

Bicentennial Provides Opportunity to Celebrate the Extraordinary and the Ordinary



L-R: George Henry Ballard, Robert George Ballard, Frances A. Ballard, Mary Simpson sitting on front steps of the family home on Culver Road.

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The passing of a bicentennial is a once in a lifetime experience, a milestone that brings with it an aura of prestige and pride. For younger generations, we did not have the opportunity to experience the excitement that came with the passing of the national bicentennial in 1976, but we can look forward to other significant milestones looming on the horizon; the Orleans County Bicentennial in particular. As we celebrate the Erie Canal Bicentennial (2017-2025), the towns of Shelby and Barre are celebrating 200 years of their “independence” from the towns of Ridgeway and Gaines, respectively (and tongue-in-cheek, of course). The Town of Barre will celebrate this milestone June 29th-July 1st with plenty of festivities aimed at drawing upon the town’s rich history, rooted strongly in the Village of Albion as well.

Bicentennial celebrations are an opportunity to draw communities together, at a time when we are perhaps not as close-knit as past generations may have recalled. It is also a time to reflect on the contributions of the “common folk,” scattered throughout the countryside, those who plowed their fields, raised their families, and made a modest living without recognition. I often cite the writings of Arad Thomas and Isaac Signor who gave us the most complete written histories of Orleans County, however, these works forget a large portion of our community. Those who lived on modest farms or made their living off of trades often found themselves forgotten from these

published histories; the poor, women, African Americans, and immigrants. So, these celebrations, those that come every once in a great while, are an opportunity to build upon our histories, a chance to capture a snapshot of life as we are experiencing it now; a time to pen an autobiography, write a journal, compile your genealogy, or record an oral history.

As I thought about my article for this week, my mind crossed Thomas Cushing of Barre, a physician who gave up the practice of medicine in favor of studying history and philosophy. His contributions to our understanding of local history often went unpublished and therefore are overlooked. I thought again about my own family and my mind rested upon my grandfather, Robert George Ballard, who was born in Barre on September 11, 1928 to George Henry and Frances Bowen Ballard. Several years prior, George purchased the family “homestead” on Culver Road from Lancelot Harling and brought his wife and daughters to the area from Niagara Falls. Robert spent the majority of his early life in Orleans County, minus a short stay in Florida in 1929 while his father sought work as a cooper.

As a young man, life for Robert was far from easy. His father found it difficult at times to make a living with a trade that was often seasonal in nature. When the Great Depression hit on October 29, 1929, George was out of work and found himself seeking odd jobs to make ends meet. He found work with a neighboring farmer in Barre making barely enough to support himself let alone his wife and children. When he pleaded for food from the farm to help feed the children, he refused. During an oral history I conducted with my great aunt in 2010, she remarked “...the bastard wouldn’t give us the sweat off his brow.”

The children attended school but were unable to graduate from high school. Robert’s sister Doris recalled nearing the end of her schooling but was forced to drop out a year early because the family could not afford new books. When Robert was nine, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. George was working for Duffy Mott in Hamlin at the time, driving the family car to and from work each day. His inability to miss work due to the family’s financial need forced Frances to take a bus each week to Roswell Park in Buffalo to receive cancer treatments. Leaving early in the week, she would remain in the city until she regained enough energy to make the bus ride back to Albion where George would pick her up. Doris, who was married and living south of the swamp on Culver Road, would trek to the homestead to care for her brother while her father was at work. She recalled her fatigued mother sleeping in a room converted into a small bedroom at the front of the house, vividly remembering her mother’s radiation burns and scars. When doctors urged Frances to undergo a double mastectomy to combat the cancer, she vehemently refused. She lost her battle with cancer on February 10, 1944, one day after her 46th birthday. She left her husband, two daughters, and fifteen year old son to mourn her loss; Robert had dropped out of school shortly before her passing.

These stories, although sometimes inconsequential on the surface, tell us a great deal about ourselves and our ancestors. They tell us far more about a community than the tomes of published histories and are worthy of our preservation. So as our community continues to celebrate these monumental occasions, take some time to recall the reasons why we are afforded this opportunity. Make every effort to preserve your own history!

