

Seneca Army Depot Story –The Displacement of the Farm Families
by Seneca County Historian Walter Gable

On June 11, 1941, the War Department announced official approval of \$8 million to start a munitions project of 500 storage igloos in Central New York State. The site chosen was in the towns of Varick and Romulus in Seneca County and consisted of approximately 11,000 acres, situated between two sets of existing Lehigh Valley Railroad tracks. About 150 farm families were displaced.

Options on the farm lands were signed between June 12 and July 26, with August 1 as a deadline for complete exodus. The displaced families would have to move rather quickly, as the 500 munitions igloos were to be completed as soon as possible. Farmers were able to harvest about 50% of their wheat crops, but some crops left standing in the fields were purchased by the government. Some buildings, including houses and barns, were moved off the Depot area to new locations. Some farmers only had three days' notice to vacate their property.

The Baldrige farm of 600 acres got cut to 345 acres with the major problem that 235 of these acres were 12 to 15 miles from his home—he would have to go around the Depot (not through the Depot) to reach the eastern portions of his lands.

The New York Defense Relocation Corporation, a subsidiary of the Farm Security Administration, had \$750,000 available to help relocate families displaced by this Depot and the new Pine Camp Military reservation (now Fort Drum) being built near Watertown. Nearly 80% of the families, however, relocated without assistance.

By September 10, 1941, 100 displaced farm families had been relocated. Of these, 50 had purchased other farms, 38 rented farms, and 4 moved to properties they owned elsewhere. Two families had taken temporary location and 6 rented from the Relocation Corporation. Of the 10 remaining families to be relocated, 8 bought new farms, 1 was going to a rented farm, and 1 moved to property elsewhere.

Interestingly, there were difficulties in documenting “clear titles” to many of these properties. Fortunately, Charles Dunlap, the 84-year great grandson of Andrew Dunlap, one of the earliest settlers in the Town of Ovid, signed affidavits based on his clear memory, so that farmers could be paid for their land.

The displaced farmers didn't start receiving their checks until November. Eventually 162 farmers would receive about \$700,000 for their property. Many felt the amount the government offered for their property couldn't begin to compensate them for their personal losses, such as having to leave behind the farm and house that had been in the family for several generations, but only a few sought a higher amount through legal means.