

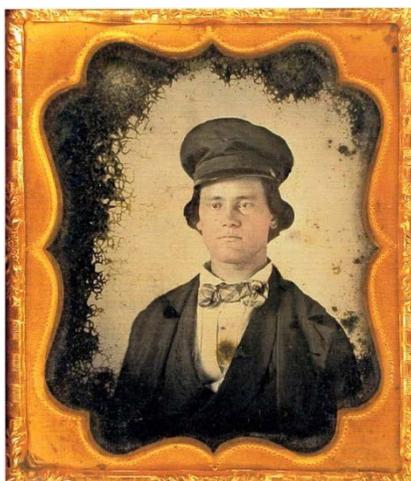
“The Busy Bee” Ferry on Cayuga Lake and Captain Jim Quick

Revised June 24, 2020



(Shown at left is a scan of a postcard of the Busy Bee ferryboat at its landing spot at Kidders. Shown at right is a picture of Captain James Quick pointing to King Ferry to where he ferried people, cargo and mail across Cayuga Lake for many years on his boat the Busy Bee. The picture of Quick appeared in the July 1, 1988 issue of the *Ithaca Journal*.)

From 1881 until 1911, Captain James Quick (local folk fondly called him “Cap Quick”¹²) crossed Cayuga Lake more than 40,000 times piloting ferry boat passengers and cargo between Kidders and King Ferry on his boat “the Busy Bee.” His ferry boat service was probably the very last one to operate on Cayuga Lake.



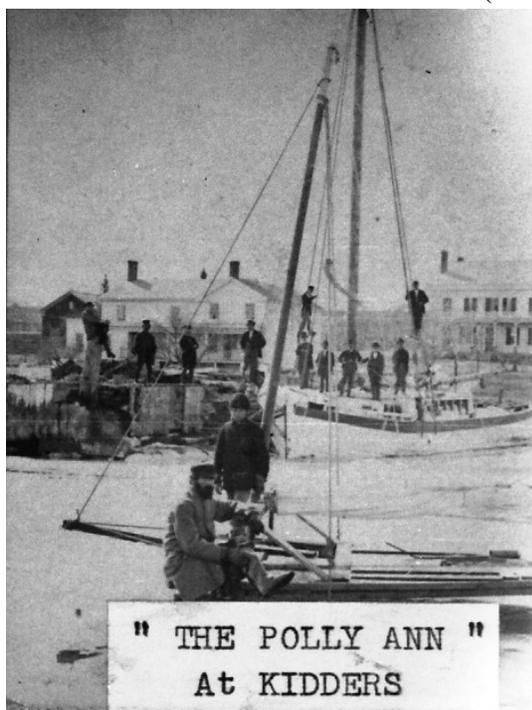
James Voorhees Quick was born on September 5, 1855³ on a farm near the McNeil Church and west of Kidders in Ovid, NY.⁴ His parents were Henry V. and Mary Traphagen Quick. The 1870 Census listed his father, Henry Quick, as a ferryman and the same for James. By the late 1870s, Henry moved to Kidders and ran a ferry boat owned by Horace Tracy. (Shown at left is a print of an ambrotype of Captain Quick from the collection of Dr. William Schultz.)

Horace C. Tracy and the “Polly Ann” Ferryboat

Horace C. Tracy and his wife Mary (“Polly”) were early settlers at Kidders, having bought land from his relative Samuel Ferris. In 1850 they built their home on the corner of the lake road and Deerlick Springs Road. South of their home he built a hotel with a landing in front of it on Cayuga Lake. This landing became known as Tracy’s Landing.

In 1850 he had James Bennett of Sheldrake build the ferryboat “A. M. Shaw” for service on Cayuga Lake between Kidders and King Ferry. Some years later, Tracy and Peter Fish had the “Polly Ann” built at Sheldrake. The name “Polly” came from Mrs. Polly Tracy, and the name

“Ann” came from Mrs. Ann Fish. (Shown below left is a picture of the Polly Ann; photo courtesy of the Ovid Historical Society.)



The “Polly Ann” was primarily a sailboat. When there was insufficient wind, however, Tracy used his horse “Ole Nell” to walk a treadmill to make the paddle-wheel power for the boat. Tracy hired Henry Quick to run the boat. Quick and his family lived to the west of Deerlick Springs Road. Quick had his son James help run the “Polly Ann.”

In 1867, Tracy sold his hotel to ex-Sheriff Myron H. Cole. The name of the hotel was changed to Coles Hotel. Horace Tracy passed away in 1878 at the age of 72. Henry Quick continued to run the “Polly Ann” until his son James was ready to take over the operation.⁵

The ferry route was from Kidders (Tracy’s Landing had become known as Kidders) on the west shore of Cayuga Lake to King Ferry on the east side, a distance of slightly over 2 miles.⁶ This ferry boat route was important in that it enabled residents and summer residents of that portion of the west shore of Cayuga Lake to connect with the train at the King Ferry station on east side of the Lake.⁷ A 6-foot sign board painted white on one side and black on the other was used as a signal. When the white side was out that was the signal for the ferry to return to the other side to pick up passengers and/or cargo. (Shown above is a portion of a recent Seneca County map. Note the location of Kidders and King Ferry Station.)



Early Years of Cap Quick

Jim Quick took over operation of the “Polly Ann,” probably starting about 1881.⁸ Jim was described at that time as being tall and lanky.⁹

Cap Quick and his wife Jennie lived in a house on the lakeside south of the Coles Hotel. This lakeshore area, just south of Kidders Landing, became the “home port” for Quick’s ferryboat business.¹⁰

Business was so good that a new ferry boat was needed. In 1884, in the few rods of distance between the family house and the lake, Jim had James Bennet, an old canal boat builder living in Sheldrake, design and build a new boat. It was a wooden boat, 66-feet overall in length with a 17-foot beam, with gunwales 4 feet high. The gunwales at the stern end could let down so that they rested lightly on the shore, enabling a man, animal or small wagon or buggy easily to

embark or disembark.¹¹ (This gunwale feature is shown in the picture at left below; picture courtesy of the Ovid Historical Society.) The rudder was a long, heavy paddle, detachable by



hand.¹² In the early years of its operation, a horse—“Ole Nell”—the same one used on the “Polly Ann”¹³--went along on the boat. This horse was trained to walk a treadmill as an extra source of power if and when the wind failed.¹⁴ In addition to the set of sails, there was a steam-powered engine.¹⁵

The boat was christened by Cap Quick’s little daughter, Anna. Cap Quick held his little daughter and helped her break the bottle used for the christening. A spectator, May D. Leverich (Mrs. George K Hooper of Pasadena, CA) murmured in a tearful

voice, “Busy Bee” and that became the name of the boat.¹⁶

A 20-year ferry license was granted by New York State Legislature to Jim Quick on April 21, 1886.¹⁷ Whether this was his first license is not known but this 1886 license gave him permission to travel from the end of the Turnpike Road at what is today known as King Ferry to or near the dock of Myron R. Cole at Kidders. The fee for transport on the ferry was 25 cents per person; 75 cents for a man



and a horse; and \$1 for a team and wagon.¹⁸ (Shown above is a scan of a postcard, courtesy of the Ovid Historical Society.) Cap Quick was the captain, skipper, mate and helmsman, all in one. With one hand he adjusted sail. With the other hand he steered the boat. If he had to leave his post, he made use of the chains at hand to fasten the handle of the rudder to hold her on a straight course.¹⁹

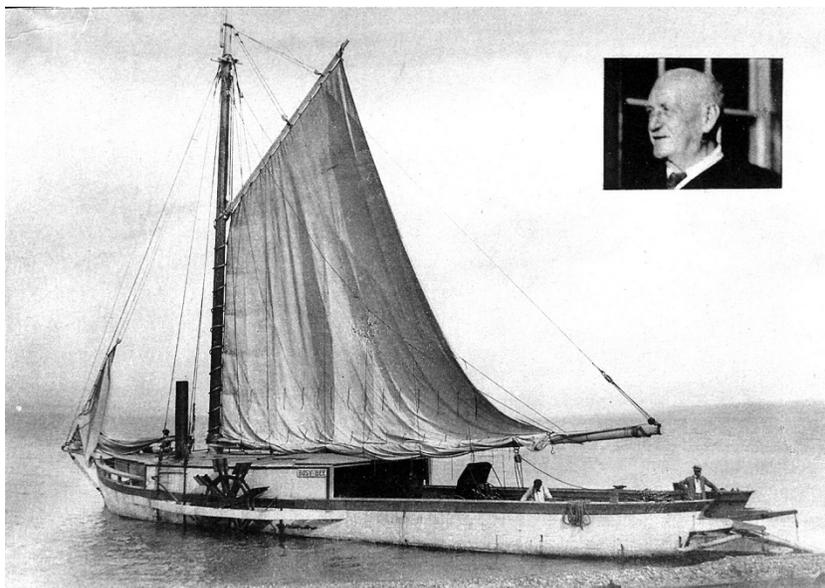
For 18 years, “the Busy Bee” made 4 regular trips every day, winter and summer, to meet the passenger trains—the Lehigh Valley lines at King Ferry on the east side and at Interlaken (Farmer) on the west side of the Lake--and to carry mail.²⁰ He was in later years a Postmaster in Kidders. “The Busy Bee” carried the mail bags over and back each day. Carrie Coleman, for example, would get a letter from her daughter in Auburn on a morning trip and could mail an answer back to her daughter on the afternoon trip the same day.²¹ In the busy summer season, he would make as many as 8 or 9 trips a day.²²

In addition “the Busy Bee” was used in countless excursion and pleasure trips. Captain Jim was proud that he made over 40,000 trips across Cayuga Lake in his years of operating ferry service. Using the horse and treadmill to power the boat, the crossing took 1 hour. With steam power, it took ½ hour. With good sailing wind, the crossing took even less time—he once crossed in 9 minutes. Following the spirit of the postal service saying that nothing can stop the delivery of the mail, in the cold winter of 1885, “the Busy Bee” froze in 15 inches of ice. Cap Quick rigged up an ice boat and delivered the mail, crossing the lake in just 3 minutes!²³

Interesting Memories of Various Trips

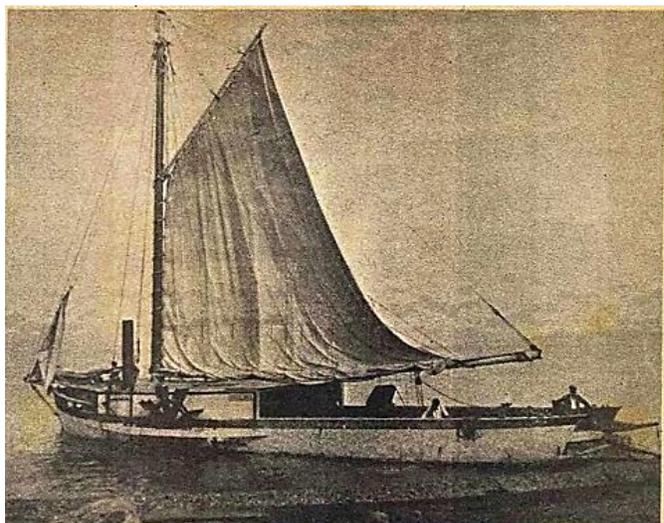
In an interview much later in his life, Cap Quick recalled that the largest load he ever carried on his “Busy Bee” was for participants in a Quaker funeral taking place in Jacksonville. Included in that ferry group were 10 carriages, 14 horses and 83 people. Another large party was transported so that a German band could play at the Cayuga Lake Hotel at Sheldrake. There were 75 people in that party and also included was their personal supply of a special German brew.²⁴

(Shown at right is a photo of the Busy Bee and a headshot of Captain Quick. Note carefully that the paddlewheel is not enclosed, unlike what will be shown in another photo later in this article. Photo is courtesy of the Ovid Historical Society.)



On at least one occasion, but probably several times, “the Busy Bee” transported in the very early years of automobiles small groups of auto club members on a lengthy drive. An article in the 1908 issue of the *Automobile Blue Book* tells about a group—the article doesn’t indicate exactly how many of these new autos—that left Binghamton at 10 o’clock one morning and drove to Owego and then on to Waverly and Elmira to Watkins. From Watkins they traveled on the west side of Seneca Lake to Geneva and then down the east side to Willard State Hospital and then to Ovid where they had dined. Then they went on to Farmer (present Interlaken) and “thence down an easy grade to Kidder’s Ferry, west shore of Cayuga Lake.” The article went on to describe their crossing Cayuga Lake on “the Busy Bee.” “The Busy Bee’ ferry boat seemed to us to be getting ‘dronish,’ but it carried us safely over two and half miles of clear water to King’s Ferry, Cayuga County, where we had a hill climb of about a mile.” From King Ferry they journeyed 21 miles north to Auburn. The article did point out that the Finger Lakes region “abounds in hills, glens and gullies, making it necessary to climb many steep hills; although the scenery repays one for the wear and tear on motors and tires.” One can easily imagine how much time—as well as “wear and tear of motors and tires”—crossing

Cayuga Lake on “the Busy Bee” saved this group of autos.²⁵ (Photo below is courtesy of the J.S. Barr collection.)

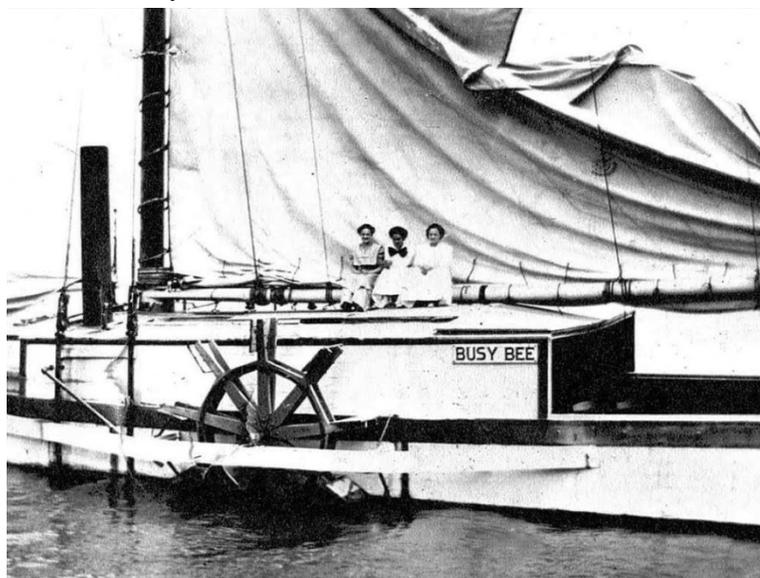


—From the Collection of J.S. Barr
This is the old Busy Bee that plied Clara Brown and her childhood friends across Cayuga Lake more than 70 years ago. Capt. Jim Quick is in the stern. The boat was sunk in Kidder's Bay years ago.

Cap Quick was known to let local children ride for free on “the Busy Bee” when space permitted. He would have them climb up on the cabin roof where he could keep an eye on them. In crossing Cayuga Lake there would be times that he would have to yell out, “Look out young ‘uns, here comes the boom” as the angle of the sails had to be adjusted with changing wind conditions. Once arriving at King Ferry, the children would wander up the wood hill “to pick berries and wild flowers.” Other times they could go to the store house near the railroad station. In that storehouse they could grab a wheat head to chew on. The youth would have to keep a watch out to see if the sign on the other side of the Lake had changed to white,

meaning that Cap Quick would want to depart very soon to get to passengers waiting on the other side.²⁶ (The names of the three ladies shown in the photo below are not known. If anyone seeing this photo, can identify any of the 3 ladies, please contact Seneca County Historian Walter Gable. Photo courtesy of the Ovid Historical Society.)

An important part of his business between 1880 and 1900 or so was transporting people to spend much of their summer in the various hotels in the Sheldrake-Kidders area or at their own summer residences. At a time when there was little air conditioning anywhere, escaping from the heat and crowded life of the big cities like New York City was a mainstay for the well-to-do families. The hotels included the Cayuga Lake House, the Sheldrake House and Cole’s Hotel. Wives and children would typically spend virtually all of the summer as



“summer boarders” at one of these hotels, with the husbands coming for weekends from their city work. Families with their own summer residences included the Leverichs, the Rappleyes, the Taylors, as well as the brother of George Westinghouse. Besides transporting them in general, Cap Quick took them out on excursion parties as well as running errands for family members.²⁷

Cap Quick and George Westinghouse were especially good friends. George Westinghouse used to come in his private car by railroad to King Ferry. He would then ride across the lake on “the Busy Bee” to visit his brother at Kidders. Cap Quick himself much later told the story of how he rescued the wedding party of a Westinghouse daughter from the marooned family yacht, named the “Clara,” and brought them all aboard to safety on the “Busy Bee.”²⁸ (Shown at right is a photo of George Westinghouse and Captain Quick. This photo is courtesy of the Ovid Historical Society.)



George Westinghouse with Captain James Quick. George loved Kidders.

One person who frequently traveled on “the Busy Bee” reported that there was a certain spot in crossing Cayuga Lake that Cap Quick would stop the boat so he could obtain clean drinking water. She recalled his saying, “No other location en route had safe drinking water, except this particular one.”²⁹



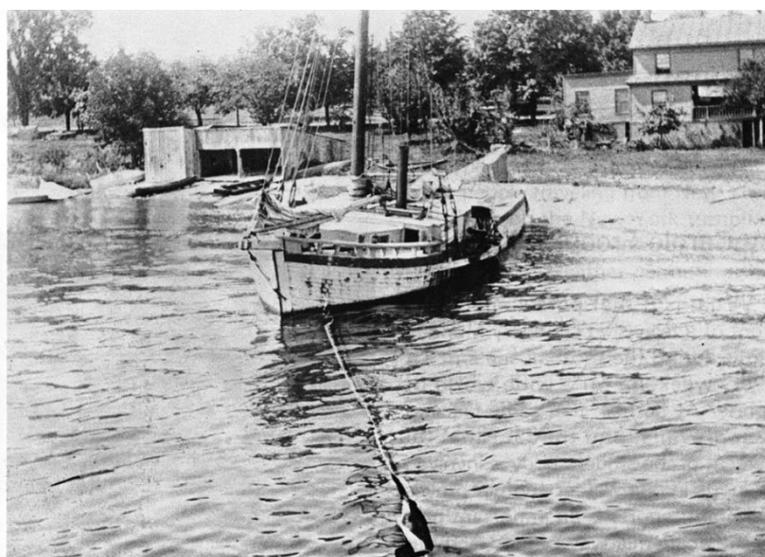
(Note in the picture at left that the paddlewheel has a cover, unlike the photo shown on a previous page in this article.)

Another interesting story stems from Cap Quick’s close friendship with the Huddle family. As part of their annual spring cleaning, the Huddle family would take up their hand-loomed carpets and scrub them down with homemade lye soft soap. Then Cap Quick would attach the rugs to the stern of his boat and drag them in the fresh clean water across to King’s Ferry and back, giving the rugs a thorough rinsing.³⁰

The Busy Bee was frequently used by Cornell University students and their families and friends for excursions especially.

“All Good Things Come to an End”

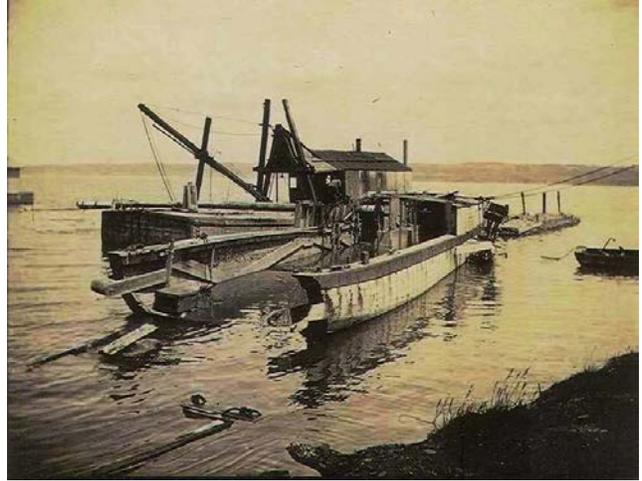
Like that old saying that “all good things must come to an end,” such was the case for “the Busy Bee.” The increasing prevalence of automobiles and better roads brought an end to Cap Quick’s obsolete ferry boat service. Adding to that fact, “the



Busy Bee Ferry, from: Cornell Countryman May 1978

“Busy Bee” was in need of frequent repairs which were costly. Business dropped off to such an extent that the Busy Bee only crossed May to November. In fall 1911, with “the Busy Bee” needing major motor repairs, Cap Quick beached the boat. The wooden boat was resting in the lake, facing the shore along the landing owned by the Colemans and in front of the home of Eunice Tracy, daughter of the late Horace and Polly Tracy. In 1913 Fred and Estelle Coleman Wyer bought the home from Eunice’s estate.³¹

In June 1913 a dredge machine (see photo at right; photo courtesy of Mrs. Naomi C. Brewer) salvaged the mast and other parts of the boat, including the boat’s machinery.³² The remains of the wooden boat was largely left along the shore to rot.³³ Cap Quick did rescue 2 lanterns and wired them and kept them on his mantle in his home for the rest of his life.³⁴



(Shown below are 4 photos to illustrate the rotting of the boat as it lay on the lakeshore. Photos courtesy of Naomi C. Brewer.)



Soon after Cap Quick put the “Busy Bee” to rest, he bid on and bought the steamer “the Senator Stewart.” With help from Robert Wyer, Cap Quick made many excursion trips as well as trips to Ithaca and back for people who needed supplies. In 1914 his ferry boat operation was abandoned completely.³⁵

For many years after ending his ferry boat service, James Quick became a caretaker for the Bartow summer estate at Sheldrake. Naomi Brewer fondly recalls how in the 1930s she and her mother, Edith Wyer Craft, would walk from their home north of Sheldrake to Kidders to Naomi’s grandmother’s home, “opening it up” and getting the home ready for her grandmother to use in the summer and “closing it up for the winter” in the fall. Mrs. Brewer added, “Often Cap Quick would give us rides in his Model T Ford car with the bucket seats behind the driver. I remember it well.”³⁶



(Shown at left is a picture of Dorothy Wickes, the granddaughter of Captain Quick. This picture appeared in the July 1, 1998 issue of the *Ithaca Journal*.)

Now to clarify about the title of “Captain”—abbreviated fondly as “Cap”—this title was an honorary title until in the early 1940s when James Quick was presented a captain’s bar from one of the officials at the newly-built Sampson Naval Base.

Captain James Quick died on October 7, 1946, at the age of 91, at his home. He is buried in the family lot in the Lakeview Cemetery in Interlaken. A fitting spot, in that the cemetery has, as the name suggests, a view of Cayuga Lake.³⁷

More Recent History

As for the lakeside house in which Cap Quick lived all those years, following his death it was owned by a grandson. Then the house sat idle for many years and was finally torn down. On the site currently is a double-wide home occupied by great-grandson John Haviland and his wife Mary.

The “Busy Bee” name remained in local folks’ minds. So it wasn’t a surprise when in 2014 a “Busy Bee Market and Cafe” opened up at the former Horace Tracy property across the lake road. Vera McLafferty of Ithaca had bought the property and converted it into a market/grocery store with a cafe/restaurant in the south part.



Pictures of “the Busy Bee” boat made up much of decor and Busy Bee-themed aprons, glasses and other items were part of the special items sold in the market. You could even buy bars of Captain Quick’s Ferry bar soap hand-made by Avital’s Apiaries.³⁸ As for the restaurant, Vera was a “great



hostess, served delicious meals inside and out on the porch. People came by car, or boat or walking. Saturday nights there was a band.” Vera was forced to close the business in mid-August 2018 due to family illness. The property is now owned by Joseph Sliker who has a Solar business in Ithaca. He is doing extensive renovation to the interior.³⁹

¹ Information provided by Mrs. Naomi C. Brewer in early May 2020, based on her personal recollections and information taken from the diaries of her grandmother, Carrie Coleman

² This title of “Captain”—abbreviated to “Cap”—was an honorary title until in the early 1940s when James Quick was presented a captain’s bar from one of the officials at the newly-built Sampson Naval Base.

³ Betty Auten “The Busy Bee and the Skipper,” *Seneca County History Newsletters*, Vol. 3 No. 4

⁴ Richard F. Palmer, “The *Busy Bee* Ferry Boat on Cayuga Lake, *The Crooked Lake Review*, August 1994

⁵ Walter Gable, “The Polly Ann Ferryboat,” unpublished article written by the Seneca County Historian in 2019.

⁶ Auten

⁷ *Around Ovid*, Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2016, p 39

⁸ “Veteran Lake Pilot...”

⁹ Palmer

¹⁰ Brewer

¹¹ Richard

¹² Walter Gable, “The Busy Bee and the Skipper,” www.co.seneca.ny.us

¹³ Brewer

¹⁴ Auten

¹⁵ Palmer

¹⁶ Palmer

¹⁷ Palmer

¹⁸ Auten

¹⁹ Palmer

²⁰ Palmer

²¹ Brewer

²² Palmer

²³ Palmer

²⁴ Betty Auten “The Busy Bee and the Skipper,” *Seneca County History Newsletters*, Vol. 3 No. 4

²⁵ “Notes of a Run from Binghamton to Auburn, N.Y.,” *Automobile Blue Book*, 1908, vol. 1 New York, Canada and West, p 211.

²⁶ Kye Sharpstein, “The ‘Busy Bee’ Sailed on Cayuga Lake”

²⁷ Palmer

²⁸ Sharpstein

²⁹ Sharpstein

³⁰ “Veteran Lake Pilot...”

³¹ Brewer

³² *Bits and Pieces of 200 Years*, compiled by the Ovid Bicentennial History Committee, Ovid, NY: W.E. Morrison and Co., 1994, p 96

³³ Auten

³⁴ “Veteran Lake Pilot...”

³⁵ Interview with Naomi C. Brewer, April 15, 2020.

³⁶ Brewer

³⁷ “Capt. Quick, Noted Ferry Operator, Dead at 91,” *Ithaca Journal*, October 9, 1946

³⁸ <https://shopavitals.com/collections/get-clean/products/captain-quicks-ferry-with-spearmint-grapefruit-essential-oils>

³⁹ Naomi Brewer information in an email and May 13, 2020 and a telephone conversation on May 14, 2020