



— James M. Van Epps
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Photo by CLARENCE M. VAN DER VEER

ALPLAUS
Once Camping Ground
Of A French Army

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A L P L A U S

ONCE CAMPING GROUND OF A FRENCH ARMY

Let us try to picture Alplaus as it was about two centuries ago, or in the year 1666. Its whole area then was clad with a dense forest, unbroken save perhaps for now and then a storm-lashed tangle of fallen trees, impenetrable thickets the lair of bears and wolves and other denizens of the primitive forest wherein sometimes echoed the scream of the panther. Nowhere north of the Mohawk River at that time was there a single clearing made by the white man save a very small area surrounding the stone house built by Alexander Lindsay in 1658; an area now covered by the village of Scotia. Three years later a dozen families, mainly Dutch, trekked over the Pine Plains from Fort Orange (Albany) settling on the south bank of the river, almost directly opposite Lindsay's home; the founding of Schenectady.

Through this great primitive forest here and there ran paths of the red man, narrow and deeply rutted by many Algonkian nations who in turn and for many centuries dwelt in the region, but who for some unknown reason had abandoned the area more than one century before the coming of the Dutch or of their immediate predecessors, the Mohawks, for we now know that the advent of this Iroquoian nation into the valley now bearing their name was but some seventy or eighty years before that of the Dutch. It is thought that the Mohawks, defeated in a great war with some northern nation came from a place along the St. Lawrence River. Fleeing from their victors and seeking shelter they entered our area, building their palisaded villages at first in three secluded places along the course of the middle Mohawk, some thirty-odd miles west from Schenectady. Here they again became a strong nation.

While the women of the Mohawks with tireless labor cleared, grubbed, planted and worked in their cornfields on the river flats below their villages, the men when not occupied in their favorite pastime of raiding Algonkian

villages—some of these as far away as Canada—their time was mainly spent in hunting and fishing.

As stated, the Mohawks on their entry found the valley a forest-clad wilderness. All cornfields and clearings made by the Algonkian, and there were many such, were completely overgrown by woods. Here, however, the Mohawks soon became familiar with the whole Schenectady area its surrounding region and here they trimmed out and followed the many old deserted Algonkian paths threading the forest in various directions and our Schenectady area soon became a famous hunting ground for them as it had been for the Algonkian before them. This is well shown by the profusion of flint arrowheads and other stone weapons and implements lost in the chase, afterwards found by the white settlers in clearing the land. Those versed in Indian relics can almost always distinguish the objects left by the Mohawks from those of the Algonkin, which also are found in abundance.

Visitors from the Mohawk Towns

When in 1668 Lindsay the Scotchman built his house and when three years later the Dutch families from Fort Orange established their homes on the south bank of the river they soon had visitors from the Mohawk town up the river. These Indians had been constant visitors on the Dutch of the older town ever since its settlement some forty years before and with whom they were very friendly. In fact they were welcomed for they at certain times of the year brought great quantities of choice skins of the beaver and of other animals which they were glad to exchange for the wonderful goods of the white man; axes, knives and other tools, clothing of fancy colors, beads and trinkets, guns and ammunition and for what most appealed to the Indian, the kegs of rum, "fire-water" whose sale to the Indian had finally to be restricted or prohibited.

From the time of their first settlement in our Hudson-Mohawk region, about 1614, the whites had lived in complete friendship with the Mohawks up to the breaking out of the war of the Revolution when this Iroquoian nation espoused the cause of the British, leaving their homes and going to Canada. This friendship was marred by only one unfortunate incident, and this through no fault of the Mohawks. A friendship with but this one tragic affair and that due entirely to the imprudence of Captain Kreikebeck, commander of the garrison at Fort Orange. To rightly understand how this unfortunate affair came about we must remember that while the Algonkian nations had, as we have seen, long abandoned practically all of the territory lying west of the Hudson River, a region in which the Mohawks freely roamed and hunted but of which they claimed but a small part, while immediately east of the river there still lived several small Algonkian nations. Among these were the Mahikans who lived directly across the river from the Dutch town and fort. These Indians, like the Mohawks were at peace with the Dutch but were having an intermittent war of long standing with the Mohawks, and whose prowess in battle they greatly feared.

In the spring of the year 1626 after an exasperating raid suffered from the Mohawks certain of the Mahikans came over to the commander of Fort Orange asking that some of his soldiers with their wonderful "thunder tubes" be allowed to accompany them in a foray against their enemy, the Mohawks. To this request the commander, Captain Kreikebeck, very foolishly assented and accordingly with six of his soldiers he joined the party of Mahikan warriors, taking the forest path leading westward to the country of the Mohawks. This they had followed but a league when the wily Mohawks who had in some way discovered their approach let fly a shower of flint-pointed arrows from the concealment of a thicket along the path that killed not only Captain Kreikenbeck but also three of his six soldiers. At this the brave Mahikans

quickly turned and skedaddled for the Hudson, followed closely by the soldiers that escaped.

Mohawks Cooked a Dutch Soldier

The victorious Mohawks now built a fire on which they cooked and ate one of the slain soldiers, throwing the other two into the fire, reserving however a leg and an arm to take to their home village as a trophy. The Mohawks were almost the only one of many Indian races of the United States that observed this custom of eating certain parts of a slain enemy. This with them was not an act of cannibalism but was done with the belief that he who thus ate of the victim thereby acquired whatever traits of virtue or bravery the unfortunate roasted one possessed.

At the period of this encounter the Indian neighbors of the settlers "Dutch" both Algonkin and Iroquoian were still armed with both bows and arrows. We find it recorded however that about thirty-five years later very many of the Indians had procured firearms and that they had become very proficient in their use.

It took a lot of palaver and diplomacy on the part of the Dutch to explain to their Mohawk friends who were quick to demand the meaning of this foray but this was finally adjusted by the good offices of a trader who went to the Indian village. Had any of the Mohawks been killed the affair might easily have brought about the complete destruction of this Dutch town and the massacre of all its inhabitants for at that period the Mohawks could muster over two hundred warriors and with their other Iroquoian allies whose homes were westward they were then becoming the dominant group of redmen in the eastern part of the entire Atlantic sea-board. Visitors at Fort Orange from the time of its settlement, the Mohawk hunters lost little time coming from their homes up the valley to see and visit this new town of the whites founded on their river in 1661. Here they at once found a

new and nearer market for the great stores of beaver pelts trapped in their wild Kunjamuck region north of the Mohawk, saving them the long trek over the Pine Plains to Fort Orange. For when Schenectady was founded, here was then as it had been for years the terminus of the canoe voyage of the Indian wishing to enter the main or lower valley of the Hudson. Here, too, more than one of the old Algonkian paths met and ended.

The selection of the strategic point for their new settlement seems to have been a shrewd move of the dozen or more enterprising families that left Fort Orange in 1661. Here on the banks of the Mohawk they would be able to intercept the Indian with his pack or canoe load and thus secure a choice of his furs. This undoubtedly was a far greater factor in the selection of the site rather than the result of a political quarrel, as suggested by certain of our older historians. The agricultural possibilities of the Schenectady area were yet in the far future for its adjoining flat lands though rich were not cleared fields of the Indian, glinting in the sunlight with golden grain, so fancifully pictured by early writers, but were a dense and tangled jungle of driftwood, vines and under-growth. Very soon, however, the people of the mother town began to realize what they had lost by the founding of this new settlement and forthwith hastened to enact legal measures forbidding any or all trade by the inhabitants of Schenectady with the Indian. Despite these laws the trade went briskly on. Even the arrest and imprisonment for a time of a citizen of Schenectady failed to stop it, nor was it ever stopped.

The New Settlers Learn of the Place of Eels

For the sake of keeping unbroken their friendship with the Mohawks, then the most fierce and war-like Indian nation in the whole Atlantic coastal region, not only for the very profitable trade in peltry carried on but

also for the ever present fear of an outbreak perhaps costing them their lives and homes, the settlers of Schenectady treated with studied kindness and consideration their increasing number of visitors from the forest towns; canoe loads of Mohawks who sometimes brought with them their squaws and papooses with an eye to the rings and trinkets sometimes given them. Sometimes also came Indians of the Oneida nation, an Iroquoian nation also friendly with the Dutch and whose valley territory adjoined that of the Mohawks. And, as the old records show, it is to the lasting credit of our first white settlers that they were strictly honest with all their dealing and bartering with the Indian.

Despite all this, we cannot help but suspect that the extremely neat Dutch housewives secretly regarded their red visitors as a great nuisance (*beschaadiging*) though tolerated. They would enter the houses of the village unannounced and would often stay an exasperating length. Too, with the coming of darkness they would sometimes stretch out for the night on the floor in front of the fireplace. Good Old Domine Magapolensis who preached in the Dutch Church at Fort Orange from 1642 to 1648, in a sketch of the Mohawk Indians ("Korte Ontwerp van de Mahakuase Indianen in Nieuw Nederlandt") a very entertaining account which he wrote in the year 1644 and which was published in Amsterdam, Holland in 1651, tells us: "They sleep by us, too, in our chambers before our beds. I have had eight at once who laid and slept on the floor near my bed, for it is their custom to sleep only on the bare ground, and to have only a stone or a bit of wood under their heads." The good Domine also adds: "They are very slovenly and dirty; they wash neither their face nor hands, and look as dirty as hogs. They likewise paint their faces red, blue and &c. and then they look like the devil himself."

It was from these Indian visitors that the settlers of Schenectady first learned of the remarkable stream flowing from the north into the Mohawk about a Dutch

mile below their homes, and of the great quantity of eels that there might be taken at certain seasons of the year. We may well surmise that the men and boys of the village soon visited this famous stream, which they at once named "Aalplaas", a place for eels. The name, thus spelled, appears on all of the early maps of the region; a spelling that should have been retained on our maps of today.

That the Indians, both the Mohawks and the older Algonkian nations that had in turn occupied our region had long known of and resorted to this place where eels in unusual abundance could be caught has been shown by discoveries made in recent years by Lloyd M. Brinkman of a series of ancient eel wiers stretching across the blue clay bed of the stream from bank to bank.

An Algonkian Shipyard

Mr. Brinkman in his valuable research has brought to light the existence of more than one village of the red man in the Alplaus area and these evidently of different nations and periods, if we may judge from the characteristic relics found. He has also announced the discovery of a buried store of several stone gouges, a "Cache" as the archeologist terms such finds of associated relics of similar type. This was an important and perhaps a unique discovery for while single examples of these primitive tools occasionally have been found here and there, yet a find of a deposit, perhaps hidden with design, of these rather rare implements has never before been reported.

An essential and indispensable tool for the hollowing out and completion of their canoes of pine or cedar, the stone gouge no doubt was carefully kept and treasured by the native workman, for its making involved the labor of perhaps a whole year, being slowly shaped and ground from the hardest and toughest kinds of stone the Indians could select; often of diorite or hornblende.

The inference gathered from this discovery of Mr. Brinkman's of this group of gouges is that here in the sheltered ravine of the Alplaus was the workshop, ship-yard if you will, of a group of Indians that specialized in the shaping of canoes from the trunks of the great pines that formerly grew in the region. And, too, we will infer that these artisans were of the Algonkian race. The canoes made by the Mohawks were fashioned from the stripped bark of the elm or birch, stitched together and smeared with pine pitch along the seams.

The log canoes made by the Algonkin were often of great length and would carry a number of people. A famous old navigator and explorer, David Pietersz De Vries who, in command of ships sailing from Holland, made at least three separate voyages to America, tells in the published account of his explorations and voyages of being at Fort Orange in the summer of 1639 where the Indians, he writes: "Hollow out trees and use them for boats and skiffs, some of which are very large, and I have frequently seen eighteen or twenty seated in a hollow log, going along the river; and I have myself had a wooden canoe, in which I could carry two hundred and twenty-five bushels of maize."

Furthermore, the Algonkian maker of canoes, completing his dugout in the sheltered valley of the Alplaus would have little labor in there launching, and floating his craft into the river, for the waters of the Mohawk at that period normally backed up for some little distance into this tributary except possibly in times of very low water. In fact a part of the lower course of the Alplaus might well be classed as an estuary of the Mohawk. Today when the great iron gates of this canalized river are closed for the season of navigation, making the proud old stream so famed in story, legend and history, a mere series of pools of less or greater extent, then, indeed, its surface level extends a full mile up the course of the Alplaus, as shown on the recent maps of the United States Geological Survey.

Classing the lower course of the Alplaus as now an estuary of the Mohawk we must remember that the valley through which today quietly courses this little and sluggish stream on whose banks a neat and thriving village now stands, centuries ago, as the geologists tell us the channel of a mighty post-glacial stream, the "Iro-Mohawk," whose waters flowed to the northward, exactly opposite to its present course. This was at the close of the glacial period when that great and thick blanket of ice, hundreds of feet in thickness which had for ages covered the entire area of our state, even concealing the summits of our highest mountains, had begun at last to melt and pass away.

At this period great floods of water released from the melting ice, overflowing their ancient channels, ran in erratic courses hither and yon their volume increased fourfold by the overflow of the interior sea ("Lake Iroquois") down the upper valley of the Mohawk; occupying basins of the five great lakes whose former outlet, the St. Lawrence was then still barred by waning front of the glacier. The cause of this strange northward flow through the lower valley of the Alplaus was due to the blockage for a time of the normal channel of the Mohawk eastward by enormous deposits of sands and gravels.

Beyond the first or second of the Alplaus channels this northern flow continued by way of the depression of Ballston and Round Lakes thus finding its way to the Hudson by the valley of the Anthony Kill. The course of this odd northern flow of the post-glacial Mohawk has been well established and mapped by our state geologists.

A strange sight would that have been of our region at this period; of vegetable life there was none save possibly certain lowly species of mosses peculiar to sub-arctic zones. All trace of former forests had been swept out of existence by the long continued and irresistible southern movement and grind of the great sheet of ice. Decades would pass before the advancing forest front

from the unglaciated south land would again clad the region with green.

Yet man was here, we now have sufficient evidence to affirm unquestionably that in this dreary, and barren waste there, here and there roamed small bands of hunters, doubtless fur clad, but as we know, armed with weapons and implements of a type and material peculiar to our northern Eskimo before their contact with the white man for many of these characteristic objects have been found in our area.

At that time there evidently was no lack of animal life of arctic type; polar bears, arctic foxes, and in the estuaries and coastal areas besides an abundance of fish there were seals and walrus. In a camping place of this nomad race well up on the bank of the greater Hudson, for then its waters ran with greater volume than today, a few years ago there was found among other characteristic relics a curved knife, its handle and blade in one piece, beautifully fashioned from walrus ivory. And in scattered localities of our area there have been found several examples of the "ulu" or woman's knife of the Eskimo. As the women of that race were the only workers on skins of animals, there were their peculiar tools, for which, says the late Otis Mason, a noted authority, "They found a great number of uses in skinning the game, preparing skins, and cutting out garments of many parts."

It is thought that this fur-clad folk, who as we have seen were here for a time, came from the south with the melting front of the ice and that they likewise left with its northward retreat. A certain few ethnologists, however, have suggested that they may have merged with the first Algonkin to come hither. Others think that as the type of these races was radically different there was no such blending.

Birth Place of the Alplaas

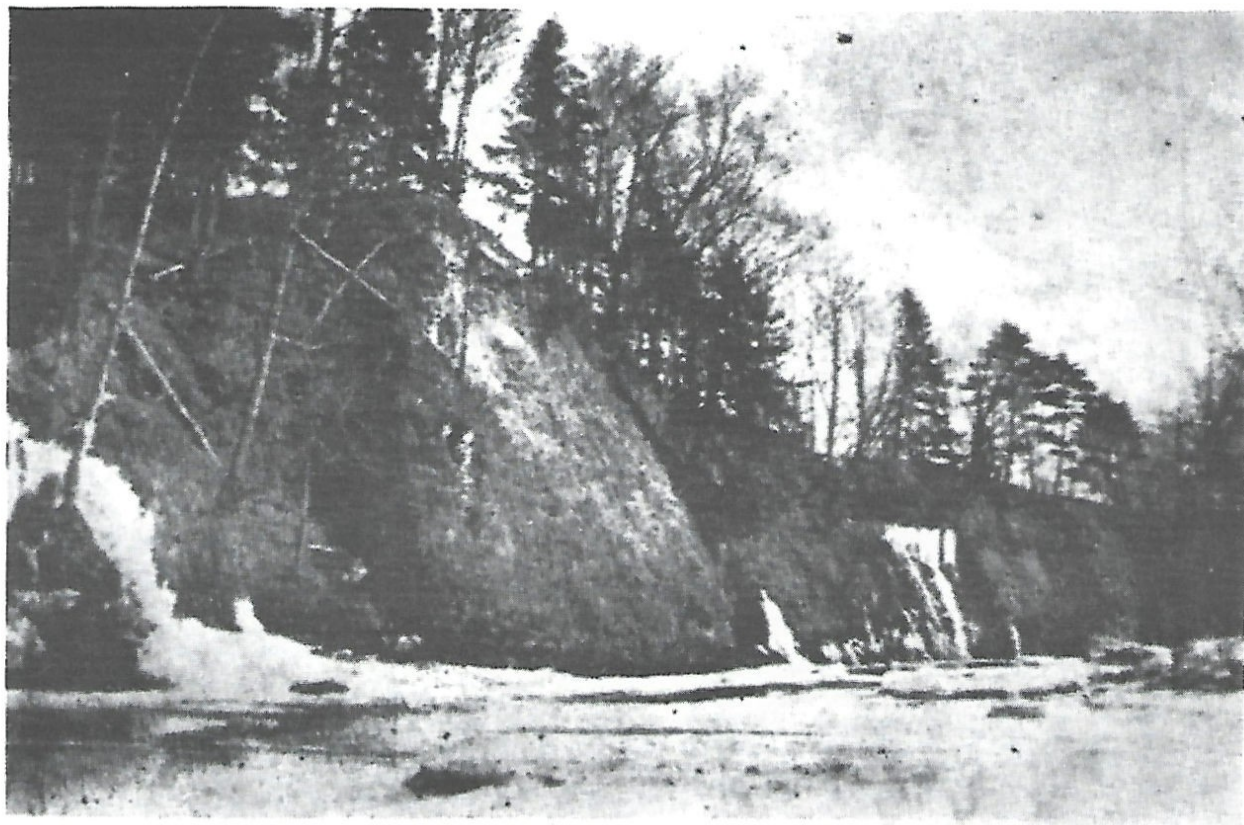
This local section of our Mohawk Valley region had several post-glacial lake beds, some of which were quickly drained by wearing away their retaining bank; in whose bank were beds of slate or shale, after a time thus bringing their partial or complete draining. Some of these lakelets remained however for some little time covered over in part with a surface growth of sphagnum and various water-loving plants, thus, becoming a bog or swampy tract which in the early days of the settlement of our region became a treacherous boggy swamp into which cattle and sometimes horses became mired and perished. This was the case in a large tract in the southwest area of Saratoga county; some two or three hundred acres. This tract is locally known as the Gonzalus Vlaie. There is today only a very small area that is not completely over-grown or occluded, as the geologist terms it. From this swampy patch there issues today a small but permanent stream flowing eastward for nearly two miles thence southward where it enters the Mohawk River about two miles below Schenectady at the village of Alplaas. This little stream, its whole length, is known as the Alplaas creek.

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OLD HIGH MILL DAM, ALPLAUS CREEK

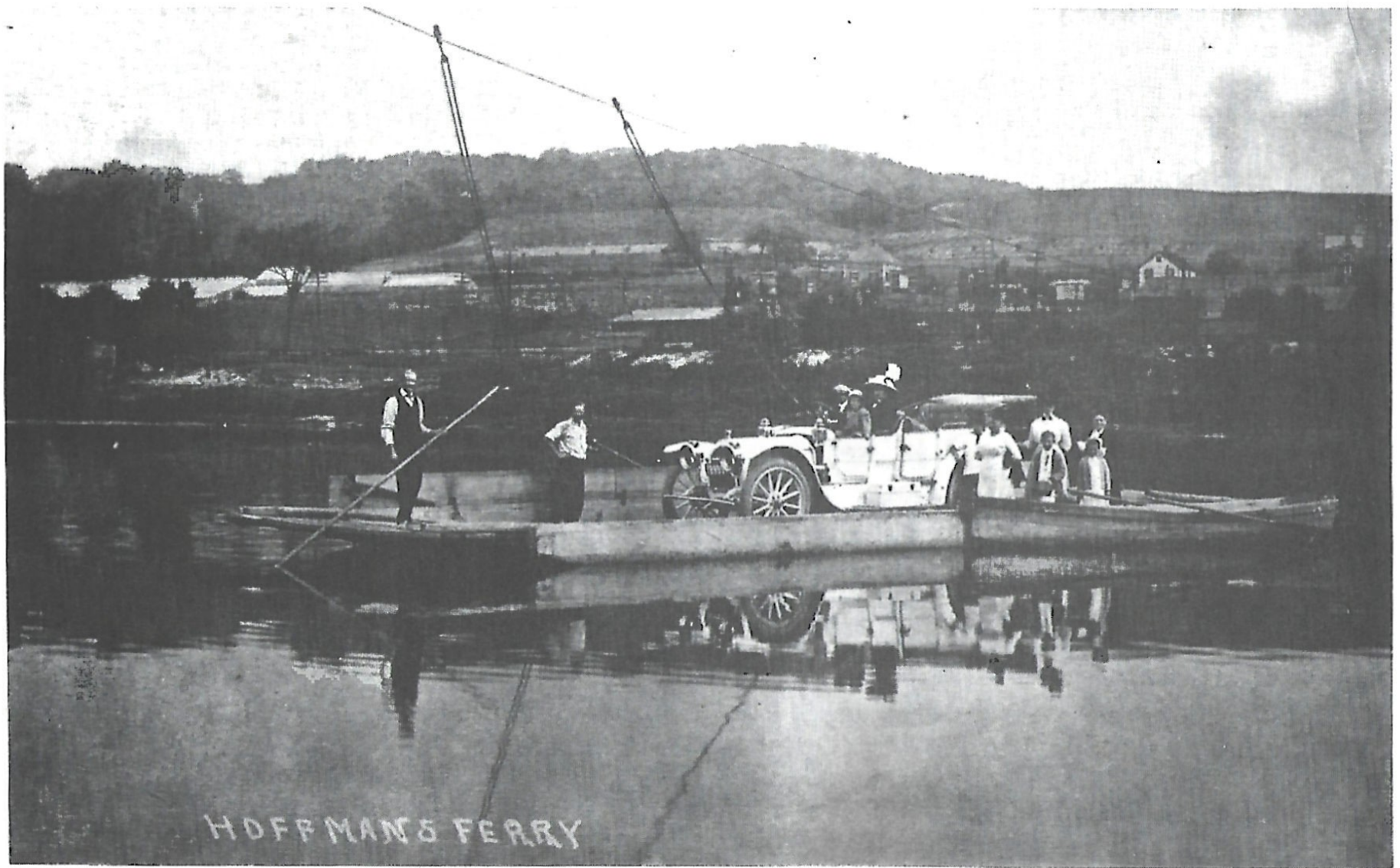
Photo by **FRED THEILMAN**



HIGH ROCK BANK, ALPLAUS CREEK, NEAR THEILMAN'S

Photo by FRED THEILMAN





FERRY AT HOFFMANS ON THE MOHAWK
DISCONTINUED IN 1924
(LOUIS PHILLIPS HOLDING PIKE)



1911 - The last band in Glenville photographed at the Kinum Farm Sunday School Picnic.



Pressing hay at Spencer Potters.



Green's Corners School, 1906. Now School Museum.