

Seneca County Wheat Farming During the Civil War

Miss Ethel Buckley, my high school history teacher, would often share tidbits of local history. One of these tidbits that has remained with me all these years is that many of the fine houses on Route 414 between Seneca Falls and Fayette were built by the profits that farmers made selling wheat during the years of the Civil War. I would tell students in my United States history courses this same story when we were studying the Civil War period. It is only recently, however, that I have been able to find some real documentation to support what Miss Buckley said. I found this information in reading a 1967 article written by David C. Smith. He based his article on the diaries of Henry K. Dey.

Henry K. Dey operated a 150-acre farm on the eastern shore of Seneca Lake where present-day Sampson State Park is located. Like most area farmers, Dey raised wheat as his basic cash crop. The wheat that was grown was both white (White Flint) and red (Old Red Chief) as well as some Mediterranean strains. All was winter wheat planted in September, with timothy or clover seed sown on the wheat field in April, and the crop harvested in late July.

Although Seneca County wheat farmers were having increasing difficulty competing with the prairie farms of the Great Plains, the Civil War created a great demand for whatever amount of wheat could be produced for market. The Geneva *Courier* carried this editorial:

Farmers—At this crisis in our country's history let not the farmer forget to make ample provisions for food for the thousands now rallying to hold up untarnished and cause forever to float that Star Spangled Banner—the pride of the world....The farmers should double the amount of ground heretofore used for the various seeds and permit not a foot of soil to become accountless....We entreat every farmer in the town(s) of Seneca and old Ontario to feel that they have an individual responsibility resting upon them.

So, this editorial is an example of how many newspaper editors were pushing the idea that it was farmers' patriotic duty to plant all the wheat acreage that they could.

The increased demand for wheat during the Civil War years is reflected in the selling price of wheat. In 1862, Mr. Dey received about \$1.00 for his wheat. In 1863, he sold his white wheat for \$1.30 and his red wheat for \$1.18. In 1864 the selling price was \$2.00 a bushel, and it was \$2.50 in 1866. His total crop on his 32 acres planted that year was 564 bushels, for an average yield per acre just less than 18 bushels. That average yield was somewhat over the New York State average.

This means there was the wonderful situation in which wheat prices were increasing greatly and farmers were fulfilling a patriotic "duty" to produce as much wheat as they possibly could! It is not surprising at all that farmers would plant wheat on every possible acre of land that could be tilled. This situation—expanded number of acres planted at a time when wheat prices were more than doubling—clearly would lead to great profits being made. This was true for Henry K. Dey, so we can begin to assume it was true for other farmers in mid-Seneca County. These great profits would logically make it possible for these farmers to then want to have a grander house to reflect their new relative "wealth."

The information contained in Henry K. Dey's diaries regarding total wheat production and selling prices for that wheat in the years of the Civil War strongly suggests that the houses along Route 414 were linked to wheat profits during the Civil War years. The most elegant of these houses was the one built by Henry Hoster just east of Route 414 on County Road 121. I remember Miss Buckley said that it cost about \$40,000 to build and furnish this house and the surrounding barns, but I haven't been able to verify that part of the story yet. The elegance of this house is suggested in these words, quoted from the book *Landmarks of Seneca County*: "...The

1876 *History of Seneca County* has a picture of this elegant house in its original state with grounds that included statues placed at intervals about the lawn. The south façade shows beautiful workmanship in the paired, arched windows and their decorative brick trim....”

I have ascertained that prior to the Civil War the Henry Hoster family was living in a wooden house and that this wooden structure was moved north of his new brick house built after the war.

I hope that this article generates some interest in the work of historians—trying to find the “facts” to prove or disprove an oral tradition. Should anyone have specific information about these houses along Route 414, please contact me.