

Malone: A short drive into North Country history

Words & pictures by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, June 16, 2006

Just 55 miles north of Lake Placid — about an hour and 20 minutes by car — is Malone, the seat of neighboring Franklin County and home to both the Almanzo Wilder Farm and the county's House of History museum.

Both attractions are well worth the trip.

'Farmer Boy's' home

The Almanzo Wilder Farm, located just outside the village of Malone in Burke township, attracts two distinct groups of enthusiasts: historic preservationists who come for the wonderfully restored farmhouse and authentically reconstructed 19th century barn complex, and devotees of Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House" books, published by HarperCollins.

"While Laura and Mary of the 'Little House in the Big Woods' were growing up out West," reads the dust-jacket blurb from "Farmer Boy," "a little boy named Almanzo Wilder was living on a big farm in northern New York State."

"Farmer Boy" is the story of a year in the life of young Almanzo Wilder, reconstructed from a series of interviews with his wife recorded some 60 years later. A (re-)reading of "Farmer Boy" before visiting the Wilder Farm will make your tour much more meaningful. Both

the restored farmhouse and the nearby complex of reconstructed farm buildings have been set up in such a way as to provide real-life illustrations of scenes and settings in the book:

- Almanzo milking the cow by lamplight and oiling his moccasins;
- the calf-yoke he was given for his ninth birthday;
- his mother's spinning wheel and loom;
- threshing grain from the fall harvest;
- the cobbler's bench —
- even the little bobsled Almanzo and his father made by hand on

"the Big-Barn Floor."

The history of Farmer Boy's family is told in "The Wilder Family Story," a major piece of research produced by Dorothy Smith. Smith was the founder of the Almanzo and Laura Ingalls Wilder Association, the nonprofit organization that restored and now operates the Almanzo Wilder Farm. Smith's 36-page booklet is on sale in the farm's bookstore and gift-shop.

According to Smith, Almanzo Wilder's grandfather Abel came to Burke from Vermont in 1817 after the famous "Year Without a



Wilder farmhouse

Summer.” In 1840, Almanzo’s father James bought the property where Farmer Boy was born. The farmhouse was probably constructed over the next few years, being completed in time for James Wilder’s marriage to Angeline Day in 1843. The Greek Revival farmhouse is fairly typical of the household architecture of the middle 19th century in Northern New York.

After the Wilders moved west in the early 1870s, the farm passed through the hands of several families. Sometime between 1945 and 1962, a fire leveled the barn complex, but the farmhouse survived. By the time it went on the market in 1986, however, it was in very poor shape, according to Wilder Association archivist Betty Menke.

Fortunately, the association had some very accurate floor plans to work from, drawn up by Laura Ingalls Wilder in the 1930s from detailed descriptions given to her by her husband Almanzo, then 75. According to Menke, the dimensions of those plans were later found to be accurate to within just a few inches, although Almanzo Wilder had not seen the buildings since he left the farm at age 18. Those floor plans were crucial not only in restoring the farmhouse but in faithfully reconstructing the Wilder Farm’s barn complex.

Potsdam university students worked on the archeological dig that uncovered the foundations for the farm buildings, while Michael Brand studied period architecture for the reconstruction, Menke said. The building techniques used were so faithful to the period that Mennonite builders have come to the Wilder Farm by the score to study the structures as models for their own working farm buildings.



Wilder barn

Wilder Farm: Where, when & how much

The Almanzo Wilder Farm is located about 2-1/2 miles east of Malone off state Route 11. The signs guiding you to the farm off Route 11 are pretty clear, but just in case you miss them, here are the directions:

Take the right fork off Route 11 onto county Route 23, then take the first right-hand turn onto Donohue Road. At the “T” intersection with Stacy Road, turn right. The Wilder Farm is about half a mile down, on the left.

The Almanzo Wilder Farm is open from Memorial Day weekend through the end of September, Monday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. Tour times range between 1 hour and 1-1/2 hours.

Entry is \$6 for adults, \$3 for children ages 6 to 16. Special pricing is available for school groups and tours of 20 or more, with advance arrangements.

For more information, visit “Farmer Boy” on the Web at

www.almanzowilderfarm.com, telephone (518) 483-1207, or call toll-free (866) 438-FARM.

The History House

After visiting the Almanzo Wilder Farm, try stopping in at the Franklin County House of History on your way back through Malone.

To get there, make a left at the corner of Main Street and Clay, where the castle-like cut-stone Congregational church stands guard. Drive one block to Milwaukee Street, turn right, and there it is: a big, cream-colored, green-trimmed, Italianate two-story brick house with a sign in the front yard reading “House of History.”

Malone’s History House is one of the better local-history house museums you are likely to run across, for several reasons. First, this 1864 house was occupied continuously from the time it was built until the Franklin County Historical and Museum Society purchased it from its last private owner in 1973. Because of its continual occupation, the house got the regular care

that beautiful old houses need to keep in fit architectural and decorative shape.

Continual occupation also meant that the house didn't have to be "restored" in order to be used as a house museum; the interior trim and decorations, all the way down to the wallpaper, are authentic.

The House of History is also a rarity among house museums because of the period furnishings in its collection. Most house museums, of course, are equipped with period furnishings to portray what life was like during the period they interpret — but most of those furnishings are only appropriate to the period, not the community.

Most of the furnishings in Malone's historic house museum, on the other hand, are directly relevant to either the house itself or the history of Franklin County.

For instance, the first room in the tour is called the Wheeler Room because it is outfitted with furnishings and memorabilia recalling one of Malone's most famous citizens, William A. Wheeler, who served a term as Rutherford Hayes' vice president from 1877 to 1881.

In the dining room, you will find a display depicting the different kinds of industry that once thrived along the Salmon River, which provided 19th century Malone with the mechanical power its lumber mills and factories required. A melodeon is also on display, which was carried around by boat to the camps on Lake Titus.

In the parlor stands a pump organ from a local church, a cast-iron stove forged at a local foundry, a piano thought to have been the very first to reach Franklin County, and a desk bureau once owned by Judge Hiram Horton, an early land owner in Malone.

Two of the upstairs bedrooms have been made into what museum director Anne Werley Smallman, our guide for last week's tour, calls the House of History's "craft rooms."

"An entire 4th-grade class will come, look through the downstairs, then come up here and actually *do* things as they were done in the 19th century," Smallman explained.

"Kids are so far removed from the making of things. It's so neat seeing the light bulb come on in a kid's head when he realizes, 'Somebody had to *make* this!'"

In one room you will find looms and spinning wheels; in another, a broom-making machine. Visiting students also get to dip wicks to make candles.

"For some things, the design has changed a lot over the years," Smallman said, "but a candle is a candle and a broom is a broom."

Another room upstairs, called the Pioneer Room, presents two sides to the settlement of Franklin County. At one end of the room is a large diorama of a Mohawk village,

built some 30 years ago when the museum first opened. The rest of the room contains a wide array of the tools and building materials used by the first settlers of European descent who made the Malone area their home.

Going back downstairs, visit the museum's "Country Store" before you leave. The store features books, T-shirts and souvenirs along with samples of the kind of goods you would find in a 19th century country store.

The Franklin County House of History is open Tuesday through Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m. between Memorial Day and Labor Day, and on Saturdays from 1 to 4 p.m. between Labor Day and Thanksgiving. The historical society suggests an entry donation of \$5 for adults and \$2 for children.

Smallman also suggests that, because tour guides are not always available, you call ahead if you plan to visit the House of History. You can reach them at (518) 483-2750, or visit the museum on the Web at www.franklinhistory.org.



Franklin County House of History