

Droves of Cattle on the Early Roads

We all know about the cattle drives on the Great Plains in the 19th century, but we probably don't know that there were droves of cattle here in Upstate New York as well. Before the advent of the railroads in the 1840s, a common way for a farmer to get his large herds of cattle, sheep, swine, turkeys, geese, horses, etc. to market was to have these animals walk in a "drove" on the existing roads. Some of these droves would fill these roads from fence to fence, necessitating any "traffic" going the other direction to get off the road until the drove passed by. Some of these droves would be as much as one-half mile in length, causing a serious delay in the movement of goods and people in the other direction. Especially if the animals became unruly for any reason.

In the winter of 1846-47, a large drove of cattle was driven across Cayuga Lake on the ice, so as to avoid having to pay the toll on the Cayuga Bridge. The ice broke beneath the weight of these cattle and 50 cattle were drowned in the lake. Some that were pulled out, though not quite dead, were killed and barreled.

There is the wonderful oral tradition story that there once was a wager between a driver of turkeys and a driver of geese as to which drove could go the longer distance in a twenty-four period of time. The turkey driver was quite sure that his long-legged, quick-stepping turkeys would win. That appeared to be the situation on the day of the wager. As evening approached, however, the turkeys became much harder to control as they sought out high roosting places from which the turkey driver could not persuade them to come down. Meanwhile, the slow-plodding geese could be kept moving far into the night.