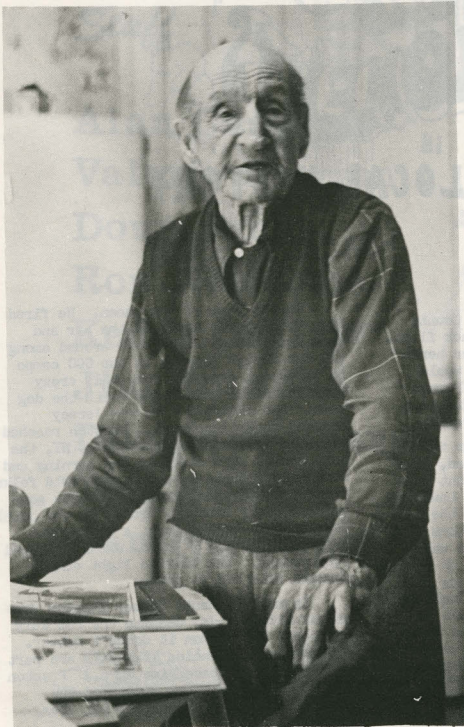


2 CONVERSATION with MERRITT MAYNE



Merritt Mayne lives in the same house in which he was born. The house looks across the road to the free flowing water of the Oswegatchie River in a part of the village of Heuvelton still known as Millville. Merritt's business was running a grist mill. "My work was selling the feed," as he puts it. First working for others and then managing his own feed business, Merritt kept at it till he retired at the age of eighty-five. That was back in 1960. One day this fall someone saw him, at one hundred and two years old, on a ladder fixing the roof of his house.

This collection of memories, in Merritt's own words, tells of by-gone days and of one man's passage through them. You might know for a fact that each one of those days was different from any other; yet, there is a union between them. It seems that practically every day of Merritt's life has been a work day.

He says "You beat any man I ever saw at dressing a stone- They used to have to take the bed stone, the runner, and furrow them out. I could put more furrows in that runner stone than he ever saw any man do."

DRIVING SHEEP FROM RED MILLS

I brought a whole drove of sheep from Red Mills. Drove them alone for Alex Smithers. He was going to meet me at noon and bring me lunch, but I never saw him till I got here with the flock of sheep. Oh, I'd probably be ten or twelve years old. He was to pay me when I got here but I haven't gotten that pay yet!

HIRING OUT AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

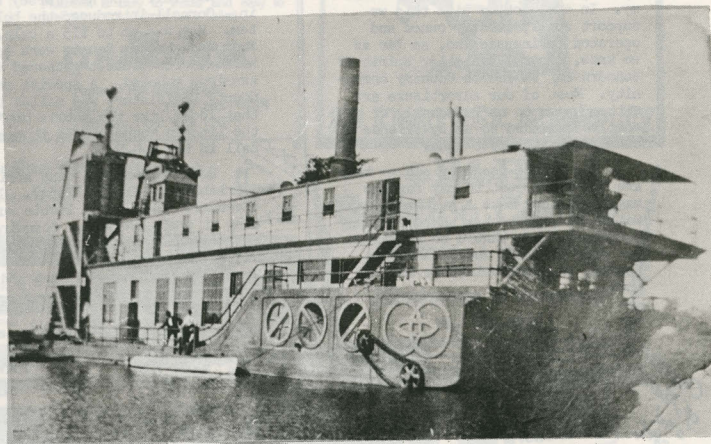
The first time I hired out some—I'd been up to DePeyster. After I finished school here, I got a job up there at a grocery store with John Wilson. He was to pay fifteen dollars a month and my board. He run a grocery with all kinds of goods in big carts. He hired me to work in the store. The first day I went there he had a lot of straw. He had a pair of horses. He had a lot of straw over to another place. He said, "I guess we'll draw that straw over and put it in the barn here in DePeyster and have bedding for the horses." Well, we drew that over. He had a big pile of hard wood, 16 inch lengths, out in back of the store and he introduced me to the axe to split the wood so it could go into the stove. I worked away at that a long while. Then he had a lot of shingle bolts way up to Mud Lake. Had a shingle mill up there—someone did back then—he sent word, "John Wilson's coming to draw his shingle bolts out." He says, "Do you suppose you could go up there with a team and draw them out?" Oh yes, I could do that. I went up there. I hadn't had much experience in the grocery store yet, dry goods, only a little at night.

Then days you had to work your taxes out on the roads, if you wanted to work that way, drawing gravel. Homer Todd—I knew Homer, he was the task master—he came into the store one day. I knew what was coming then. He says, "John, I need a man over in the gravel pits."...He says, "You could work out your tax if you want to." "Ha," I say, "those are taxes I'm not going to pay." I was just a green kid right out of school then with soft hands. John looks at me, he goes, "Do you suppose you could go over there and shovel gravel with him?" I said, "I suppose I could,

but I'm not going to." I said, "Do you think I'm going over there to shovel gravel with all those hearty men." I said, "It's about time you and I had quit, I guess." I had been there two weeks then. He paid me up for two weeks and I rode back downtown Hammond on the stage, down through Depeyster to Heuvelton. I came home and I saw Mr. Colon sitting out on the logs in front of his mill. So I walks over there to keep him company. He says, "Merritt, what are you going?" I says, "I ain't doing nothin' right now. I just got through a job." He says, "How'd you like to work for me for about three months." So we agreed. I said, "When do you want me?" He said, "Right now if you want to." I hired out to him for three months. I didn't draw a cent in that three months. He was giving me \$15 a month. He asked me what I got up there, that's all. Of course, my mother was alive then and I lived at home. I stayed with him three months and I said, "My three months is up now, Tom, I suppose you don't want me any longer." He says, "I haven't told you to quit, have I?" No—I stayed on and he commenced to pay me a dollar a day. I'd begin to get the hang of the mill business. I was there until the mills burnt.

THE BURNING OF THE MILL

We burned 30 inch hardwood in the furnace. The farmers wanted us to save the ashes from it, and they'd buy the ashes. We had this big milk can—an "old fashion" big milk can—well, in the morning we'd take the ashes out of that big stove and put it in that milk can and after that had all cooled we'd put it in a cracker barrel. That week I was up around with my mother; she had pneumonia. I wasn't working that week and they had a fellow hired that drank a lot. I told Mr. Colon afterwards, I said, "He wasn't particular about what he put in that barrel, whether they were coals or not." I said, "That's where the fire was when they woke me up." A neighbor woman down here saw the reflection.



That's a dredge. The lower part was built right across the river. There were rapids down below before the other dam was built. The lower part was built right across the river on my uncle's land. It was floated into the river and then down through the rapids and under the old archway bridge and was anchored right by where Richardson's store is now. It was finished there.

That was finished. It was an awful expensive thing, too. A company came here. They sent boat builders and spent a whole summer over there. My older brother, he was two years older than I was, he was the right watchman on that while they were building down below there. They got it all ready and they launched it. Headed for Black Lake. They got to the mouth of Black Lake and it caught afire and all burnt up there. Never got up Black Lake to dredge that peat. They were going to dig peat, you know? It was a money scheme or something. Thousands and thousands of dollars poured into that.

It was the 22nd of February. The reflection showed through the window. I was sleeping upstairs and she come and hollared. She said, "Merritt, the mills all afire!"

And now don't you think I wasn't in bed very long then. Why I knew just where the big key—had a big key locked that door there—I just pulled on my pants and pulled on my socks—I ran through the snow over there. You had to go. I raced up in the blaze where the post was where that big key was kept. I thought



REBUILDING

A man by the name of Brooks. He used to be in Rensselaer Falls. This old big mill up at Rossie where they used to mine. He had bought that mill that was up there idle. I said he bought it, but he didn't know what he'd do with it. He had an interest in this sash door blind here. He says, "I know what I'll do with that mill up there. I'll send men up there and take that down." It was the winter time and you could hire teams then pretty easily. He hired teams and he sent men up there and tore that big mill down—saved the lumber and the timber and they drawed that down over thirty feet long through the village square and built a new mill.

That was built up over here. My brother and I, we had a cider mill at that time. Will Bell was in partner with him at that time. Jim comes to me one day and says, "Merritt, Bell wants to try and buy me out. He wants to try and get ahold of the cider mill himself." I said, "He ain't going to buy anyone out as long as I've got a little money." I went down to Will Bell—he run a grocery store down here at the village at that time. I said, "Bell, I understand you want to buy the cider mill business out." Yea he did. "Well, sir, I'm going to make you an offer. You can either buy or sell to me. Now you aren't going to buy Jim out at all I bought his share of the cider mill." So I was down the cider mill working with Jim. We used to make about \$25 a day just making cider with farmers bringing in apples.

Lester Thorton, he had all the interest in the saw mill part over there. Brooks had built up the new building and just went up and said, "I'll rent you the gristmill part of that building. I came up and I made a deal with him and I was to pay him \$25 a week to start. It had the grinder and everything in already to hook up and drive it. I run it and run it till I got a chance to buy the whole thing.

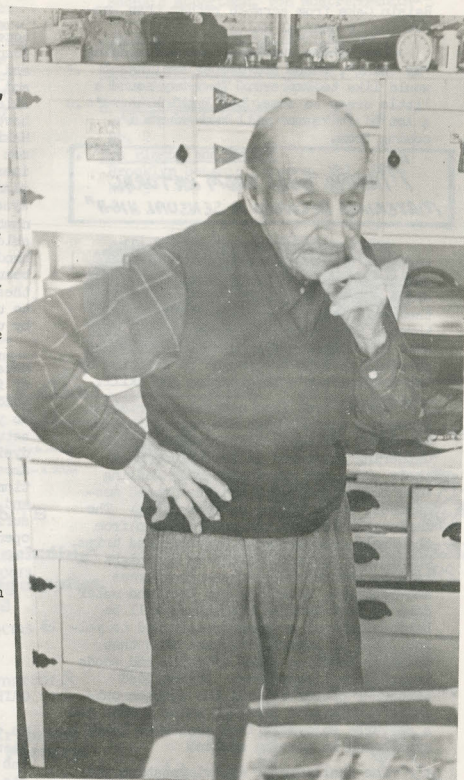
A QUICK DIP AT 75 YEARS OLD

Well, there was a lot of brush growing along the side of the road. I took the scythe, cut them all down, loaded them on the truck and drove over to the bank of the river, backed up the truck, took a fork and unloaded them down the bank. When I backed up there I was closer to the edge of the bank than I thought I was, so I put a four-by-four back of the wheels. So I got the brush off and got back into the truck. Started her up. It kicked that four-by-four out of there and I went down the bank truck and all right into the river. Pretty soon the water commenced to come into the cab. I said, "It's pretty near time, the way the water is raising in this truck. I better be moving." I happen to have the window down and I got up on the seat and I dove out of the window into the river. I had heavy clothes on and heavy shoes but I made the shore. It took a big tractor and a wrecker to pull that truck up the bank again.

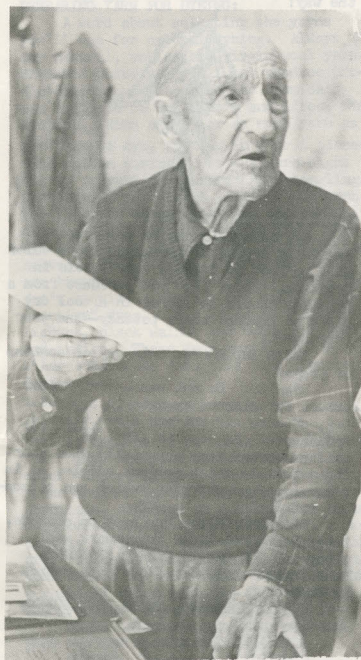
KNOWING HOW

I got to tell you about Dan Giffin and George Pomple. Dan Giffin, he used to be Justice of the Peace. The first thing George Pomple wants some papers signed. He took 'em up into Giffin's office and signed a name to them, Justice of the Peace. George asked him how much it was. He says, "Fifty cents." George says, "Ain't that pretty steep? You just signed your name to that." "Well," he says, "It's twenty-five for the name and twenty-five for knowing how." "All right," George says, "I'll pay you."

It wasn't long after that Giffin brought a tea kettle on down, stopped into the hardware store. He says, "George, can you fix this tea kettle?" George says, "Yes, I can. Stop when you go home and you can get it." Giffin says, "How much is it?" "Well," George says, "It's fifteen cents for knowing how and ten cents for the solder."



ROOTDRINKER would like to acknowledge the aid of Robert Balfort, Elementary Principle at Heuvelton Central School, and the Center for the Study of North Country Folklife, Canton, N.Y.



If I could get the key and open the door, I knew just where the door, I knew just where the desk was...I'd get the books. So I raced up there and there wasn't any keys there at all. I made up my mind that fellow that worked there—he was going with a girl then—he was up night and day with her. That's when the mill got burned about. We'd just unloaded a car of corn just a few days before that. I knew if I got the window open, I know'd where the scales were. I'd dove in that window but I looked up and all the ceiling in there was all afire. I said, "I go in there and that ceiling goes down, that's the end of me." So by that time Bob Crawford's dad—he used to be around with us a lot working—he came over and Billy Martin. They tried to get the wagons and sleighs and things used to be down in that shed part. The wagons was in towards the wall and they got ahold of a wheel. I was in the back end of that on a sleigh top. It was the end of the wagon box. I was in back there and they pulled that out and that flipped over, took me there, cut my eye open, and before I got away took that fingernail right off. I drug that wagon out of there and by that time a lot of men came from the village. Took me down to Dr. Hammond and by the time I got back both buildings were ablaze. Boy, a lot of nice machinery went down in there.