

Excerpts from:

REMINISCENCES OF DEANSBORO [1839-1909]
An Address of Rev. Samuel Miller of Sherburne, New York
Delivered at Deansboro, New York on January 3rd, 1909

[Regarding Thomas Dean]

I remember Thomas Dean when I was a boy in the streets here in Deansboro, a massive man, a man of noble presence, tall, well proportioned, weighing somethings over 300 pounds. A Quaker as was indicated by his broad-brimmed hat, yet a worshiper in the Methodist Church, as I often saw him in the family pew. . .

Mr. Dean had a face as white as that of Horace Greeley, and beaming with benevolence as if he had a heart for everybody and especially for his wards the Brothertown Indians, who revered, honored, trusted and loved him as a father. A pity that all our Indian agents were not like Thomas Dean!

Of course, as a boy I knew Mr. Dean only at a distance; I do not know that I ever heard his voice, but I heard something of a little speech he made in Deansboro when a pair of steers from Waterville were passing through the village. I remember going from my home in Northern Augusta to Dicksville, five miles, to see those steers. I was amply repaid for my journey; one of them filled my eyes as if he had been an elephant – a four-year-old steer, weighing 3700 pounds. That steer got his size and his weight on still-slop, which I guess is better for steers than for men. Mr. Dean said, “I thought I ought to drive those steers to market to let people know that Oneida County not only raises big steers but big men.”

I have heard an anecdote concerning Mr. Dean's dealing with a four-year-old colt, which illustrates his quiet philosophical way of managing matters. The colt was balky, that is, you could not get him past a pair of bars where he had been wont to be turned out into the pasture, so said the hired men. Mr. Dean said he would see what he could do with him. So the next day he put his newspaper and his spectacles into his pocket and mounted the colt. When they arrived at the bars the colt stopped as usual and would go no farther. Mr. Dean did not urge him nor whip him, but took out his newspaper and commenced reading. Pretty soon the colt with over 300 pounds on his back got uneasy. Not long after he wanted to go along; but Mr. Dean was in no hurry and kept on reading. By the time that Mr. Dean was ready to go, the colt had had all of those bars he wanted and never balked there again.

[Regarding the Irish]

In my first recollections of Deansboro the banks of the canal were lined with what were known as paddy shanties. I saw them only on the outside, but a boy of my acquaintance told me what he saw inside of one of them. His father was a shoemaker. He went one morning to carry a pair of boots to one of those shanties. The inmates were a man and his wife and a little boy. They were at breakfast; the parents on a rough board for chairs, at a table of the same material, with no table cloth. The little boy was seated on the ground, as there was no floor. The father and mother had each a spoon in hand taking soup out of a pan on the table. The little boy had a spoon also in which he was taking his breakfast out of a smaller pan. Every now and then the pig would come up and slush his snout into the boy's soup for his share and the boy would hit him over the nose with his spoon and drive him away, to the amusement of his parents. All this in accordance with the old song, “We keep our pig in the parlor, and that is Irish too.”

The stones for the locks in the canal through Deansboro were quarried, some of them at least, on the west Hill on the farm now owned by the wife of my brother Levi. Mrs. Munger boarded the hands who dug the stone. She said the first time they sat down to the table, not being used to a table cloth and not wishing to soil the one on the table, as they peeled their boiled potatoes they threw the skins over their shoulders on to the floor until she told them better. These Irishmen were, some of them, when in liquor disorderly, quarrelsome, fighting each other, their wives often coming to the aid of their husbands with their stockings turned into bludgeons by putting stones into them, and on one occasion things got so serious that the militia had to be called out. I remember in May 1834 Corporal Morris S. Miller came to our house while we were at breakfast, his face flushed with excitement and warned my father forth, armed and equipped as the law directs, to Colonel Comstock at Cassidy Hollow, now Oriskany Falls. Our hired man, Adam Boss, immediately got up from the table, went to the closet and got the musket out and commenced polishing the barrel so that it would pass muster. Father changed his clothes, strapped his belt around him with the cartridge box, mounted his horse and set off for the front. About noon the horse came back riderless, like the steed of Lochell, but not "with his bridle red with the signs of despair." But mother was frightened; so Adam Boss mounted the horse and rode to Deansboro where he found father safe and sound in one of four companies of militia whom Colonel Comstock had marched from Cassidy Hollow to Deansboro, drums beating, flags flying, plumes nodding—the light infantry companies of these days had showy uniforms—bayonets bristling. At the sight of the militia the marauders dispersed; some of them were made prisoners, and father had the honor of standing guard over them shut up in the Indian School House where now stands Maccabee Hall, all night. The next morning as my sister Lucy and I were going on our way to school we met a squad of militia, father among them, coming home. Soon after we passed them we heard the discharge of their guns, which I think was the only shooting during the campaign. Thus ended my father's twenty-four hours' service to his country as a soldier, for which he received neither pay nor pension nor political promotion, but only a few rounds of powder, a few bullets, some slugs made by cutting up bars of lead into pieces half to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch long, with one of which he shot a mad dog.

There is a great contrast between the Irish as I remember them seventy-five years ago and the Irish as I know them today. You could wish no better neighbors than those who live up on the west hill in Kirkland near my farm; the Carriers, the Mullens, the Lawlesses, the Mahadys. Two of our prominent men in Sherburne; one often president of the village or trustee, and the other one of the best men I know. The Irish farmers of the Town of Sherburne that I know are industrious, thrifty, moral and religious, and as for religious sentiment and religious principle, for gentle manners and fair faces, I know of no ladies the superior of the Irish ladies of Sherburne. . .

[Regarding Work]

When the forests were in the way as they seemed to be when I was a boy, chopping was an art with men, now, like knitting with the women, a lost art. At that time men were ambitious of a day's work. It is related of Aaron Ross in those times that in one day he cut and put up seven cords of 3' wood, that is a pile of wood 56' long 4' high 3' wide. Say nothing about the chopping. Where is the hired man today, who, if left to himself, would not make more than one day's work of piling that 56' of 3' wood? Sometime later Edwin Gruman husked 100 bushels of corn on an October day between sunrise and sundown and 20 bushels after sundown, a week's work for your hired man of today, ambitious of short hours and high wages.

The farmer's dollar today means more than any other dollar. It did 70 years ago. Very little machinery on a farm then. I remember when horse-rakes first came into use. The first one my grandfather saw he said, "Humph, soon they will be trying to mow with a horse." Planting, sowing,

mowing, reaping, haying, cradling – all hard work; but the farmer's dollar then, hard and slow as it came, was his own, not as now, mortgaged for feed, for fuel, for fencing, for fertilizing, for machinery, and for wages away up above his reach; and yesterday, today, and till Mr. Roosevelt's commission gets through with him, the farmer cannot “sit on the fence in some cool and shady nook and help the corn and taters grow by reading from a book.”

The Goffs of Augusta were model farmers in these days, the old gentleman, Johnathan, his three sons, Harry, Hiram, Harlow; Goff acres and Goff crops were proverbial; in the matter of plowing, sowing, harvesting, the Goffs took time by the forelock; and it was a common saying that no matter how cold and sour the weather after planting, the corn was bound to come up, if only Uncle Johnathan walked over the field and breathed on it.

We had another farmer of a different type, a representative of too many of his neighbors, his fences mostly on his cattle; a rope fastened together the horn and hoof of one; a board over the face of another; a yoke on the neck of a third, with a staddle limb and all projecting in front so far that if the animal grazed at all he must back up. His oxen turned into the pasture yoked, one facing one way, the other the other. Uncle John was a genius, he had gumption; he could, it was said, hone his razor on a cart wheel and scythe up the stakes of a rail fence with a dry alder. I do not see so much fences on cattle as formerly; they do not, with pigs and sheep, pasture in the road; there are not so many carcasses of cattle in the farmer's bone yard in the spring for want of proper care in the winter. In the care of animals there has been a great improvement in my day.

[Regarding the Household Furniture of the Farmer's Wife]

And think of the household furniture of the farmer's wife in those days, not a piano bought on the installment plan, but vessels for catching lye, making soap, brewing beer, tin and brick ovens for baking, cards for fashioning tow and wool into rolls, wheels for spinning flax, tow and wool, wheels and swifts for quilling and pooling yarn, bars for warping, looms for weaving yarn, and presses and pans and skimmers for dealing with milk, butter and cheese. And yet it was in dealing with such furniture as this that my grandmother Miller measured out 89 years, my aunt Champion 97 years, my grandmother Duncan 99 years. How much longer they would have lived with the aid of Mr. Roosevelt's commission I do not know.

[Regarding Village Industries]

Seventy years ago [1840] our villages had each their mechanical industries: blacksmith shop, shoe shop, tailor shop, harness shop, wagon shop, cooper shop. Now all swallowed up by the great concerns of the city; and the mechanic no more a citizen, a property holder, owning and managing his own business, but crowded into the city to be a cog in the wheel of the labor union. It is a pity! A great part of man's education is in managing his own business. “Get on to your own land and trust in the Lord,” says the proverb, “manage your own business and trust in the Lord.” It cheapens a man to be a wage worker.

[Regarding Neighborliness]

Social life seventy years ago was more neighborly than it is today. People in sickness then had neighbors, now trained nurses. People were neighborly in their work, as was witnessed in drawing bees, husking bees, chopping bees, raising bees, paring bees, and quilting bees. I well remember the drawing of a building about 1842 on which were hitched on each string six or eight yoke of oxen and

two or three span of horses. I had on one string a yoke of oxen hitched next to the building. We went down quite a hill, the building following us faster than we wanted to have it. All I could do was to run at the top of my speed and whip the oxen and keep them on a canter, and I can assure you I was not sorry when the runners plunged into a rise of ground and snap went the chains. But buildings were sometimes moved a mile or more in that way, by oxen and horses.

[Regarding Education]

As for intellectual life we were not so much to be pitied; for there were the common schools with full houses, forty to fifty scholars where there are now ten to fifteen, with spelling schools and exhibitions; the select schools and academies where boys prepared for college; the debating clubs; the weekly paper with speeches in it worth reading from Clay and Calhoun and Benton and Webster; and the school district library; and the church with its well trained ministry and the earnest, thoughtful religious life, of which it was the center.

[Regarding Recreation and Sports]

How about the sporting life of seventy years ago; hunting in woods abounding in game, fishing in streams alive with trout, fowling in spring time with pigeons in the air, sometimes uncounted and in flocks that you could measure by the acre; ball playing after raisings and on Saturday afternoons in the early summer, and wrestling at school and after spelling school. I can see Steven Boss now after spelling school wrestling in the snow in his stocking feet; and wrestling all day at town meetings, both at Deansboro and Augusta Center. Athletics then not only in college but everywhere. Our boys would now hardly know the difference between a back-hold, side-hold, square-hold, still less would they know about the toe-lock, over-lock, grape-vine-lock, elbow-lock with which Steven Boss was wont to astonish his antagonist. The champion wrestlers in those days were Lafayhette DeLand on the west hill, Hiram Hathaway, then quite well along in years, and Steven Boss and Henry Bullman in Deansboro, and Louis Brush, small but lithe and spry as a cat, and William Yale, the brother of Carlos, and Frederick Marble in Augusta.

[Regarding Political Life]

Political life was more intense 60 or 70 years ago than now; not in the heat and vituperation and innuendo of presidential messages; though like Roosevelt, Andrew Johnson, John Tyler, and Andrew Jackson were rebuked by Congress for words intemperate and abusive. I do not think that revolvers were more in evidence then in Southern life than now, but they were more in evidence in political life at that time; but in a presidential campaign there was then more excitement and noise than now. Women as they passed each other in the streets as well as man and boys, shouting the names of their respective candidates. Politics in mass meetings with processions by the mile. I remember a canoe made here in Deansboro in 1840. It was painted white, mounted on six wheels drawn by six horses carrying from a dozen to twenty men, among them my father. It had a banner painted by Zorocester Patten with the picture of a log cabin and in the doorway old Tippecanoe pouring from a pitcher a glass of cider. I saw it on the 12th of August 1840, in a procession on its way from Deansboro to a Whig mass meeting in Utica. On the 3rd of September, 1844, I was a long procession passing in the streets of Utica with wagons drawn both by horses and oxen, and machinery and men plying their industries and two ash trees with raccoons upon them; for parties then like Indian tribes had their totems. The totem of the Democratic party was a Hickory tree, that of the Whig party an Ash tree with a raccoon on it. In that procession on a banner there was a picture of a man bent under a heavy load called "Texas", deep in the mud, and under it these words: "There is too much 'clay' on this northern road for Jimmy Polk and his Texas load."

Politics in school: I remember in 1840 a ten-year-old boy informing me that a foreigner could not vote in this country unless he was “pulverized.”

Politics in the pulpit and in the pew: As the pulpit in one case in prayer deplores the fact that both the great parties were seeking to elevate to the highest office in the gift of the people a slave holder. “Whew,” the pew whistles in a left-handed “Amen” that was articulate to everybody. In another case the pulpit prays for Daniel Webster that if there is not any prospect of his repenting that he may go and, like Judas, hang himself.

Politics in families: An American born son of an Irishman complaining that he was flogged by his father for being at a “know-nothing” meeting was it was not the flogging that he minded; it was being struck by a cussed foreigner.

Politics in newspapers: Of course, in articles more abusive and reckless than now and in poetry such as this: “Oh, poor Coony Clay, forsaken Coony Clay,

The white house was not made for you,
So home you'll have to stay.”

That was the Democratic poetry, and here is a snatch of Whig poetry of that campaign.

“At Linden Wald the foxes howled.
The coons all laugh to hear it told.
Ha, ha, ha, such a nominee
As Jimmy Polk of Tennessee.”

The Muse in 1840 was very propitious to the campaign, papers like the “Whig Log Cabin,” and the “Democratic Rough Hewer.” Not a number but that had in it one or more campaign songs, and in the spirit which animated them they were both Whig and Democratic or Loco-foco, as they were then called “Rough Hewers.” At the town meeting and all-day election in knots of men about the polls, it was politics as hot as election.

I do not think as to corruption and graft, things were as bad sixty years ago as today. We are reducing official rascality to a fine art; but as to the abuse and clamor and bitterness of political campaigns, I can see a marked improvement.

[Regarding Military Life]

Military life seventy years ago was something to remember. Every able bodied man between the ages of 18 and 45 required to do military duty; officer-drill two days, usually at Paris Hill the last week in August; company-training in every town the first Monday in September, and on the Wednesday or Saturday following, general training, at Clinton usually. I remember it once at Vernon Village, once at Deansboro by the 20th Regiment of Infantry, made up of companies, usually two from a town; Augusta, Vernon, Marshall, Kirkland, Paris, and I think Westmoreland. This was of all days in the year the holiday which the boy doted on. Peddler stands with such gingerbread and cedar rails as the making of which is now a lost art; auctioneers vending with much noise their wares; Indian women from Brothertown, Stockbridge, Oneida, with their tall silver-bound silk hats, blue broad-cloth leggings, gaudy shawls; Indian boys with their bows and arrows shooting at pennies; then there was the martial music, the falling in of the companies, the roll-call, and the marshalling of the regiment under the hand of the Adjutant. Then the light infantry company with the colors, taking its place in the center of the regiment, and the dipping of the colors to the salute of the music. Then the hollow square, the dismounting of the staff and the field officers, the regiment standing at parade rest with uncovered

heads while the chaplain offered prayer. Then the wheeling of the regiment into companies, platoons or sections, and marching to the field for inspection and battalion drill; and all this with the picturesque uniforms of the light infantry companies and the line officers and the cocked hats of the staff and field officers with their white plumes, silver epaulets, dress swords, superbly mounted on horses beautifully caparisoned made a day for a boy to anticipate and remember.

[Regarding Religious Life]

Religious life seventy years ago was more active, perhaps more earnest than now. Religious meetings held more frequently, usually three religious meetings every Sunday – morning, afternoon at five o'clock, and in the evening: everybody almost a church goer, every family represented in the congregation. But as I look back upon the people of those times I cannot say that in morals and manners they were better than People as I know them today. Seventy years ago there was a Free Will Baptist Church in Deansboro—their meetings, as I remember them, in the house of their minister, the Rev. Levi Gardner, the father of James Gardner, sometime professor, afterwards president of Whitestown Seminary. The house where the meetings were held stood on the north side of the road about one-half mile up the hill as you go from Bogusville to MacMillan's Corners. Afterwards their meetings were held in the Indian School House in the Village, with Elder Crandall as the minister. Their baptisms in the Oriskany Creek just below the bridge on the road from Deansboro to Dicksville called to witness them quite a crowd of people.

I do not remember just the year when the Methodist Church meeting house was built. I should say in 1836 or 7. I believe Elder Beach was the Methodist minister in Deansboro at that time, a good preacher, a man of mother wit and rare humor. In illustration of which was his definition of a Methodist dog. The dog, he says, always so glad to see the minister that he would commence barking and capering at the sight of him and very likely, before he got through, kill a chicken. Elder Beach had a parishioner quite like him, Uncle John Cottrell. They both enjoyed a joke. For one of the plates in the meeting house Uncle John cut down a white elm tree, tall and straight as an arrow and very tough like most white elms. When he took it down he met the minister and said to him, “Elder Beach, I have brought you down a stick of timber that is tough enough to stand any doctrine that you want to preach.”

The Methodist Church at the time it was built was much needed and well filled by people coming for miles from all quarters, among them those who had before worshiped in the Methodist meeting house in Northern Augusta, just below the house of Ira Sturtevant and half mile south of Addisons Woods. This meeting house in Deansboro has been the scene of some powerful revivals. Notable that of 1843 at the time when the Millerite excitement was at fever-heat. Among its members many earnest devoted Christian men and women whose lives were a power on the community most salutary.

The Congregational Church was dedicated in 1853. Among its charter members were Adonijah Day and wife, Anthony Peck and wife, Zebulon Peck, Charles Peck and wife, Mr. Ormsby and wife, William Young and wife, Mrs. Thomas Bishopp, Levi Buckingham and wife, Isaac Miller and wife, Alonzo Miller and wife, Morris S. Miller and wife, Curtis Miller and wife, Olive C. Miller, and Curtis Miller, Jr., and I presume others that I do not remember. Among these names you notice but few unmarried people.

The young people of these days as I knew them about Deansboro and Hanover and Augusta, moral and cultured, were not so generally as now professors of religion and church members. Since the dedication of these two meeting houses there has been a falling off in all the county districts so far as I

know in church attendance. Those districts with removals to the West and to the cities, and with small families, have not increased in population, and yet I believe that the two congregations of the Methodist and Congregational churches of this place number as many as formerly filled the house and the galleries when the Methodist church was the one church in the community; and as for piety, though not so demonstrative in some ways as then, yet as a matter of heart and hand I should hope as salutary and as much a power for righteousness as ever. Indeed, for the last twenty-five years these two churches are among the few churches of the rural communities, so far as I know, which, in spite of removals to larger places and the scattering of the young people to find something to do, have held their own. For which fact both of these churches have reason to thank God and to take courage. I am glad that you have so good a congregation, so good a society of young people, so good a minister, so good a choir, so good a leader, and the same organist as years ago. It freshens in my mind the hymns and anthems which were years ago wings of devotion to us here in this church, and especially that anthem,

“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up on wings as eagles.”

And the closing words to which Mr. Bears gave such expression,--

“They shall run and not be weary;
They shall walk and not faint.”

[Regarding Morals]

As to morals, they are, or I am much mistaken, on a higher plain than seventy years ago. Now, there is only one place in Deansboro where liquor is sold where there were three then. I do not believe that is one-quarter of the whiskey drank in Deansboro that there was at that time, or one drunkard where there were then five. As for manners and morals, I do not think there is really as much profane swearing or foul speech as then, or any such number of men and boys turbulent and disorderly as there were at that time. And on the whole, I have no doubt that the Deansboro of today is up as to morals on a higher plain than the Deansboro of sixty and seventy years ago.