

The Spit Box Cannon of the Ovid Historical Society



In a corner of the interior display room of the Ovid Historical Society is an artifact known as a spit box cannon. This type of cannon was built to make lots of noise rather than to fire cannon balls.

The cannon itself is wrought iron and was cast during the Civil War at a foundry near Covert. The two parts of the cannon have a total weight of about 350 pounds. The bottom portion, made of a cottonwood tree stump, is the larger part. In the center of the bottom portion is an indentation about the size of a shot glass, with a small channel that then runs to the hole from the edge. Gun powder was poured into the hole, and then the bottom was covered with wet paper and the smaller top part was placed on it. The spit box cannon was then fired by a long iron rod which was heated at the point. The top section would blow off, rising higher than the tree tops. The noise was said to be terrible.

Firing the cannon was dangerous. Extreme care had to be taken to make sure that the cannon was cooled down enough between shots. Otherwise severe burns would result from pouring more gun powder into the hot cannon. This was a special concern during

celebrations such as the Fourth of July for many years. Sometimes during the multiple firings on these celebrations, not enough time passed between firings. One time, an Ovid fireman had most of the hair on his head singed off from one of the cannon shots.

This old cannon was last fired in Ovid on the Armistice Day in 1918, ending World War One. Obviously, this was a most momentous event—very fitting for firing of this spit box cannon. The event also had a local tragedy. An Ovid resident by the name of Allen, who had a soldier son fighting in France, heard the noise of the cannon firing. He walked up to the scene and then walked back towards home, having to stop to rest near the hardware store. That night he

died in his home, never to see again his son who did not return home until after the armistice was signed.

George Lynd, who for many years owned and operated the hardware store in Ovid, was responsible for the restoration of this spit box cannon. He took the badly rusted cannon to Elmira and had it sand-blasted. He then sealed the wrought iron surface, and secured a new cottonwood stump for the bottom part of the cannon.

For several years, the spit box cannon was displayed at the Edith B. Ford Memorial Library. Following its establishment as an organization, the Ovid Historical Society has the spit box cannon on display.

If this story has aroused your interest in seeing this great curiosity, you will be able to look at it closely when the Ovid Historical Society is open. It will open in the evening on May 18, 2009, and during the day of the village's annual Strawberry Festival in early June, and then Thursdays and Saturdays in July and August from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

If you have suggestions for future articles on some aspect of Seneca County History, please contact Seneca County Historian Walt Gable at wgable@co.seneca.ny.us.

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