

# Spindle City Historic Society

Volume 8 Issue 3

Fall 2005

## DID YOU KNOW

...that the Home for Aged Ladies opened in 1920 at 100 Vliet Street? Mrs. Anna Lepp was matron at the home until its closing in 1960.

...that in 1906, ten thousand workers were employed by the industries in Cohoes, with an aggregate payroll of \$4 million? There were 75 businesses of 50 different types.

...that St. Agnes Cemetery was consecrated in 1883? The Parish was organized in 1878, by the Right Reverend McNierney, Bishop of Albany, who assigned Reverend John Francis Lowery as pastor. In 1882 the congregation purchased a burial plot of 24 acres near the western end of the city. The plot was beautified by an experienced horticulturist, making it the finest cemetery in the city. When the parishes of St. Agnes, St. Maries, and St. Patricks consolidated in the 1980s (creating Holy Trinity Parish), the cemetery was taken over by the Albany Diocese.

...that there is a locktender's house from the Enlarged Erie Canal located at 52 Erie Street? The house was occupied by members of the Champagne family from 1926 to 1999.

...that W.D. McLean, bookseller, stationer, and jeweler, was located at 3 Adams Block on Remsen Street (near Cataract Alley) in 1878? The store moved to Troy in 1884.

...that Dr. Edward Vandercar and fellow Hudson-Mohawk Industrial Gateway founder William Grattan were instrumental in convincing New York State to acquire Peebles Island and establish it as a state park? This effort was successful and today the area is a park with scenic river views, trails and picnic areas. The former Cluett & Peabody bleachery on the island houses a new Visitor's Center for the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, and also contains facilities for the New York State Historic Preservation Office.

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Spindle City Historic Society welcomes new members *Susan Baird, Louise DeBaryshe, Eileen Early, Joy Hopeck, Archie Jackson, and Sara Levi.*

## HISTORIAN'S NOTEBOOK

### Ben Trieble Celebrated One More Time

In the October 14, 1927 issue of the *Cohoes American* it was reported that there had been a retirement party the previous evening to honor Ben Trieble. Workers and supervisory personnel of the Harmony Mills Manufacturing Company had gathered to pay tribute to the long career of Trieble, their Consulting Engineer. Management had specifically created this title for Ben in respect of the broad and detailed knowledge he had of the facility's intricacies.

He joined the company in 1867 at age 13 as an apprentice carpenter. His career developed from apprentice, to carpenter,

to master carpenter, to foreman and finally to consulting engineer. Throughout this he witnessed the evolution of the company from a single cotton mill to a vast complex of unparalleled appearance, efficiency and reputation. As a carpenter, his hand could be traced throughout the company holdings of factories, tenements and ancillary structures.

Finally, reaching 73 going on 74, he reluctantly yielded to the limitations imposed by age and decided to seek "a comfortable arm chair beside my home fire." He added "I can no longer walk to the mills during the winter months."

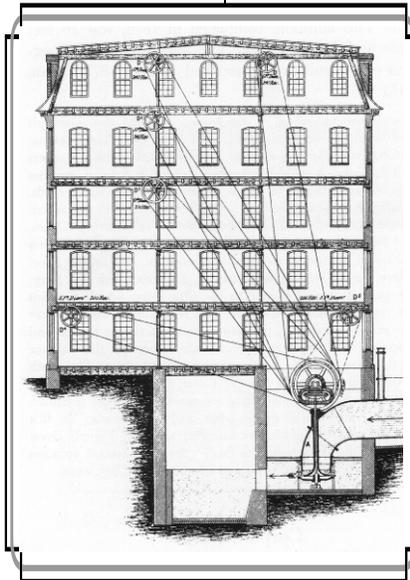
During the evening he also reminisced that "in the early years all employees reported to work at 6 o'clock in the morning; had 20 minutes for lunch then finished the day at 6:30 in the evening. It was quite common for mothers or fathers to lead their 9 and 10 year

old children to work carrying a lantern for safe footing." He remembered "every morning when the machinery was engaged to the water powered belting the lint activated by the sudden movement of the machinery made it momentarily impossible to see the person next to you. The dust just added another layer to the difficulty of the job." "Back in the old days an expert weaver ran 6 to 8 machines and was constantly busy. Today machine operators run several times more machines than that and have time to themselves during the workday."

"61 years is a long time to work in the same place and it breaks my heart to think of leaving my work. I can hardly express in words how I will miss the mills and my fellow employees, many of them long time veterans of the Harmony Mills."

Ben died barely a year and a half after retirement. Fortunately he never witnessed his beloved mills decline from their place of distinction. Within 10 years after Ben retired, Harmony Mill #3, the crown jewel of the entire complex, was sold at auction for \$2,500 even though it was assessed at \$200,000. Today, the southern end of that mill is undergoing a 12 million dollar retrofit for upscale apartments. What, I wonder, would Ben think of that?

Walter Lipka



## **Smith's of Cohoes**

As you walk into Smith's restaurant on Remsen Street, your thoughts instantly flash back through the years to the Prohibition era. The place is a time capsule, little changed since the mid-1930s. Smith's was built in 1873, one year before the Cohoes Music Hall. The building housed a silent movie theater for a time, and was then converted to a pool hall, and into a tavern around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The restaurant achieved its fame when it was purchased by Michael T. Smith. "Big Mike", as he was affectionately known, became a legendary and colorful figure in regional and state politics, achieving some renown in Democratic political circles on the national level. In the early 1900s, Mike Smith had owned a "beef house" on the corner of Vliet and Garner Streets to provide meals for the elderly and poor. After years of service, the "beef house" burned down and was not reopened. Smith also operated a tavern on Willow Street for many years. Familiarly known as a "poor man's club," it was located in the heart of the Harmony Mills district, and was the first of his real estate holdings which grew to some 90 buildings in the area.

Mike Smith's political career was launched in the 1890s when he held the office of Albany County Supervisor. He could not read or write, so whenever he was asked to read or sign something, he made the excuse that he had forgotten his glasses and could not see well enough. "Big Mike" held tight control of Cohoes politics during the 1920s and 1930s. He was physically imposing – 6'4" and over 300 pounds – and had a knack for drawing attention, as at the 1936 Democratic National Convention, when he entered the convention hall attired in white suit and white Stetson hat, carrying a ubiquitous cigar. His impressive entrance was noted in coast-to-coast radio broadcasts.

Mike Smith and his entourage traveled to the Philadelphia convention on a bus referred to as a "land yacht." The vehicle was equipped with a dining room, refreshment bar and observation platform, as well as a roof garden. The "land yacht" generally attracted more attention than most of the convention's events. The bus was parked in front of convention headquarters, blaring a recording of "Happy Days are Here Again", promoting the re-nomination of Franklin Delano Roosevelt for President. Mike Smith had campaigned for FDR in 1932, lending his support to the then-Governor of New York. A warm friendship developed between them, and flourished even after Roosevelt left Albany to lead the nation. On one occasion when the presidential train was passing through Cohoes, Roosevelt ordered the train to stop just so that he could shake hands with his old friend Mike.

Smith's Restaurant was considered one of the best dining establishments in Albany County. The restaurant was also known as the unofficial headquarters for the Democratic party in Cohoes. Among the patrons over the years was former Mayor of New York Robert Wagner. Because of the bitter political rivalry between Mike Smith and Republican Governor Thomas Dewey, Smith was not able to obtain a liquor license. After several failed attempts, he decided to operate his restaurant without one. No one dared challenge him.

Smith had an appreciation for cars and antiques. He often owned four or five cars at a given time, and over the years amassed a large and valuable collection of antiques. Among his acquisitions were \$100,000 worth of items from the Burden estate; many of these were believed to have originally come from the Vanderbilts. Mike's collections were housed at his Hamilton Street residence, often called the "big house." The structure was an architectural monstrosity, created by Mike's propensity for constructing additions to accommodate the items he acquired. One example was an oriental rug obtained from the Burden estate; Mike found he had no place to put it, so he built a new room around the rug.

Another of Mike's prized acquisitions was the bar at Smith's. The bar, made of African mahogany, extends nearly 50 feet, and at the time was reputed to be the longest bar north of New York City. It is said to have been brought from Tammany Hall in New York City by the O'Connor family, who ran a speakeasy in Albany, and later a bar and restaurant on State Street. Governor Alfred E. Smith was



*The bar at Smith's*

among the patrons of O'Connor's bar. Because of the size of the bar and its association with notable (and some notorious) political figures, Mike Smith was determined to get it for his restaurant in Cohoes. And so he did. The bar is ornamented with other unique artifacts. Two palace urns of Egyptian revival design grace the back-bar. The 5-foot tall urns are reportedly over 250 years old and are believed to have come from the Burden Estate in Troy. In the front of the bar is a smaller vase once owned by pugilist John L. Sullivan. The circumstances under which Mike Smith came to possess this item are murky.

The dining room at Smith's was added in the late 1930s. The floor of the main dining room has individually inlaid tile. An additional dining room was added in 1949; leaving the restaurant floor plan as it appears today. The huge stone fireplace in the dining room was laid stone by stone by an Italian stonemason from Cohoes. The room's fireplace was originally planned to be along the left wall as one enters the dining room. But when it was partially constructed at this location, "Big Mike" decided he did not want it there and had it disassembled and the wall replaced. The fireplace was then built at its present location, but when it was half finished Mike concluded it was too small so it was rebuilt to its present size.

The building that houses Smith's maintains its historic appearance, and the interior evokes times past. One need only think of the thousands of stories shared over the bar, and the backroom political discussions and deals over the years, to sense the history of the place, and its embodiment in "Big Mike" Smith.

Michael T. Smith died on December 31, 1949. He was 90 years old. On the day of his funeral, Cohoes school children were given the day off. He will always be remembered as one of the city's most influential political leaders, and a character larger than life.

*Thanks to Eunice Antonucci for her account of the history of Smith's restaurant and the story of Michael T. Smith, from which this article was adapted, and for the photographs of Smith's restaurant used in this article.*



*The staff at Smith's on December 5, 1941. First row, second from right – Ralph Purificato, chef; second row, left – Ma Brow; last row, second from right – Carmie Toma, waiter. Also in the group is Fauncie Veronese. Can you identify any of the other people in this photograph?*



## Off the Top...

Wow, another summer has flown by and now we are moving into Fall again. The Spindle City Historic Society was busy this summer and has exciting news. As you read this issue of the newsletter, our second book, "Cohoes Revisited" is off to the publisher. It will not be available until January, after the holiday season, but SCHS is offering Gift Certificates that can be given over the holidays, and the books will be distributed as soon as we get them. Look for additional information or contact us about the gift certificates. Our annual raffle is well under way and the crock painted with scenes of Cohoes is eye catching and one of a kind. Be sure to get your tickets before the Thanksgiving weekend drawing so you could be the lucky winner!

Speaking of winners, a group of elementary school students from Long Island worked hard to raise money to preserve the history of the Erie Canal. Their efforts paid off and Cohoes is the winner. The money they raised, along with funds from SCHS, enabled us to design an interpretive sign about the canal system and the locks and that sign was dedicated on September 17<sup>th</sup>. The sign is located by Lock 18 on North Mohawk Street. Stop by, take a look and let us know what you think. Many thanks to Mayor McDonald for declaring September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005 as "Hewitt and Riverside Elementary School Day" to honor the hard working students from those schools. Also, many thanks to their teachers Joseph Paluseo and Maureen Dockery, and their principals Joanne Spencer and Patricia Bock who worked with them.

Keep your eyes and ears opened about our future tours (the next one is on the Churches of Cohoes) and our lectures (an exciting one is being prepared on worker housing in Cohoes).

Donations of photographs, memorabilia and artifacts have been coming in for our growing collection. The SCHS is grateful for these contributions. Our regular meetings are the last Wednesday of the month at 7 PM in the Cohoes Visitor's Center at 58 Remsen Street (the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the historic Cohoes Music Hall). I hope to see each one of you at an event. Let's keep memories and history of Cohoes alive!

Paul D. Dunleavy  
President

## "Cohoes Revisited" is Coming Soon



The Spindle City Historic Society's second book, "Cohoes Revisited", to be published by Arcadia Press, will soon be in print. The SCHS Arcadia team is hard at work finalizing photo captions and layout.

We expect a publication date in early 2006, but you can reserve your copy now by contacting us. The book also makes a great gift. Although the book will not be released by the holidays, SCHS is offering gift certificates that can be redeemed when the book arrives in January. We can also arrange for mailing of books for those who cannot pick them up. And remember, if books are purchased directly from SCHS, our organization retains over 40% of the cover price to support programming, exhibits, and other activities, as well as this newsletter. If you'd like to reserve copies of the book or purchase gift certificates, please call us at 518-237-5618 or e-mail us at [cherniak@nycap.rr.com](mailto:cherniak@nycap.rr.com).

## Trustees' Summer Picnic and Meeting

On August 23, SCHS trustees gathered for a meeting and summer picnic at the home of June and Walter Cherniak. Along with enjoying great food and socializing, the trustees discussed the society's upcoming events, ongoing projects, policies, and goals for the future. If you'd like to join in the festivities next time, let us know. SCHS is always looking for additional members who wish to become more active in the organization and serve as trustees.

## Canal Square Mural

Cohoes High School art teacher Joann Johnson has created a mural in Canal Square, between Remsen Street and the Odgen Mill, celebrating the history of the Erie Canal in Cohoes. Plans are underway to create additional murals in other places around the city, with subjects such as the mastodont, the mills and mill workers, and historic personages including baseball great George Stacey Davis. SCHS is excited about these projects to highlight the history of Cohoes, and is grateful that we were able to assist by providing images and information from our archive that helped to inspire the work.

## Harmony Mills & Mechanicville Hydroelectric Station Tour

On Saturday, August 6, SCHS members had a rare opportunity to take two special tours – a tour of Harmony Mill #3, currently being converted to loft apartments, and a tour of the 1897 Mechanicville Hydroelectric Plant on the Hudson River.



*SCHS members inside Harmony Mill #3, with tour guide John DeMeo (left)*

The morning's tour of Harmony Mill #3 covered the building from the turbine room in the basement to the roof and upper floors with their awesome views of the Mohawk River, Cohoes Falls, and Rensselaer County hills. This was a chance to see firsthand the progress in restoring and adapting this landmark industrial structure for residential use.



*The Mechanicville Hydroelectric Station*

The afternoon's tour took the group up the Hudson to Mechanicville, where James Besha, President of the Albany Engineering Corporation, guided SCHS members through the historic hydroelectric plant originally designed by famed General Electric engineer Charles Proteus Steinmetz. The plant has been carefully restored and maintains much of its original equipment, and still effectively generates power after one hundred years of operation.

Future plans for the site include creation of a Visitor Center to host students and other groups, and further restoration of the buildings and grounds to more closely approach the original appearance of the facility.



*A view inside the plant, with its long hall and row of seven generators, which convert the waterpower produced by water flowing through turbines into electricity. Four of the generators are currently in operation; the rest will be brought on line shortly.*



*James Besha demonstrates the stability and lack of vibration of the generator by balancing a nickel on the shaft support.*



Several SCHS members were fortunate to have an additional unexpected tour that day. During the time between the scheduled tours, they stopped at Lock 2 of the Champlain Division of the Barge Canal, and were shown the workings of the lock by the lock tender on duty and invited in to see the lock's well-preserved 1910 power generation facility.

*Thanks to Uri Kaufman (Harmony Mills) and the Hudson River Power Corporation (Mechanicville Hydro Station) for permitting us to tour these facilities. And many thanks to our tour guides John DeMeo and James Besha.*

## Grace Reavy – A Pioneering Woman in Public Service and Community Leadership



Grace Reavy was born on March 14, 1877. Her father, Frank C. Reavy, was an undertaker. Grace attended St. Bernard's Academy, and after graduating in 1893 attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, where she developed her talent

as a pianist. In 1900, the Reavy family moved to a stately Victorian home on Van Schaick Island. The house, where Grace resided for the remainder of her life, still stands on Ontario Street, near the bridge (called the Reavy Bridge) connecting Van Schaick and Simmons Islands.

When Frank died in 1905, Grace and her brother John took charge of their father's business; Grace continued as President and Treasurer of the corporation following her brother's death in 1919. In 1916, the business was located to 25 Mohawk Street and Henry Smart was hired to manage daily operation of the funeral business. He remained manager for many years, through the funeral home's relocation to 121 Remsen St. in 1926 and to 282 Remsen St. in 1943.

Grace Reavy was a committed community activist, involved with many cultural and humanitarian organizations and activities over the years. She founded the Cohoes Women's Municipal Welfare League, which established the city's first playgrounds in 1913. She chaired a home service division of the American Red Cross from the First World War period (1917) until 1931. She worked with the Albany County Tuberculosis Association beginning in 1914, and with the Albany County chapter of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, chairing the first fund-raising campaign for Cohoes for the latter organization, and heading numerous fund drives over the years. In 1952, she was named to the Board of Directors of the Albany County Board of Health.

She was an active communicant of St. Bernard's Parish, involved in the St. Bernard's Academy Alumni Association and the Court St. Bernard

CDA Cohoes. Assisting conductor and composer Professor John Carabella (who was at one time the organist for St. Bernard's Church), Grace helped to organize the Albany Symphony Orchestra in 1931. She also served as President of the Siena College Opera Forum.

Grace's most notable achievements were in the field of public service. On January 1, 1919, she was appointed by Cohoes Mayor Michael J. Foley to the post of City Comptroller. She was the first woman in New York State to be named to municipal public office. In 1921, she was reappointed by Mayor Daniel Cosgro, serving as Comptroller until she was appointed City Treasurer. She remained City Treasurer until July 1, 1928, when she became Commissioner of Elections in Albany. Only a month later, she was named Deputy Secretary of State by Edward J. Flynn, the Secretary of State under Franklin D. Roosevelt in his first term as Governor of New York. On April 15, 1937 Governor Herbert Lehman appointed Grace to the New York State Civil Service Commission; she was soon elected President of the Commission, holding this post until her retirement in July 1943. During her years as Deputy Secretary of State, Grace became friends with both Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. She worked with Eleanor in support of various causes, and campaigned for women's rights and greater roles for women in public life.

Drawing on her own experiences pursuing a career in public service and bearing responsibility for a family business, Grace worked to advance opportunities for business and professional women, participating in activities of both the Cohoes and Albany Business and Professional Women's Clubs. She was affiliated with Altrusa International, a service organization of professional women.

Grace Reavy died on February 20, 1959. She was buried from the Reavy family funeral home on Remsen Street, the business she had guided for more than 40 years. She left a legacy in her pioneering role as a woman in public service in Cohoes, Albany County, and New York State government, and through her community activism and organizational skills in promoting public health, the performing arts, and women's rights.

*JC/staff*

*Thanks to John Reavy for providing the photograph of Grace Reavy.*

## Mr. O'Leary's Inventions

Because of its status in the forefront of industry in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Cohoes was a center for industrial innovation and invention to improve manufacturing efficiency. But Cohoes also was home to inventors in other fields. One of these creative individuals was John O'Leary of 205 Congress Street. O'Leary obtained patents for motor vehicle fenders to prevent pedestrian-vehicle collisions, and for a prototype airplane with hovering capability.

In the early days of the development of motorized vehicles, there was great concern about injury to pedestrians given the relatively high speeds of motor vehicles with respect to other street traffic. In attempts to solve this problem, O'Leary developed the "O'Leary fender", which purported to eliminate the possibility of pedestrian injury. The fender had a bar in front, which when lightly touched (as at first contact with a pedestrian) would move a lever holding a net basket or cradle to release and scoop the endangered pedestrian safely out of harm's way. O'Leary's concept impressed the New York Automobile Association, which recommended the device for taxicabs and commercial cars. He was issued patents in 1908, 1910, 1915, and 1916.

O'Leary developed ideas for an airplane with hovering capability, proposed for use in wartime. The flying machine had four bladed propellers, each giving a thrust of 243 pounds in vertical lift. He claimed that aeronautical engineers declared his airship to be "the only type of aircraft to make aviation a success." It could rise straight up from the ground, and while in horizontal flight could slow down and stop forward motion, hovering in midair. This feature, as well as its limited wingspread, would permit storage in a small space, takeoff from a limited area and easy transport, assets that might make the aircraft valuable to the military. The design also included a machine gun mounted on the hood of the plane, within reach of the aviator. It is not known whether a full-size working prototype of the plane was ever built, but O'Leary's aircraft invention was never adopted by the armed forces or developed for general use.

JC/staff

### In Memoriam

Longtime Spindle City Historic Society member and trustee Bernard T. Shaw passed away on May 27, 2005. Mr. Shaw's collection of photographs of historic Cohoes has been donated to SCHS in his memory. We offer condolences to his family and sincere gratitude for this generous gift.

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## ***Spindle City Historic Society Membership Application***

[www.timesunion.com/communities/spindlecity](http://www.timesunion.com/communities/spindlecity)

[www.spindlecity.org](http://www.spindlecity.org)

President - Paul Dunleavy

First Vice President - Daniele Cherniak    Second Vice President - Tor Shekerjian

Secretary - Linda C. Christopher    Treasurer - June Cherniak

<input type="checkbox"/> Individual Membership	\$10.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Institutional Membership	\$25.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Senior Citizen Membership	\$ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Contributing Membership	\$35.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Student Membership	\$ 5.00	<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Membership	\$50.00
<input type="checkbox"/> Family Membership	\$15.00		

*We have great things planned in our home in the Cohoes Visitor's Center!*

*Please help if you can with an additional donation to support our upcoming programs:*

\$5.00     \$10.00     other

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Mail completed form with membership fee, payable to Spindle City Historic Society, to:  
June Cherniak, Treasurer, 415 Vliet Boulevard, Cohoes, NY 12047

## ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

**SCHS Annual Raffle** - The prize for this year's raffle is a hand-painted crock with scenes of the Cohoes Falls, the Harmony Mills, and a canalboat. Raffle tickets are \$1.00 each, or 6 for \$5.00. The raffle drawing will be at the Cohoes Christmas Tree Lighting, the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Please contact us at 237-5618 or at [cherniak@nycap.rr.com](mailto:cherniak@nycap.rr.com) if you would like to purchase tickets.



**Saturday, September 17** - Dedication of a new interpretive sign along the Erie Canal in Cohoes. The sign, designed by SCHS members, will be located near Lock 18 of the enlarged Erie Canal. It describes how a lock works and honors the efforts of students from Hewitt and Riverside Elementary Schools in Rockville Centre, NY, who adopted sites of the Erie Canal in Cohoes. Ceremony at 1 p.m. near Lock 18, North Mohawk Street.

**Wednesday, September 28** - Spindle City Historic Society monthly meeting, 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Saturday, October 8** - Guided tour of historic churches in Cohoes, 11 a.m. Tour begins at the Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Wednesday, October 26** - Spindle City Historic Society monthly meeting, 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Sunday, November 13** - Introducing Adelaide. The life and times of Adelaide Dickey, the famed dancer and vaudeville performer who spent her early years in Cohoes. This presentation by Paul Dunleavy will feature exciting new information and images of Adelaide discovered in recent research. Co-sponsored by the Victorian Cultural League and Victorian Social Club. 1 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center.

**Wednesday, November 30** - Spindle City Historic Society meeting. 7 p.m., Cohoes Visitor's Center. There will be no meeting in December because of the holidays.

*Photo credits this issue: Walter Cherniak, Paul Dunleavy, Tor Shekerjian*

~ SCHS Newsletter Staff ~

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Spindle City Historic Society

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