

TOWN OF RUSSELL

GLACIAL POTHOLE FOUND ON SCOUGHTON
ROAD NOW CALLED LAFAYETTE ROAD IN THE TOWN
OF RUSSELL

THIS POTHOLE IS ON DISPLAY AT THE
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IN
NEW YORK CITY

THIS STORY ALSO COVERS ELM CREEK
BEING HAND DUG AND THE CLIFTON RAILROAD BEING
A WOODEN RAIL

Russell's Scoughton Road

By EUGENE HATCH

To reach the sites of our article, the traveler should go from Russell village onto the old Russell-Hermon State Road. Taking the turn to the left, one enters the Hamilton Hill Road. A mile ahead appears a fork in the road. A right turn here and you enter the Lower (Scoughton) Road. Much of this first portion of the road was described in "A Rural Ramble" in the Quarterly of April 1966.

Three miles farther on, the road fringed with trees drops steeply into Elm Creek valley and skirts the edge of the valley's meadowland. Another mile and a hillock abruptly crosses the road. This is a spur of rock and here begins a section of road rich in historic, even prehistoric interest, one point of interest fairly crowds the next.

On the right side of the road, atop the hillock is the site of a notable glacial pothole, now at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. The pothole was a circular, vertical cavity about two feet across in the slanting rock ledge of the Grenville series of limestone. The hole measured 3 feet deep on the front side of the rock, and 4 feet at the rear. This hole in the rock was known in my boyhood and usually referred to as "the Indian kettle" as some persons assumed that the Indians used the aperture to grind their corn.

In prehistoric ages, four great glaciers flowed in succession into Northern New York and the present St. Lawrence River valley lay buried under ice 5000 feet thick. There were long intervals of melting ice between each glacial period. Our pothole may have been formed in the melting of the last great glacier which scientists variously estimate was 10,000 to 50,000 years ago.

As the ice melted here, the water driven by a powerful current surged about in a small whirlpool. Small rock fragments and gravel stones rotated and became the grinding agents which cut and smoothed the hole in the rock ledge. The melting ice of the last great glacial ice sheet must have left a watery world, without form, and void, like the first Creation. In the ages that followed the waters drained into rivers and lakes and the land took on the contours of our own town time. Hardwood trees of species known today began to appear and grasses sprouted as the glacial lakes receded.

Many of our present wild grass eating animals came into central New York, where their fossil remains have been found. It was in 1910 that my cousin Grover Hatch, son of local farmer Lester Hatch, entered St. Lawrence University, and came under the teaching of Prof. Chadwick, young and energetic professor of geology there. Prof. Chadwick was attracted by the interest of the student, and together they made some field trips through the area, viewing among other features of geological interest, this ancient pothole.

Dr. Edmund Otis Hovey, head of the geology department of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, was told of this prehistoric formation and he decided to acquire the pothole with its enclosing rock for the museum.

To cut out the pothole with its surrounding stone, a channeling machine with an operating crew was procured from a Gouverneur marble quarry. The machine consisted mainly of steam driven drills which cut through a stream of water into the rock and three weeks were required to finish the cutting. The cut out cube of rock was six feet square, a foot higher on the rear side. Grover was the superintendent of this project.

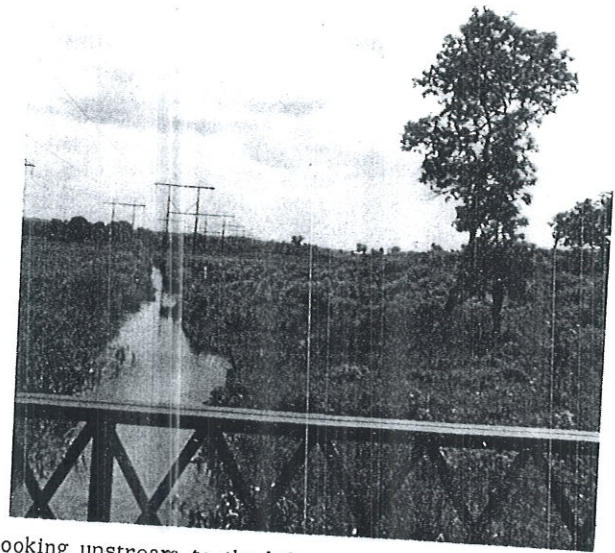
Then came the problem of getting the rock to New York. It was decided to wait until the winter snows came and then haul it on runners to the railroad for shipment. Woodcock Brothers of Edwards, then in the heyday of their logging business, undertook the exacting job of moving the block of stone on sleighs to the railroad station at Edwards, 8 miles away, and it required the pulling efforts of six of their horses to haul the ten-ton load. Each of the several wooden bridges along the road had to be carefully reinforced. At Edwards the rock-encased pothole was loaded onto a flatcar. The pothole arrived safely at the Museum and it was placed in a conspicuous place before the south entrance. Today

it stands admired by the many visitors, a mute reminder of the time of the glaciers, a fateful period which produced such momentous physical changes in our St. Lawrence Valley and in the whole northern section of our country.

Continuing History Road

Descending the hill and two hundred feet away is the bridge spanning Elm Creek. One should pause on this bridge. The platform of any bridge where the traffic doesn't hinder is a proper vantage point to view the surroundings.

The present iron bridge replaced a wood structure which was a simple truss. There was an upright post on each side called a 'king post' and from its top heavy timbers were fastened diagonally in both directions to the outer edges of the spanning timber at each bank of the stream. This type of early wooden bridge was quite commonly used where highways crossed the smaller streams.



Looking upstream to the left, you will notice that the creek flows through the flat land between wide meadows in a straight line. You will doubt that it is a natural channel and you will be right. The channel is a drainage ditch nearly half a mile long, a remarkable feat of hand shovel excavation. The heavy crops of native grass, before the advent of the horse-drawn mower, were laboriously cut with the handscythe, but help seemed available. An old neighbor recalls that she once saw, at sunrise, seven men handmoving in this meadow.

In the late nineties, the owner of the farm became tired of the lazy, zigzag movements of Elm Creek, which often erratically changed course and left pockets of wet land, 'sag-holes,' in the field. By geological measurement there is a drop of only four feet in over a mile and he decided to have a drainage channel dug. In attempting to learn about the origins of this ditch project in conversations with older people, the name of an Irishman professional ditch digger Peter Hurley from Richville keeps coming up. He is described as an undersized, weather-beaten man of natural courtesy. It is even asserted that he dug the drainage channel alone during one summer season. The very dimensions (four feet wide at bottom and four feet deep slanting to eight feet wide at the top) seem to preclude a one-man job as a physical impossibility and the feat would do credit to the mythical Paul Bunyan. It is more likely that Hurley was one of a crew, perhaps the boss.

One person, a contemporary of the event, says that a contractor from Malone with a crew of men, undertook the evacuations for at least part of the work and that his crew lodged in the old plank road toll house nearby on the Hermon-Edwards road. At least two farm owners above here had the Creek ditched across their lands.

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HIGHWAYS

(Continued from Page 3)

The essential tool used was the round pointed shovel. Along with the gun and the axe, the shovel should be enshrined as the most important tool used in the development of our young republic. By its use, communication was carried on between the scattered settlements by shovel built roads like ours and the nearby railroad bed and canals, although our small canal was built not for travel but for drainage. This too was of prime importance in the making of the farms, as then agriculture was the leading occupation.

What may be a souvenir of the digging of this channel is a tobacco pipe found two years ago by Lester Hatch on the bottom of the channel. The pipe is of bright metal, probably pewter. Its deep bowl is an inch in diameter and has an inch long stem. It is a type not seen today.

The creek was partially tamed by the ditching but in winter it still overflows over a wide area, much to the joy of the neighborhood's younger inhabitants. As soon as the ice froze thickly enough, they put on their skates and skimmed over its broad glassy surface. The skates were then clamped securely to the shoe by a small built-in lever.

A short distance ahead the Clifton Railroad crossed the road and the old road embankment can be clearly traced on each side, head high above the fields which flank it. The terminus of this road was at East DeKalb. There it joined the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railroad, now the New York Central. Built in the late 1860's to haul the high grade magnetic ore from Clifton Mines, it was used only a few years and the track was demolished. The railroad bed follows the Elm Creek valley two miles further, then it turns easterly. After this turn the road, even grooves in the earth where the ties were placed, can be easily traced in many sections to the Russell Turnpike on its way to Clifton.

The rails were of wood laid on wood ties. Lengthwise on the upper side of the rails were fastened strips of iron two inches wide and a trifle over an inch thick. The wooden rails made an occupational hazard to one engineer, John Mills,

later postmaster at Canton. He recalled that often long sharp splinters of wood would be split off the rails and fly upward. One day while he was running the locomotive, one of the flying splinters tore the seat out of his overalls. This incident led him to promptly resign.



The Clifton Railroad engine was a wood burner and there was a wood yard in the meadow on the left side of the highway where the train could stop and take on wood kept piled there.

After leaving the railroad crossing, our road goes quietly and uneventfully straight on over a short distance to join the Hermon-Edwards road which once followed the latest mode of travel -- a fine plank road. Now it is busy concrete paved thoroughfare.

(I wish to thank Grover Hatch of Russell for furnishing a photo of the pothole and valuable information about it. Also thanks are due to Ray and Vernice Leonard for information about the Elm Creek channel, and the Clifton Road, Ray Leonard came to the farm through which the highway mentioned passes in 1900. Some of the information came through John Wescott, former owner. The author)

Work crew removing historic pot hole.

(See Map on Page 21)

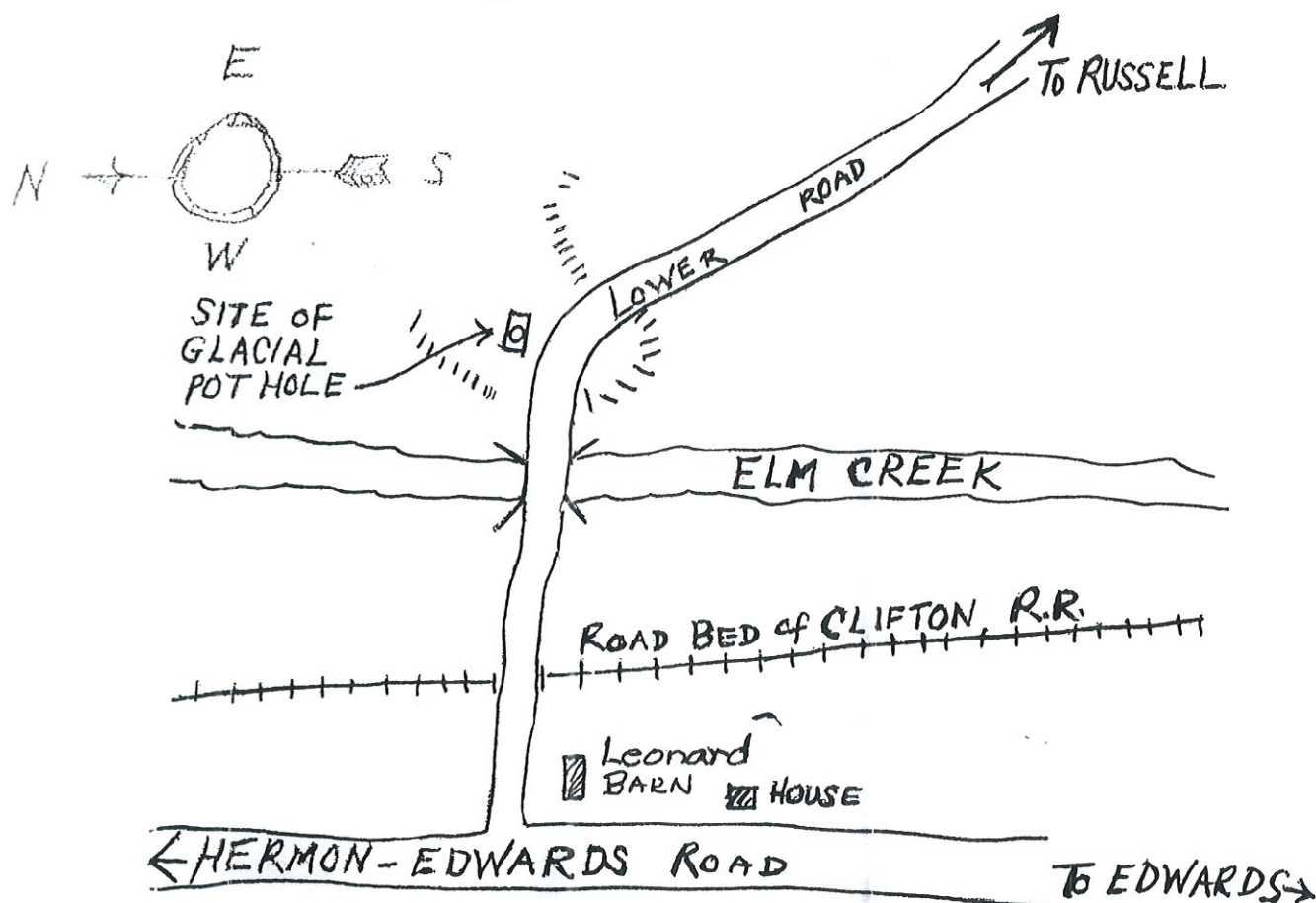


History Center Hours
9-4
Mondays and Thursdays
Court House in Canton

In searching genealogical records we find some picturesque early given names of our pioneers: Experience, Thankfull, Vigalence, Patience, Charity, Freeloove, Silence, Desire, Decline, Deliverance, Rely, Prudence, Exercise, Hopestill, Remember, Hope, Resolved and Submit, Prize; Wayte-a-While Makepeace! Some were obvious misspellings of popular names: Garviss, Eliony, Prosilah, Scissilla, Ussillah, Bennit, Oseeth, Elianer, Izrell, Merriam, Anney, Rookby, Bathia and Bethylah, Benhemoth, Farthrandro, Barbry, Phebey, and Neomy. Thank goodness Shadrach, Azuba, Cozbi, Cyprian, Bethsheba, Jedediah, Ichabod and Dorcas have gone out of fashion! Can you add to this list?



(HIGHWAYS, Continued from Page 4)



Map of Section of Lower or Scoughton Road