

The ghost towns among us

*Jay historians bring the past to life
in the midst of the present*

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, April 18, 2003

AU SABLE FORKS — When you drive through Jay, what do you see?

A handful of houses scattered among some vacant lots?

Or the living remnants of a vibrant 19th century Adirondack industrial hamlet?

For local historians like Mary Wallace, her daughter Bev Hickey, and town Councilwoman Amy Shalton, Jay's past is alive all around them. The work they do to preserve the township's past keeps it alive for residents and visitors alike, making Jay a richer place to experience.

"When I started as town historian in 1982, all I had was a little box full of things," said Mary Wallace in an interview last week.

In the intervening 21 years, that "little box full of things" grew into a large collection that filled one of the bedrooms in her Glen Road house.

Thanks in part to the efforts of Councilwoman Shalton, who is also Wallace's deputy historian,

the Jay historical collection is now stored in the cabinets of a room in the Jay Community Center, in Au Sable Forks.

Shalton said that she was in the process of getting a \$5,000 grant from the New York State

Archives to equip that room as the town's new archival center. Not only will the small facility arrange the material already gathered by Wallace, but it will help with the preservation and restoration of some of the historical documents currently stored in the Community Center's basement.

"Every time the (Au Sable) River floods, so does the basement," Shalton said.

While Wallace has focused on gathering and inventorying the material of Jay's historic past, daughter and retired school librarian Bev Wallace Hickey has tried to interpret that material for the children and adults of the Au Sable Valley.

"When I was in school, I collected documents," Hickey recalled. "People were very good about letting me make copies of their own documents, as long as I



The Baptist church in Jay was built in 1830 by John Purmont (or Purmort), an early industrialist who bought the hamlet's main forge in 1809. Purmont also gave the town of Jay the land that is still Jay's village green.



The former home of Hettie Bartlett, at the foot of Mill Hill, overlooking the Jay Covered Bridge site. Bartlett took over operation of the Brick Store across the road, which had survived both the 1856 flood and the withdrawal of the J.&J. Rogers Company from Jay. Besides being a storekeeper, she was also a local judge from 1919 to 1931.

returned them right away. And Mother has been very generous in letting me copy some of the material she's gathered."

With the papers Hickey collected, she started putting together slide shows, historic walking tours and children's history programs — among them, her Au Sable Days presentations at Holy Name Catholic School, in Au Sable Forks, now given on the second Thursday of June each year.

"I've been doing Au Sable Days for about 5 years now," Hickey said.

"In addition to the talks for the students, we make up displays of the antique clothing and kitchen

implements that Mother collects.

"One of the years, the kids couldn't figure out what anything was," she recalled. "They didn't know what a creamer was, for instance, because they'd only seen the kind of cream that comes from a carton.

"So I decided to have a silver tea for all those kids," Hickey concluded. She gathered enough period china, real silver tableware, cloth napkins and silver or china teapots to serve afternoon tea to about 60 area schoolchildren.

The early history of Jay township, the three women said, had been fairly well documented.

Hickey had written a 177-page

history herself, publishing it in 1999, but only 30 copies were made. If you want to take a look at her manuscript, called "Recollections of the Town of Jay," you'll have to visit the Au Sable Forks Free Library.

There you will find much more in the way of resources on local history than just Hickey's excellent manuscript. Dozens of books on the folk and events that made the Adirondacks, the Au Sable Valley, Clinton and Essex counties, and Jay township's three hamlets — Jay, Upper Jay and Au Sable Forks — are kept in its special collection.

Included in the Au Sable Forks library local history collection is at least one book dedicated to the story of Noah John Rondeau, the famous Adirondack hermit. Rondeau's story illustrates one of the most common pitfalls of the amateur historian: credulity.

"Noah John was a bit of an outlaw," Hickey said. "If you talk to some people, you'll hear that he was a romantic hermit. Others will tell you that he just didn't want to pay his taxes, and they'll remind you that his 'hermitage' was on state land.

"If you're doing original research, you have to talk to some of the old-timers about their own experiences and the stories they remember about earlier times. Just don't take everything they tell you as gospel," Hickey cautioned.

Wallace, Hickey and Shalton mentioned a few other resources for those interested in local history, including the Keeseville Public Library, the archives at the Wells Memorial Library in Upper

Jay, and the Feinberg Collection at the Plattsburgh State University library.

“Also, if you’re looking for something specific, the County Clerk’s Office in Elizabethtown can be very helpful, too,” said Hickey.

All three agreed that the biggest shortage in local historical research is in the post-World War II era.

“From the early 1900s through the 1940s there’s been a lot written,” Hickey said. “There’s nothing after that, though, and now’s the time when that material should be gathered, while the stories are still alive.”

Hickey mentions, as an example, the story of the “Ladies of the Valley” as a recent historical study deserving attention.

“All the men picked up and went to war in the early 1940s,” Hickey said. “If it hadn’t been for those staunch old ladies left behind, this area would never have survived.”

Jay township has seen its share of challenges:

- the breaking of the St. Huberts dam in September 1856, whose resulting flash flood not only washed out nearly every bridge



The Tobey Homestead, built in 1819 to replace an earlier frame structure destroyed in a fire, was used by the family a century later as one of Jay's several vacation hotels. Carriages were sent to collect guests at the D&H Railroad station in Au Sable Forks, 6 long miles away by dirt road.

on the Au Sable River but destroyed the main iron works and other industrial facilities in Jay;

- the slow decline of demand for iron after the Civil War, followed by the economic bust of 1893, forced Jay’s iron works to fold up altogether; and
- the 1971 closing of the pulp mill in Au Sable Forks, the area’s major employer. The closure was brought on, in large part, by

increasingly stringent environmental regulation.

To make sense of what one sees in Jay, or Upper Jay, or Au Sable Forks today, one must understand the history of those communities and the challenges they have faced.

Mary Wallace, Bev Hickey and Amy Shalton are three people working to preserve the record of that history, making sure it is available to future generations.