

AFTERWORD

One of the reasons why we look back to where we've been is that it gives us a better view of where we are now and where we're headed tomorrow. The first lesson of history is that events have both causes and effects.

The basic themes that have colored our county's progress so far will continue to color it: geography, transportation, changing population makeup, technological advances; even politics and moral imperatives.

First, the land itself. Some of Yates County's farms must be ranked among the best in the state; perhaps in the nation. It seems clear that prime farmland ought to be farmed. Though farmers here have been caught in binds familiar to farmers elsewhere, public policy backed up by 200 years of experience demands that every effort be made to retain today's productive farms and to encourage formation of new markets for farm products.

The beauty of the land can too easily be taken for granted. But this and the fertile, well-watered soil have drawn population here since the beginning. It is our county's basic asset and must not be damaged.

Changing transportational needs and technology have created, transformed and destroyed traditional settlement patterns. Beasts of burden gave way to steam engines on rails and on the water. The internal-combustion engine forced the greatest changes of all. An historical perspective shows that not much lasts forever; and it never pays to put all your eggs in one basket.

For years after the date chosen to terminate this study, the median age of the county's population dropped steadily. Now it is rising again. This must affect both public and private services. Too, our large seasonal population places heavy demands on some services (roads, law enforcement) and minimal demands on others (schools). These types of population patterns are not unique in human history and have been met with greater and lesser success in other places. Here is an opportunity to avoid other people's -and our own - mistakes.

The county's rural conservatism has always been leavened by dissident elements - all those whiskey-distillers, upper-class women, the Irish, the Germans, the "Wets" and the "Drys", abolitionists, runaway slaves, visionaries from the Universal Friend on down. This must continue; it's the leaven that lightens the loaf.

Anyone who looks at population statistics for the county can see that the long decline bottomed out after World War I and has been increasing since. This can be looked at as a good or a bad thing in varying degrees, depending on what other baggage you're carrying. Agriculture remains the county's largest industry, but has continued directly to engage fewer and fewer people.

In 1955 there were 1223 farms in Yates County, involving about 76 percent of the land area, about 168,012 acres. In 1987, the most recent year for which figures are available, there were 363 farms that met the standard definition of an operation grossing \$10,000 annually. If you drop your consideration to include all agricultural ventures grossing \$1000 or more, the total is 617.

This trend - not at all unique in the northeast - may be somewhat reversed by the latest influx of immigrants, members of the Old Order Mennonite communities from Pennsylvania. At this writing, some ten years after the first families arrived, the congregation maintains two church buildings, seven schools; and includes 127 households (to which 334 babies have been born). Almost all these families live on farms. Two further groups of Mennonite families are centered in Barrington's Crystal Valley. These people (even the women) drive cars instead of horse-drawn buggies, but they preserve the traditional distinctive dress and predilection for farming.

Yates County - and Penn Yan in particular - has lost a great many manufacturing jobs since soon after World War II. Michaels Stern, Walkerbilt, the canneries, the local wineries and many other industries, large and small, either went out of business altogether or left this area. Again, this is not an untypical pattern for this part of the country.

If this loss of industry must be regarded as a cloud, then it has a silver lining. During the 1950s the Keuka Outlet was judged by state environmental officials to be a "biological desert," a condition probably endemic in streams subject to industrial use from the middle of the nineteenth century, if not earlier. Waste from dozens of small industries - not to mention from humans (the entire village of Penn Yan in the Outlet's case) and animals along its banks - was simply channeled into the water and away it went, to bother someone else farther downstream.

This situation has changed. The Outlet is now a clean and cheerful stream, site of a linear park established in the 1980s through the efforts of county officials and many volunteers. This one example may stand for many others; the county is a lure for thousands of tourists and seasonal residents who value the land for its beauty and relatively unspoiled appearance. Tourism has overtaken manufacturing as the county's second largest industry. Our continued economic health (not to mention our right to continue inhabiting the planet) is at stake, and conditions must not be allowed to revert to their former state.

As in other parts of the region, the number of service jobs has grown in much larger proportion than other sectors. Since many of these jobs are held by women, this has vastly increased the number and relative importance of women in the workforce. However, as in other places, women are at present underrepresented in managerial, technical, administrative and political positions.

Yates County continues to have an extremely small number of black residents, smaller now than during the mid-nineteenth century. Some hundreds of Spanish-speaking migrant farmworkers live here in summer. The Mennonites and the older Danish community are possibly the only well-defined resident ethnic traditions left.

One large "minority group" that has become more evident in recent years is the one comprising the elderly. Yates County, because of its reputation as a retirement community, has a very large number of people over age 55. In 1980 about 25 percent of the county's population was over 55; nearly 5500 out of nearly 21,500 total. This represents an almost 19 percent increase over 1970 figures and no one thinks the trend has reversed in the 10 years since. Many

of these people are seasonal residents, living in Florida or other places in the winter.

The county is clearly a product of its history; but equally clearly at a crossroads. It has been predicted that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, rural life will be extinct. We all have our preferences, but it's hard to think of such an outcome as anything but unalloyed tragedy; if only for the loss of variety. But a way of life can't be preserved, as museums do with artifacts. By definition, life belongs to the living; we burn our dead, or bury them. If we have found something valuable here, we must preserve it because it is alive; not honor it despite its irrelevance.

The purpose of this work is not to collect and then forget. History is the memory of the people, and learning is an affirmation of life. We have been a part of the great mainstream of the nation for two centuries; if we haven't forgotten what we always knew, we can continue in that tradition.