,000 gallons of water. The pressure for our water was provided by a gasoline engine which pumped the water into the tanks. One tank had well water, one rain water. In the same part of the cellar that the one tank and the engine was placed, there was also a washing machine, a churn, and sometimes a cream separator. There were shafts suspended from the ceiling with belts that went to pulleys on each of these pieces of equipment, the shaft being turned by a pulley from the engine. So, very often, if the tank was being filled with water, it would be done on wash day so that Mother could do the washing at the same time that the tank was filling with water. In some cases, I've even had it turning the churn at the same time. They were great help-savers or labor savings to the women of the house.

R Did many people have that system?

F I think not. Actually, I think my father was a rather progressive farmer in his thinking. I remember even before we put in the whole system ourselves that a salesman came, set up a miniature plant

in the front yard, and people all around the neighborhood were invited to see the demonstration. So I think that my father was a little bit advanced in his thinking in some of the things he did. I recall now one of the greatest pleasures of his life and one of the things he enjoyed the most was when electricity came to the farm. He just delighted in it! That really has done more for farming, I would say, than almost anything that has been done because it has made it possible for people to live in the country and have the same modern facilities as those who live in villages and cities.

R That's right!

F Having electricity really has been one of the greatest changes that has come in the last fifty years. It has added so much to the lives of people, not only on the farms, but elsewhere; but particularly to those of us who are living on the farm, it has accomplished and helped us so much. Personally, I would set that as one of the greatest accomplishments of this whole area. But I started with mentioning "recreation", didn't I?

R Yes, you did.

F I guess I'd better go back to it!

I mentioned reading and then side-tracked because of our type of light. I might say that, once in a while, carbide would run out in the machine, and everything in the house would go dark. We would just have to wait until Father could go down cellar, put in some more carbide, and get the thing going.

In the evening, we were a family of usually seven or eight people because there were three of us children, my father and mother, usually a hired girl (who would be termed a "Domestic" these days, but a person who lived in with us), and a hired man, who hired by the month and lived with the family. In one case, in fact, our hired girl and our hired man were married. There's a family, by the way, in the area by the name of Gaylord, and the Gaylord girls, Rosa and Jenny as we called them, were our hired girls for many, many years. They lived with us, one girl or the other, for many

years and were practically part of the family and called my parents "Pa" and "Ma Goodwin"; always very close to us, and still are for that matter.

Reading and eating apples were frequently two things that went on at the same time. Usually, it was Mother or Father who read and peeled apples ... one would read, the other would peel apples. Father more often would peel the apples, and Mother read. Father would go down cellar early in the evening and get a whole pan of apples; they could be Northern Spys, Greenings, Hubbards, Gravensteins, and so on. We usually had our choice of the variety before a particular apple was peeled for us. There had been established in our neighborhood at that period what I would call a "Book Circle". This included maybe as many as 15 or 20 farm families in, say, a mile square area around us. Each family bought a book. As I think back to the books, I think back, for instance, to such books as "Girl of the Limberlost", "Freckles", "The Harvester", books by Zane Grey, "The Mohicans" by James Fenimore Cooper, and many others, most of them fiction, a few non-fiction. Usually a book was passed to the next family taking part, to your left. You kept a book about two weeks, then passed it on again to your left, and kept passing it around until weeks later, you received back your own book. In that way, each person had the expense of just one book, but had the enjoyment of many. This provided a great deal of enjoyment, not only for your immediate family, but the whole neighborhood. That was a period of enjoyment.

We also played games. We had acquired from a certain source a huge round table, big enough for each of us to sit around. Our favorite games of the time were Pit, Rook, Authors, and sometimes just watching two play a good game of Checkers. It might even be Dominoes.

R Cribbage?

F No Cribbage; none of the straight card games. My mother did not believe in the use of so-called 'playing cards'. So I never

learned to play games with those until I was teaching in high school. They were just a "no-no" in my family.

R Mine too!

F It's interesting to see so far as gambling; anyone could gamble on a game of Checkers, or any other. It would be gambling just as much, but it was the idea of playing with a certain type of equipment.

Music played a great part in my family also. My mother, as a young woman, had given music lessons, and my father was an old-time-fiddler. I recall with delight the hundreds of nights that we kids went to bed listening to Father and Mother play their music, never knowing when they quit. There was a part of our existence we all learned to play some instrument, and we did have what amounted to be a small family orchestra. We had a Cello and various other instruments in the family. In our neighborhood, we were fortunate in having, residing with an elderly gentleman nearby, a woman who was an accomplished musician, Mrs. Mattie Martin Keenan, who gave music lessons in the Albion area for years; a very talented person. When her first husband, Mr. Martin, died, she came to live with an uncle who lived just a very short distance from us. It was handy for us children to go over there and take music lessons. My brother took lessons on both piano and violin, and it was a great pleasure to work with her. It was she who advised us to take frequent lessons, but only a half-hour in length, and we could do that very readily; so that music was a great part.

Then there were many community activities. Many of us were devoted church attendants. As a child, I remember going to the West Barre Methodist Church. When we moved to Lee Street, there was some question as to which church we would attend. We chose the Albion Baptist Church, I think primarily because my Great-Grandmother, Phoebe Paine Loveland, wife of Artemas Loveland, had been a Charter Member of that church in 1860. We had an organization also in the neighborhood called "Farmers' Aid". I think it must have been associated in some respect with a larger organization, but I don't know just what. The farm people in the area would meet together, particularly

during the winter months, about once a month, for social times. Very often, there would be a program of some kind and refreshments. It was just a good time for the people to get together and discuss their difficulties and pleasures, and it was very greatly enjoyed. Also, produce of various types were purchased as a group which would make it possible to get them at a more favorable price. For instance: barrels of sugar, flour, fertilizer for the farm, sometimes seed of various types for the farm. I don't know what finally happened to the organization, but, like many other early organizations, it died a natural death. But it provided a real need for farm families.

Then there was the "Grange", an organization of farmers, a few of which still remain, but they are becoming more scarce all the time. That also provides a real need for farm families. One of the things which it provided back in the early days is what we would call nowadays "group and farm insurance". Members could get fire insurance at a very reasonable price, but it required the person to belong to Grange. I feel proud that my father happened to have been the First Master of Barre Grange. He was also on the committee with other people like Myron Grinnell, Will DeLano, Herbert Steele, who worked on the Building Committee for the Grange Hall in Barre Center, which is still used. When the Grange was first started in the area, they met upstairs in Jackson and Rice's Store, located in Barre Center. There is still a store in the same building in the center of Barre Center. The Grange met there for many, many years, and eventually went to the new hall when it was completed. I remember being a part of a Degree Tea, putting on degrees in Barre Grange, as a young person. We used to have a great time. We had our special outfit we wore, and we not only gave the degrees for candidates of our own Grange, but visited other Granges and gave degrees there. It made a social time for this whole group of young people. That is something I will never forget.

Another thing which was quite popular at the period was a Singing School. An individual by the name of Jay Parmalee taught a Singing School for years and was very widely known for doing that.

R About what period of time was the Singing School?

F That was when I was just a small child.

I mentioned that one of our hired girls and hired men married eventually. They were going together, and they used to like to go to Singing School. This was back probably somewhere around 1910, but the Singing School did continue for many years afterward. It was going at that time, and I think Jay Parmalee was doing it then. Father let this couple take a horse - in the wintertime, it would be on a sleigh - to go to Singing School. Barre Center is about three or four miles away, and Harry and Jenny were going up Johnny-Cake-Lane. Up the road a-ways (of course, the roads weren't plowed; there were snow drifts), they came to one place where the road was near a barn, and there was a great big snow drift. So the track where people went went around the snow drift. Apparently Harry and Jenny weren't paying sufficient attention to the driving, and the old horse was more or less on his own, and he turned out to go around the snow drift, but he didn't go quite far enough and he tipped them out! It was an open cutter, and it tipped them and the lap robes out, but the cutter didn't tip over; it straightened up and the old horse never stopped. So here they were, and the horse had gone on down the road, so they picked themselves up and started walking down the road to find the horse. They kept going, got over onto Maple Street at Jenny's home, got her brother who hitched up the horse and sleigh, and they all headed for Barre Center. When they got to Barre Center, I guess to the church where the Singing School was being held, they turned in the drive and went around back to the horse shed. There, very nicely placed, without having hit a thing, was the old horse and the carriage. When they spoke to him, he whinned at them!! That was in the days of the Singing School.

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(end of taped interview)

Transcribed by Marjorie Radsinski of Albion, New York.
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