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THE INSATIABLE GLUTTON.

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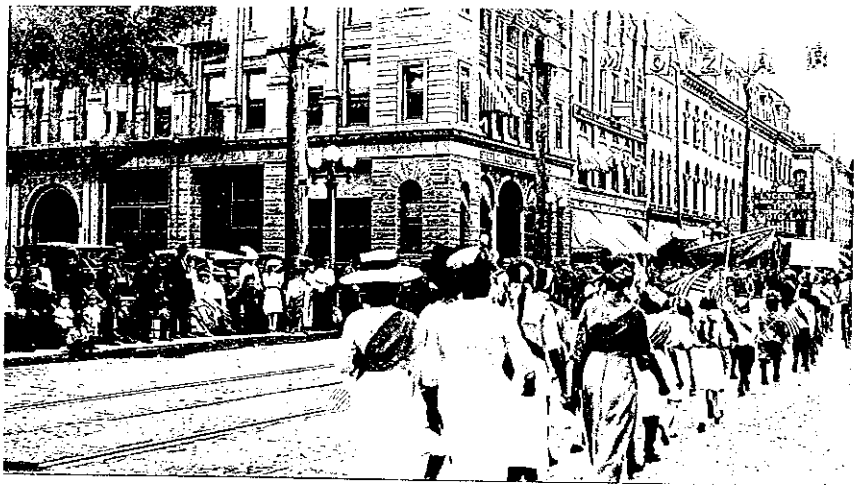

Suffragettes march in Elmira, 1913.
(Image courtesy of the Chemung County Historical Society).

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On the Cover

Cover of Puck magazine, December 20, 1882. "The Insatiable Glutton".
(Image courtesy of the Chemung County Historical Society.)

From the Editor

You can fool some of the people some of the time, and some people all of the time, but can you fool the federal government? Well, yes and no. As local Historian Gary Emerson writes, the largest Civil War pension ever awarded by the federal government - $13,000 - was bestowed upon an Elmira veteran of the Civil War - who was "blind" and a deserter - and was to be proven fraudulent. It's an exciting tale of one soldier's service and his post-war experience.

County Historian J. Kelsey Jones writes about one cent reward notices for children serving as indentured servants.

100 years ago, the *Elmira Advertiser* reported that a famous opera singer performsin town, the Cashmere Grotto was planning a vaudeville show, and the local roads would not be oiled this year, but perhaps the most sobering news was that the local army recruiting station was very busy, hoping to make its 200-men quota, as reported by Gary Packard.

School's out, the fish are biting, and the carousel at Eldridge Park is waiting for you and your family. Enjoy all Chemung County has to offer this summer, including a trolley ride (departing from CCHS) and indulge in the great ice cream shops in the area!

Until fall,

Kathryn Whitmarsh

The Great Swindle:

"Blind" Patterson and the Union Pension Fraud

By Gary Emerson, Historian

The man had been on the run for more than two weeks, but now he was caught. He was placed in a jail cell in Washington, D.C. and the door locked behind him. On his person was discovered $1,600 of the over $13,000 he had received from the federal government. The man was Francis "Blind" Patterson. He was from Elmira, New York, and he was awarded the largest Civil War pension ever granted. It was a pension that created a national sensation followed by national outrage, when it was discovered that it was obtained by fraud.[1]

Francis "Blind" Patterson
(Image courtesy of the St. Bonaventure University Archives.)

Patterson was born in Greene, New York in 1837. He grew up in Binghamton, never getting any schooling. For a short time, the family moved to Elmira, then back to Binghamton where Francis, or Frank as his acquaintances called him, took a job working on the Chenango Canal. He married Helen Greek in Elmira when he was nineteen, and they moved to Olean, New York, where he worked as a teamster, but also worked on the Genesee Valley Canal in the summer months.[2]

Frank had a reputation as a rough character who abused alcohol. One co-worker, William Canning, called him a "pretty rough fellow." Canning also noted that Frank frequently complained about his weak eyes. Yet, when the Civil War broke out, Canning and Patterson enlisted in Olean, joining Company G of the 154th New York Volunteers as privates in August, 1862. He left Helen behind with three children while he went off to war. Helen struggled to pay the bills in Frank's absence. He sent money home, but with the army on the move the soldiers often went

for long periods without pay. Frank mostly worked behind the lines as a teamster, and he frequently wrote to Helen by dictating letters that literate soldiers wrote out for him.[3]

Frank served at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. At Chancellorsville, even though he was stationed to the rear of the army, his wagon train was subjected to artillery fire, killing one man and some mules. At Gettysburg, he was fortunate to remain far behind the lines and out of harm's way. But it was during the summer of 1863 that his eyes worsened. They began to sting and itch, then became red and inflamed. A doctor gave him some eyewash, but it failed to help.[4]

After the Battle of Gettysburg, Frank got bad news in a letter from home. Helen and one of the children were very ill, and he feared they might not live. Frank had been separated from the rest of the 154th as they were being shipped west to help the besieged Union troops at Chattanooga, so Frank and others were placed on a train to follow them. Riding on the train, Frank drank heavily, his red, swollen eyes, and worries about his family back home fueled his misery. A fellow soldier from the 154th, Wellman Nichols, commiserated with Frank, and the two hatched a plan to desert. As the train slowed for a stop in a town, the two men jumped from the boxcar and headed north. They traveled together until they reached Oil City, Pennsylvania, where they split up. Four months later, Frank arrived back in Olean, which left some wondering where was he during those four months. He never accounted for that lost time, but some speculated he worked on the Genesee Valley Canal under an assumed name, although Frank denied that.[5]

In early February, 1864, Frank made a dramatic entrance to his Olean home by crawling through a window and surprising Helen. Over the next few days, his eyes worsened. A doctor visited him, but could offer little help beyond eye bandages and tea leaf compresses. Helen was annoyed that she had suffered so much in his absence, and now her husband had returned home a blind man. Frank insisted the blindness was brought on by campfire smoke and a bad cold that he suffered, overlooking the fact that his eyes bothered him even before his military service.[6]

The military listed Frank as a deserter, and they were looking for him. He was arrested in Olean on March 2, 1864, sent to the Provost Marshall in Dunkirk, New York, and then put on a train to the state military depot in Elmira. He was jailed at Barracks 3 in Elmira for a short time, before being sent to a hospital on William Street. He was totally blind.7

Frank was fortunate to have a sister, Olive Hooker, who lived in Elmira. She managed to get permission to have Frank stay with her in her rented house and visit the hospital daily. Frank sent a letter to Helen in Olean that the doctors planned to recommend his discharge from the

military. With his enlistment bounty and back pay due to him, Frank figured the couple could get a place to live and make a new start in Elmira. Helen packed some belongings and made the move to Elmira. Frank got his discharge, but not his money. The discharge was conditional. The military still classified him as a deserter, and until he explained his long absence he would get nothing.[8]

Helen fumed at their life of poverty in Elmira and blamed Frank for all that had befallen them. Frank did odd jobs to earn what he could. He mostly cut wood with a buck saw using a stick to measure the cuts. He also helped cut brush, worked at a brickyard sometimes, and every Fall he husked corn. And he drank. He drank a lot, which often got him arrested.

Frank discovered that begging on the street was easier and more profitable than working. A kind soul bought him a hand-organ to play while soliciting donations. Frank got drunk and "knocked the music out of it." When his son, Abram, got married and was no longer available to guide his father around town, Frank got a shepherd dog to be his guide. The dog skillfully and faithfully guided Frank around town, even safely navigating him home after one of his drinking binges. Frank became a well-known, but pitiful character wandering the streets of Elmira.[9]

Frank and his family presented such a pitiful sight that some Elmirans took steps to improve his life. Getting a monthly pension for his military service and disability would hopefully set the family on a path to respectability and independence. In 1866, members of the Ladies Relief Association, aided by officials from the Soldiers' Home, petitioned the commissioner of pensions seeking a pension for Frank. But Frank faced two challenging hurdles: proving that his disability was due to his military service, and producing discharge papers. Frank had no valid discharge papers because he deserted. Frank insisted that campfire smoke and a bad cold had caused his eye affliction. He did get an affidavit from a former soldier from the 154th, William Lennon, who swore that Frank did suffer from sore eyes in the army, but further investigation proved Lennon to be a drunkard and illiterate. His affidavit was judged a forgery and ignored.[10] The pension claim was rejected, but the growing lobby for pension benefits and the subsequent legislation it produced would eventually change Frank's fortunes; however, it was a windfall obtained through deceit and greed.

A contentious debate already swirled around pensions and veterans. In his Second Inaugural, Abraham Lincoln said, "[L]et us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve a just, and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations." Civil War veterans felt the nation owed them a debt for

their patriotic sacrifice that saved the republic, and they wanted the nation to live up to Lincoln's words. Veterans of the American Revolution received compensation in the form of land, and by 1832 Congress voted a pension for all veterans of the Revolution, so a precedent existed for veteran pensions.[11]

Congress first passed legislation in 1862 providing pensions for widows and orphans of soldiers, and to soldiers disabled by the war. Over time, Congress increased and expanded pensions for Civil War veterans as it became a political issue. Republicans sought to bond veterans to their party through liberal pension legislation. Republicans also wanted to preserve tariffs to protect American industry, even though the tariff revenues created a large surplus in the U.S. Treasury. Generous pensions helped spend down the surplus allowing Republicans to preserve high tariffs. Veteran groups, like the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), actively lobbied Congress for expansive pensions providing monthly payments to veterans and their dependents.[12]

Congress continued to tweak the pension system, making more and more people eligible for pension money. An important adjustment was the Arrears Act of 1879. This provision allowed new applicants for a pension to receive a lump sum payment covering arrears for the money they should have been getting since they were first discharged or when the family's soldier died. As more people collected pension money, pensions became a sizeable share of the federal budget each year, and in fact, became the largest single budget item.[13]

Pensions became a divisive political issue. Democrat, Grover Cleveland, who avoided service in the Civil War by paying a Polish immigrant to take his place, was unfriendly to pensions. Congress often passed private pensions through legislation, intending to help veterans who failed to qualify under the regular pension system. In 1888, Congress passed 131 private pensions ranging from $50 to $8 per month without any discussion about them. Cleveland objected to the private pensions and vetoed most of them. Cleveland also earned the ire of veterans when he suggested that captured Confederate flags should be returned to Southern states. The determined outrage voiced by Union veterans forced Cleveland to back down on his pledge to return the flags, and in the next presidential election Cleveland lost to Republican Benjamin Harrison, with the Union veteran vote playing a deciding role. Harrison proved to be much more friendly to pensions.[14]

The growing expense led to a public outcry against pensions and their recipients. Gilded Age culture believed charity should go only to those so disabled that they could not work. Many opined that Congress was being too lenient in granting pensions, thus creating a dependent class eschewing work to live off the public dole. Many also believed

it was unmanly to not independently support oneself through work. A rising resentment surfaced in editorials and in journals. One letter to the Chicago Times in 1887 characterized Union veterans as loafers, paupers, and pension-beggars. The letter harshly concluded, "It will be happy day for the Republic when the last beggar of the Grand Army humbug is securely planted."[15]

But veterans and their families were not the only beneficiaries of the ever expanding pension system. Lawyers and pension agents discovered a lucrative business in helping veterans file for claims, helping them navigate the bureaucracy and complete the paperwork, and in return earning a fee for their expertise. Agents pushed veterans to file claims since they got five dollars for each one. In 1884, a pension lobbyist succeeded in getting a law passed raising the claim fee to twenty-five dollars, and it made the fee retroactive to include all of their past filings as well![16]

It was greedy agents who turned Frank's pension claim into a great swindle. In 1881, Dr. Robert N. Mills of Elmira encountered Frank begging on the streets. Asking about whether he was getting a pension, Mills learned the whole sad story of Frank's past. Mills was an intelligent, dapper looking man, but it belied his sinister character. Frank's story led the conniving Mills to hatch a plan to benefit himself. Soon he was plying Frank with alcohol and stories about how he would make Frank wealthy by getting his pension with arrears and a monthly payment. Mills had a friend, Captain John Laidlaw, and he told Frank that together they would secure the pension.[17]

Thoughts of getting a huge payout motivated Mills and Laidlaw as they speedily worked on the details to get Frank's pension approved. They had to somehow prove that Frank became disabled by his military service. Locating a former member of the 154th Infantry, Wilkes Miller, who lived in Elmira, Mills and Laidlaw got him drunk and promised Miller one hundred dollars if he would swear a deposition that Frank's eyes went bad in 1863 while he was in the military. Miller agreed.

Mills even blackmailed the pension commissioner, who took the depositions from Frank and Wilkes Miller, to approve the pension, which he did. But, the chief of the commissions department ordered a closer examination of the claim. A special examiner interviewed several former members of the 154th, who remembered Frank Patterson as a drunk with a bad disposition, but they did not recall any eye problem. The pension claim was rejected for lack of evidence.[18]

Mills and Laidlaw were not about to give up, and resolved to find a way to get the pension. Although they had not given up, Frank's wife, Helen, had. Tired of the poverty, the drunkenness, and even some beatings by Frank, Helen left the marriage in 1883. She moved in with a

rag peddler who lived near Waverly, just across the Pennsylvania border. Frank began living with another woman in Elmira.[19]

Five years after their first attempt at a pension was rejected, Mills and Laidlaw were still hatching their scheme. They enlisted the aid of an Elmira attorney, Andrew Galatian, who agreed to work with them to get the desertion charge dropped. If they could prove Frank was blind before he left the army, they could use that to justify his absence. Once again, Wilkes Miller was plied with alcohol and promised one thousand dollars if he would testify that Frank had bad eyes in the service. Mills and Laidlaw bolstered their case by enlisting a former captain and quartermaster of the 154th New York, Edward Porter of Olean. They also got Porter drunk, and although he never knew Frank he was glad to help an ailing member of the old unit out of pity. Porter also swore that Frank complained of bad eyes in the army and worried that he was going blind. Armed with this new "evidence," Mills and Laidlaw applied for Frank's pension once again in 1887, and succeeded.[20]

On May 14, 1887, Frank's pension was approved. Although the original pension amount had been eight dollars per month, subsequent pension legislation had adjusted it upward to $72 per month. Based on his discharge date of 1864 the arrears came to a whopping $13, 337.99. He would also get a payment of $72 each month for the rest of his life. This was the largest pension payment ever granted to a Civil War veteran. In today's dollars it would equal a quarter of a million dollars. Frank Patterson was instantly rich.[21]

Frank was delighted at his sudden good fortune. It was reported that when asked about his windfall, Frank responded, "Old Blind Patterson won't be kicked around anymore." His award also mended his marriage as Helen suddenly left the rag peddler returning home to share in Frank's hopes for a better future.[22] Everything seemed to be happening so quickly. Unfortunately for Frank, so were the events that would make his fame and fortune ephemeral.

Elmira city attorney, Hosea Rockwell, had read about Frank's pension award, and he also heard rumors that Dr. Mills was telling people he was Frank's guardian. Rockwell knew that was not true, and rightly suspected the foul intentions of Mills. Rockwell petitioned the Chemung County court to appoint a guardian to Frank to help secure and manage his finances. The court appointed David Pratt, a cashier at the Second National Bank in Elmira, as Frank's guardian. But it was too late, Mills and Laidlaw got wind of the effort to name a guardian, and decided to get their hands on the money before that could happen. Mills, along with Elmira attorney, Charles Knipp, and Frank, took a train to Syracuse to confront the Pension Agent, Major T. L. Poole, to get him to pay on the vouchers due to Frank. Using Knipp's connections with a

member of the Treasury Department, Mills got Poole to pay the vouchers to Frank. The men returned to Elmira, and Mills convinced Frank to sign over most of the money to him. He also threatened to "carve Patterson up" if he ever told about their scheming. Frank did get to keep some of the money, and he was to receive $72 per month, so he was satisfied. On June 14th, he and Helen put some money down to purchase the Fishler House hotel in Wellsburg so the couple would have a home and a way to make a living.[23]

Mills left one important detail uncovered. He had promised Wilkes Miller a thousand dollars for his fraudulent testimony. When Miller tried to collect, Mills laughed at him and said, "We don't owe you anything." That was a big mistake. Miller decided to blow the lid off of the entire scheme.

Miller contacted a Pension Bureau examiner and admitted that he took bribes in 1881 and again in 1887 to lie about Frank's eye condition in the army. When attorney Andrew Galatian heard what Miller had done, he acted quickly to cover his role in the scheme by explaining that he had no idea fraud was involved in the claim. He then took a sworn statement from Miller and sent it off to pension officials in Washington, D.C. The affidavit made it clear that Miller had lied and had taken money. Now it was a race to find Frank, Mills, and Laidlaw, and to track down the money.[24]

Mills, Laidlaw, and the Pattersons left Elmira. Laidlaw and the Pattersons, including their daughter, went to Troy, Pennsylvania. Mills, who had been drinking, fell asleep on the train and did not wake up until the train was in Williamsport. He contacted the others, and had them meet him in Williamsport. There Mills cashed in the pension checks he still possessed, but the bank could only cover it in gold coins, which he carried off in bags. Mills had the Pattersons take a train to Lock Haven, while he and Laidlaw took a train to Virginia. The culprits were splitting up.

At Lock Haven, Frank put $2,300 in a bank, most of it gold coins. He got a hotel room where he and Helen began drinking a great deal. Meanwhile Mills, his wife, and Laidlaw were in Virginia spending their money freely. Mills even bought his sister some land for six hundred dollars. But authorities were closing in. When Mills arrived at his sister's home early in the morning on June 23, a pension special examiner and a county sheriff were waiting for him. Laidlaw was there as well—sound asleep on the sofa. Bags filled with over four thousand dollars in gold coins were discovered inside the home. Dr. and Mrs. Mills, along with Laidlaw, were arrested and taken to Washington, D.C. On further inspection in Washington, it was discovered that Mrs. Mills had

concealed $635 in her bosom. The Elmira police chief arrived to escort the party back to Elmira.[25]

The Pattersons back-tracked, returning to Waverly, then crossed the border to Pennsylvania to hide out at the tenement building where Helen had once lived with the rag peddler. Leaving their daughter there, and joined by the teenaged son of Dr. Mills, they hit the rails again, heading to Virginia to join up with Dr. Mills. Arriving in Stanardsville, Virginia, they were surprised to learn that Dr. Mills had been arrested. While preparing to board another train to flee, they were all arrested on June 28 by the very same pension agent who had nabbed Mills. The New York Times announced the arrest of Frank Patterson and reported that he was taken to Washington, D.C. to be locked up. It also said, "He had $1,600 of the pension money on his person, and this, together with the money already regained, makes $12,850 which has been recovered by the Government of the $13,250 paid out on account of Patterson's pension."[26]

Once back in Elmira, the conspirators all proclaimed their innocence and insisted that no fraud was involved. The Pension Commission disagreed and suspended Frank's pension. Frank was poor again, and feared he would lose Helen to the rag peddler once more. His fear proved unfounded, as she stayed with Frank the rest of his life.[27]

Four legal proceedings took place attempting to charge Frank, Mills, and Laidlaw with fraud. A preliminary hearing was held in Binghamton on July 6, 1887, followed by a grand jury indictment in a Buffalo Federal Court in September. Next came a Federal court trial in Auburn in November that ended with a deadlocked jury. A final Federal court trial in Utica in March, 1888 surprisingly resulted in the acquittal of all three defendants. Many Elmirans attended the Utica trial in support of Frank, and they applauded jubilantly when the acquittal was announced. The federal government spent more than twice the amount of Frank's pension to try the case, but failed to get a conviction.[28]

Frank was free to go, but he was pension-less and nearly penniless. The military once again classified him as a deserter, making getting a pension impossible. Yet, Frank applied again for a pension, using his destitute state as a defense. In his application he told the commission, "I am now utterly destitute, old, infirm, and unable to obtain the necessaries of life. Since the close of the war I have been and am now an object of charity, buffeted from door to door, and dependent upon the kindness of strangers to keep me from starvation's door." His request was denied.[29]

The *Elmira Daily Gazette* and *Free Press* reported in August, 1888, that the Patterson's had returned to a squalid life, labelling them "A Dirty Pair." Police charged the couple with disturbing the peace for a drunken rant in an alley, replete with loud vulgar language. Frank was

described as "dirty beyond description, unshaved, unkempt, and the odor which filled the room from his presence would have made a bone factory smell like the attar of roses," and Helen was even worse.30

David Pratt, the guardian appointed for Frank by the Chemung court, still possessed assets frozen when the pension scandal broke. Those assets included the $3,000 mortgage paid on the Fishler House in Wellsburg and $2,300 in cash confiscated when Frank was arrested. Some leading Elmirans suggested that Pratt should get those funds to distribute to Frank, and the attorney general approached the commissioner of pensions about making that possible. The commissioner agreed to provide the money to Pratt for disbursement to Frank, along with $4,807 that was also seized from Julia Mills and Helen Patterson. The money allowed Frank and Helen to buy a home at 724 West First Street in Elmira.[31]

In April, 1897, Frank fell ill and died in his home after suffering for two weeks with paralysis. He was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in Section M, lot 183. Helen spent her remaining years trying to get a widow's pension, but was always denied since Frank never got an honorable discharge. To add to her woes, the settlement of Frank's estate led to the sale of the house on West First Street, forcing her to find other places to live in her remaining years. Helen died in September, 1904, and was buried in the plot next to Frank.[32]

The "Blind Patterson" swindle was indicative of the Gilded Age controversy surrounding pensions for Civil War veterans. Veterans believed pensions were a debt owed to those who sacrificed for the nation, while others viewed pensions as damaging to the American ideal of rugged individualism and independence. But, there were many veterans, like Frank Patterson, who were disabled after the war and genuinely needed assistance. The key roadblock for Frank was his desertion. If not for that, he would have qualified for a monthly pension that could have provided a better life. The fact that advocates for Frank thought he still deserved something, and in fact succeeded in getting him some of the money, reflects the extent to which people agreed that Civil War veterans were owed a debt by the nation. Many Elmirans believed that even though Frank deserted he had still served his country, and that his desertion was related to his deteriorating eyesight. They supported paying the debt owed to Union veterans for saving the nation.

Now, long after the old veterans have been "securely planted," many would probably be proud to know that the U.S. government still honors that debt. As of 2017, Irene Triplett, the daughter of a Civil War veteran, still collects what Frank Patterson could never get, a monthly Civil War pension of $73.13.[33]

Endnotes:

1 "'Blind Patterson' Arrested," *New York Times*, June 29, 1887.

2 Mark Dunkelman, *War's Relentless Hand: Twelve Tales of Civil War Soldiers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 198-99. Dunkelman's book devotes an entire chapter to the Patterson case for those interested in getting more details about what happened.

3 Ibid, 199-201; Muster Roll, Company G, 154th NY Volunteers, Fold3.com.

4 Dunkelman, 201-202.

5 Ibid, 202-203.

6 ibid, 203.

7 Ibid, 204.

8 Ibid, 204-205.

9 Ibid, 205-207; "A Blind Beggar's Fortune," *New York Times*, June 12, 1887.

10 Dunkelman, 207-208

11 Don Fehrenbacher, ed. Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary Portrait Through His Speeches and Writings (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 279; Theda Skoepol, "America's First Social Security System: The Expansion of Benefits for Civil War Veterans, *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring, 1993, 92-94.

12 Skoepol, 92, 97-100; James Marten, "Those Who Have Borne the Battle: Civil War Veterans, Pension Advocacy, and Politics," *Marquette Law Review*, Summer, 2010, 1407-08.

13 Marten, 1407-09; Skoepol, 102.

14 Marten, Sing Not War, 201-202; "Special Pension Acts," *Elmira Weekly Gazette* and *Free Press*, April 12, 1888.

15 James Marten, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 198-201; "Grand Army of Beggars," *Chicago Times*, March 2, 1887.

16 Marten, Sing Not War, 59-60,209-12.

17 Dunkelman, 209-10.

18 Ibid, 210-12.

19 Ibid, 212.

20 Ibid, 212-14.

21 Ibid, 214.

22 *Rockland Country Journal*, June 18, 1877; "A Blind Beggar's Fortune," *New York Times*, June 12, 1887.

23 Dunkelman, 214-16, 218.

24 Ibid, 216.

25 Ibid, 218-19; *The Evening Truth*, June 25, 1887. The Evening Truth was a Richmond, Virginia newspaper. Newspapers all across the nation closely followed the Patterson case.

26 Dunkelman, 219; "Blind Patterson Arrested," *New York Times*, June 29, 1887.

27 Dunkelman, 220-21.

28 Ibid, 221-22; "Blind Patterson Acquitted," *New York Times*, March 27, 1888; "Found 'Not Guilty,'" *Elmira Weekly Gazette* and *Free Press*, March 29, 1888. The *Elmira Weekly Gazette* estimated that the cost of trying the men had cost the government at least $50,000.

29 Dunkelman, 223.

30 "A Dirty Pair," *Elmira Daily Gazette* and *Free Press*, August 29, 1888.

31 Dunkelman, 223-24.

32 Dunkelman, 197, 224; "Blind Patterson," *Elmira Gazette* and *Free Press*, May 1, 1897.

33 "U.S. Still Paying a Civil War Pension," August 8, 2016, http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-08-08/civil-war-vets-pension-still-remains-on-governments-payroll-151-years-after-last-shot-fired.

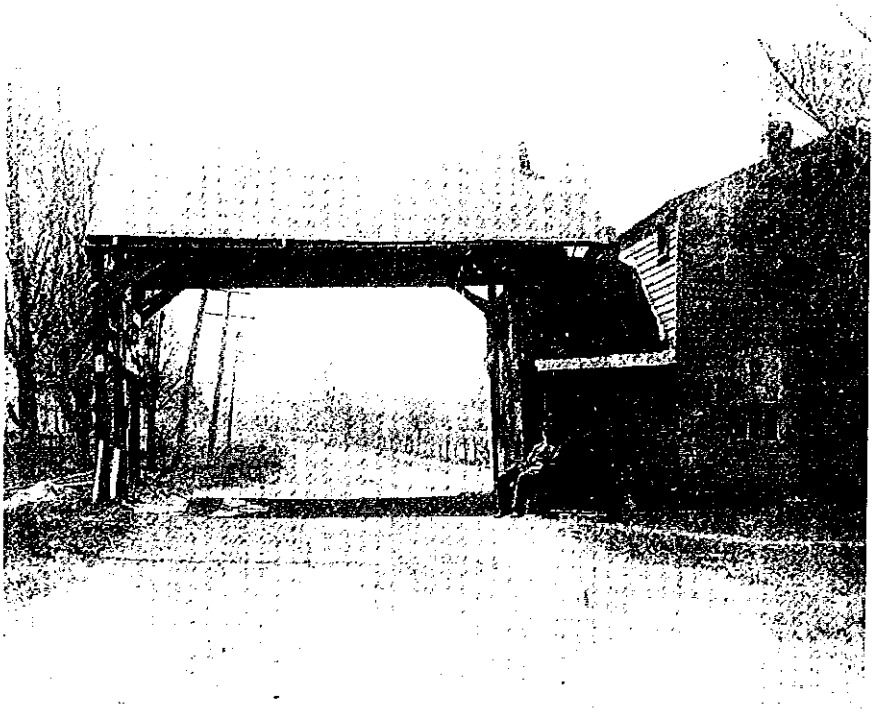
Southport Plank Road: Private or Public?

By Bruce Whitmarsh, Director

On Saturday, May 20, 2017, the Chemung County Historical Society unveiled its newest historic marker commemorating the Plank Road. The Plank Road was one of the area's important early improvements to help aid commerce and development of the area. The route of the original Plank Road was from the Lake Street Bridge in Elmira south to the Pennsylvania line following the route of today's Pennsylvania Avenue. Early roads were notoriously bad, with ruts and heavy dust in the dry weather and deep mud during wet periods. Travel was slow and difficult, especially for long distances. When the Chemung Canal was first opened in 1833, it was far faster to travel from Elmira to New York City by canal boat than by stage coach or horseback even though the canal route was a greater distance. This problem was greatly compounded for shipping large loads or perishable items.

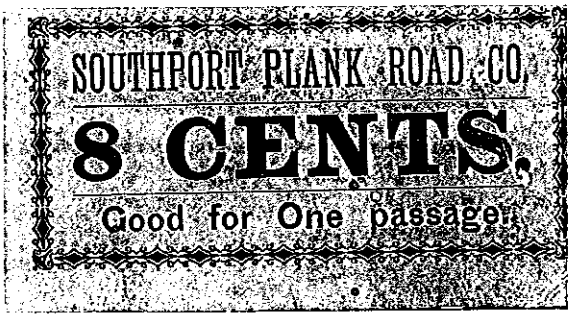
Building roads from planks was not unusual for the time. The asphalt we are so familiar with today had not yet been invented and paving a road with bricks or cobblestones, as happened on many urban streets, was not feasible for those roads running through more rural areas. Chemung County's Plank Road was made of Hemlock planking, originally running a total of thirteen miles but was later reduced to just nine miles of plank. [1]

"...A company was organized on March 6, 1848 to build a plank road to pass through Seeley Creek and South Creek from the Lake Street bridge in Elmira to the Pennsylvania State line. The company was organized under a general statute passed in 1847 governing the incorporation of companies to construct plank roads and turnpikes."[2] Several prominent businessmen in Elmira (the best known of them today is John Arnot)



Plank Road toll gate, ca 1885.
Photo courtesy of the Chemung County Historical Society.

formed a new partnership to take on the project. It also allowed the new company to collect tolls that went to the maintenance of the road and also to the profits of the partners. This was not without controversy as both the law and the new company met local resistance. In March of 1848, anti-plank road organizations came in to being, protesting the transfer of the public road to a private concern. The new law was described "...as the acme of legislative folly, exceeding in enormity all former laws..."[3] and "that the plank road law stands as a foul blot on the statute book of



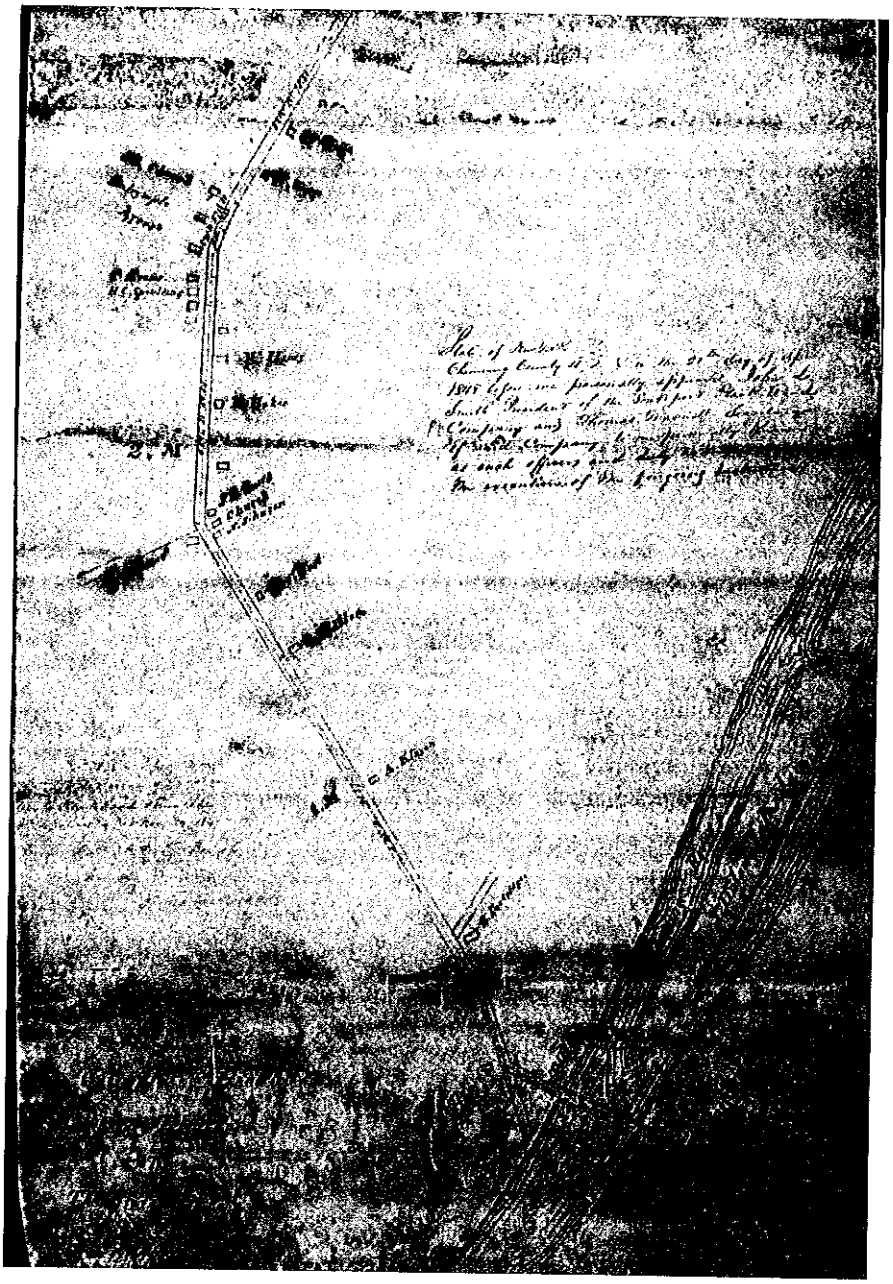
A ticket cost eight cents!
Image courtesy of the Chemung County Historical Society.

the State..."[4] . This conflict between public and private has also been a part of American history going back to the earliest days of the republic, with decisions going back and forth over how public improvements were to be paid for, whether private or government and if government, whether local, state or federal.

The Plank Road survived into the late 19th century when it was ultimately returned to the people of Southport and paved over using the newly invented "Macadam" process. Through the years the Plank Road did serve its purpose, to improve travel between Elmira and Pennsylvania. During its heyday, the Plank Road saw regular stagecoach service supported by hotels and taverns. In the collection of the Chemung County Historical Society is a plank from the road and another is in the possession of the Southport Historical Society.

Endnotes

1. Ausburn Towner, *Our County and Its People: A History of the Valley and County of Chemung* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason & Co., Publishers), 443
2. Towner, 443
3. "Plank Road Meeting," *Elmira Gazette*, March 9, 1848
4. "Anti-Plank Road Meeting," *Elmira Gazette*, March 30, 1848



One third of an early plank road map in the CCHS collection. The complete map is nearly six feet long.

Image courtesy of the Chemung County Historical Society.

The County Historian's Corner

with J. Kelsey Jones

ONE CENT REWARD!

Children bound to labor was a legal system of indentured servitude. Conditions were not always ideal and some chose to flee. Notices for their return were common. Below are some notices appearing in Elmira newspapers.

Elmira Gazette, Saturday, August 8, 1835
One Cent Reward

RAN away from the subscriber on the 14th inst., William Keech, aged 15 years, and had on when he went away a low frock and pantaloons. All persons are hereby forbid harboring or trusting him on my account, under the penalty of the law. The above reward, but no charges will be paid for his return.

WILLIAM DURLAND.
Elmira, July 16, 1835.

Elmira Gazette, Saturday, June 30, 1838
One Cent Reward

Ran away from the subscriber, on the 15th inst., an indentured apprentice to the shoemaking business, by the name of John Walling, about 18 years of age, has a slow and unsteady walk in consequence of a weakness in his legs. This said Runaway has recently recovered from a long spell of sickness, the effects of which are still visible in his meagre and ghastly look, and which sickness has put the subscriber to an expense of fifty dollars. I hereby forbid all persons harboring or trusting this said runaway at their peril.

JAMES GLASS.
Elmira, June 22d, 1838.

Elmira Gazette, September 29, 1838
One cent Reward

Ran away from the subscriber on the 11th inst., an apprentice girl named Deborah Brown, aged about 15 years, whoever will return said apprentice girl, shall receive the above reward, but no charges paid.

DANIEL B. ROCKWELL
Elmira, Sept. 20th 1838.

Elmira Gazette, Thursday, July 10, 1845
One Cent Reward

Ran away from the subscriber on the 24th inst., a Bound Girl by the name of Maria Moser, thirteen years of age with black hair and black eyes, and had on when she left my house a woolen dress and a nun bonnet. The public are forbid harboring or trusting her on my account. Any person who will return the said runaway shall be entitled to the above reward, but no charges paid.

JAMES ROBERTS
Chemung, June 28, 1845

Remember Our Society In Your Will

You can assist the Historical Society for years to come. We ask that you consider a bequest to the Society in your will. Please see your attorney.

A simple bequest is as follows:

"I give and bequeath to the Chemung County Historical Society, Inc. and to its corporate successor or successors the sum of $....."

100 YEARS AGO...
in the Elmira Herald

Compiled By Gary Packard

April 6, 1917 – ALMA GLUCK GETS A TIDY SUM HERE – Director Charles Tingle gave Alma Gluck, the singer, an even $2,000 for her appearance of 1 hr., 45 mins. in this city on Wednesday night. The great singer left for New York, her home, an hour after the concert was over. She will spend a few days with her baby before singing in Auburn on Saturday night.

April 9, 1917 – WAS A BUSY WEEK AT ARMY STATION – Recruiting Progresses Nicely, Many Elmira Youths Enlisting - According to Chief Electrician Henry Grube, in charge. Three men will be sent to Buffalo today for final examination and two others may also go. Tomorrow two more will be sent. On Saturday there were a large number of applicants at the recruiting station, among whom was one who was a former Navy man and who wished to enlist in the aviation corps. This man's name will not be published until he is finally accepted. Mr. Grube expects to enlist the full quota of two hundred from the local station as requested by the Navy Department.

April 22, 1917 – Some Doin's at the Grotto Monday Night – Next Monday evening Cashmere Grotto will hold a big smoker and vaudeville show at the Masonic Hall, Masonic Temple. The committee has also prepared some stunts that will be decidedly interesting. The Grotto Band will give a concert and there will be a feed up to the minute. One of the main objects of this smoker will be the plans for the gigantic ceremonial which will take place May 21, at which time many candidates will be initiated into the realms of the Veiled Prophets with all the pomp and ceremony that Cashmere Grotto is capable of.

May 10, 1917 – FLOYD CASE MUST BEHAVE, SAVE MONEY AND GO TO CHURCH – Floyd Case, who pleaded guilty to grand larceny, second degree, in stealing the automobile of R. Joberg in this city some months ago, was given a suspended sentence yesterday on condition that he obey the orders of Probation Officer Cook and turn his pay over to him every week and, in addition, must attend a church service every Sunday while under a suspended sentence. He was warned if he did not behave himself that he would be sent to the Reformatory without further leniency. He was represented by Attorney Michael O'Connor.

June 4, 1917 – CITY THOROUGHFARES WILL NOT BE OILED THIS YEAR – The dirt streets of the city will not be oiled this year, residents of the city generally having protested to the authorities that the plan is more of a nuisance than anything else. Oil will be used by the park commissioners in Eldridge Park, and, possibly, on some other public roadways, but there will be little oil spread elsewhere in the city. The West Elmirans will, however, oil West Water St. and some of the streets connecting it with West Church St., where the traffic to Rorick's is heavy. Street Sprinkler Tong is busy making contracts with property owners and others, and the streets that are not paved and flushed by the city will be sprinkled twice daily in many parts of the town.