

Making Sauerkraut in Skaneateles

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Kenneth Jennings Wooster

Many businesses that once flourished in the Township of Skaneateles have been allowed to disintegrate and slip into oblivion without any historical record so one more would probably not be noticed.

However, an effort is now being made to unearth some of the highlights of a few of these former important enterprises.

These notes deal with the Sauerkraut Factory on Fennell Street which is located on almost the last area within the corporate limits of Skaneateles Village.

According to a news item in the Skaneateles Semi-weekly Free Press of January 1901 a new business had been founded on West Elizabeth Street by two industrious local citizens - Throop Martin and Charles (Chick) DeWitt. They had trimmed and sliced by hand 8 ton, 16,000#, of cabbage for sauerkraut during the fall of 1900. After curing, the kraut had been packed and sold in wooden containers in 10 and 25 pound amounts. They hoped to have a mechanical slicer the next year.

From information furnished by Charles Spearing, a life-long resident of W. Elizabeth Street, it seems as though this first sauerkraut making was done in the cellar of the house where Harvey Smith now lives. At the turn of the century this farm was owned and occupied by the Martin DeWitt family. One of Martin's sons was "Chick".

No reliable records have been found to cover the sauerkraut business until we come to the factory on Fennell Street. It was rather common knowledge that a man named Lee Colton was associated in the business with DeWitt at about 1905 or 1906. (?) What became

of Throop Martin? How long was Colton a partner? No one seems sure.

No record has yet been found as to when the kraut factory on Fennell St. was built or by whom. Some information indicates that the cement part of the building had been used as a feed mill and also as a cider mill, and was sold in 1904 by Amos R. Pardee to the Skaneateles Kraut Co.

An item of interest that has been given me was taken from the columns of the old Skaneateles Democrat, date Sept. 13, 1906. It states that "the old Stacey mill on Fennell St. has been renovated by C. P. DeWitt and associates for the purpose of making sauerkraut. New and up-to-date machinery has been installed; also four wooden tanks each with a capacity of 400 barrels for curing the sliced cabbage. It is expected that the capacity of the plant will be about 150 barrels per day and that by the time the 4th tank is filled the 1st one will be cured and ready to be marketed. A large wooden addition is being built on the north side of the building for storage of both empty and filled barrels. A railroad siding comes into the plant for convenience in loading and shipping."

Until the canning equipment was installed the cured kraut was packed in wooden oak barrels. More correctly I should call them casks because a barrel is $31\frac{1}{2}$ gallons and I feel sure that these had a capacity of 45 or 50 gallons.

The main building which housed the kraut making machinery and the storage tanks is still standing, but there has been some indication that the village may decide to have it demolished because it is unsightly and not suited for other use.

There were 5 or 6 wooden storage vats in which the sliced

cabbage was packed for curing. Each of these vats was circular, 10 or 12 ft. or more in diameter and perhaps 20 ft. deep. They were really small silos without doors; the only entrance or exit was the entire top and while each vat was being filled there would be 2 men wearing rubber boots and using long handled forks to keep the sliced cabbage evenly distributed and firmly packed down to insure proper fermentation.

The early type cabbage was most extensively grown for making kraut as it matured earlier and was perhaps juicier. The kraut factory usually started operating early in September and would finish sometime during late October. (Estimated from memory)

I believe an effort was made each year by DeWitt to contract 400 acres among farmers living within a radius of 10 or 12 miles when horses were used for hauling. In the '20's when trucks became common carriers, distance was not so important.

It seems to me that the years from about 1912 to 1935 was the period when cabbage was an important cash crop in this vicinity, and that period was probably when kraut making in Skaneateles was at its peak.

As the loads of cabbage arrived at the plant each load was weighed (that is gross weight of wagon and contents), then the load was drawn to a chain elevator at the south end of the factory.

Here the farmer unloaded into the elevator and the cabbage was raised about 20 feet into the 2nd floor of the building and onto an endless belt conveyor. On each side of this conveyor was a shelf perhaps 12 inches wide and used as a working area for

trimming the heads. As I remember there was room for about six people (usually women) on each side. Each person had a high stool for a seat and a sharp butcher knife to remove a few of the outer leaves and cut the stump close to the head.

Next the head moved on to the coring machine and then the slicer which shredded the heads up very finely. The knives for the slicer were made in Germany and during World War I DeWitt had considerable difficulty in obtaining an adequate supply. The shredded cabbage fell from the slicer into a metal hopper that was suspended from an overhead track and could be pushed to whichever tank was being filled. Here it would be dumped and the men in the tank would level the sliced cabbage while the empty hopper was returned to the slicer for another load.

If the farmer was extra ambitious and unloaded faster than the trimmers could take care of the heads, then a signal would be sent to the engineer (who for many years was Frank (Cooney) Chappel) and he would stop the elevator for a short time until the trimmers got caught up with the work.

Charles Spearing furnished the information that, probably about 1930, he drove to Hannibal with a small truck that he owned and brought back all of the canning equipment from a factory in Hannibal that was no longer operating. This equipment was installed in the Fennell St. factory by Charles DeWitt.

Bits of information that have been furnished me regarding the manufacture of sauerkraut in Skaneateles have been interesting and somewhat intriguing to me. One note states that during the time

that Charles P. DeWitt managed the Packwood Livery, he made kraut there, one barrel at a time. It seems to me that it must have been before the venture on West Elizabeth St., but no date is given.

Another note states that DeWitt made kraut in a stone feed mill at Mottville. Said mill was later occupied by Edward W. Feeley as a grist mill. This information is erroneous because the building in question was a large wooden building that stood between the railroad tracks and the outlet and, according to Gay Youker, had always been used for handling feed. By the way, Mr. Youker came to Mottville in 1894 at ten years of age and his memory is excellent.

There was a stone building on the west side of the outlet opposite the Feeley building that was originally built to make pearl barley. This stone building, although unoccupied for years, was in good condition and when cabbage became an important cash crop, cribs were installed and it was used for cabbage storage. Mr. Youker has no recollection of kraut ever being made here or anywhere in Mottville. The large wooden building was successfully used by Feeley for several years. Cheap power was furnished by an over-shot water wheel.

The business was sold by Feeley to William Kew, a baker by trade, who installed a bakery in part of the building but this side line was not successful as vibration from grinding feed disturbed the yeast used in bread making. Mr. Kew gave up the project and was employed for many years by Holben's Bakery and later by Karsa Brothers.

Other information indicates that the Skaneateles Kraut Company incorporated in May, 1943 and was sold to Solomon Greene in 1959.

(I believe that Greene rented the building several years before buying it.)

No kraut has been made for the last 4 or 5 years and the building is deteriorating fast.

Alzina Loveless gave me a list of some of the women who worked as trimmers while the kraut factory was operated by Charles DeWitt, namely: Bella Drew, Carrie Stott, Mrs. Rose Sweeting, a Mrs. Halleck, a Mrs. Chapman, Gertrude Ulrich and Camilla Prouten. There were, without doubt, very many others but no records are available. Any records that may have been left in the little office building that stood between the railroad track and the scales have been destroyed by vandals who have broken in to and wrecked the interior.

During the years that I drew cabbage to the kraut factory, Jennie Evans was the bookkeeper. I presume it was later that Ruth Powell, Edith Eastman and Mildred Smith each served as bookkeeper.

During the period that Solomon Greene operated the business some of his transactions with farmers were not too satisfactory, and conduct of the business rather haphazard. It has been said that there is many a slip between the wrist and the lip and, by the same token, there was many a headache for the farmer between planting the cabbage seed and producing a crop for market.

I believe that from 1905 to 1925 most local farmers attempted to raise their own cabbage plants and were fairly successful.

Usually a fertile plot in a well drained area was selected in which to sow the seed. The seed bed would be worked into a fine pulverized condition and the seed sown usually in rows with a hand drill.

Early May was considered to be the right time to make a cabbage bed. However, if the weather became hot and dry there was a danger of small black bugs attacking the plants as they emerged from the ground and a bed could be practically destroyed in 2 or 3 days.

Another enemy was a small white grub or maggot that worked underground and destroyed the roots so that the plant was no good. It required about one pound of seed to produce enough plants for 3 to 4 acres. The price of seed varied from \$2.00 to \$4.00 per pound.

The length of time required for a plant to grow large enough for transplanting was 4 to 6 weeks depending on the weather, and the middle of June was when most fields were planted. July 1st was considered the end of the planting season.

The plants were spaced about 24 inches in the row with the rows about 3 feet apart. It required about 7000 plants per acre. Early in the 20th century the plants were set by hand using a wooden peg or a trowel to get the roots of the plant 3 inches or so into the ground. At that time there was always a job for a sturdy boy to follow along with a pail of water and a dipper to pour a half teacup of water around the stem of each plant. A rather tedious job.

Mechanical transplanters were soon introduced. This was a vast improvement. The transplanter was a 2 wheeled implement that supported a 50 gallon barrel of water. It was drawn by two horses and had a seat for the driver and 2 seats back of the barrel, and very close to the ground, for the men who did the planting. A small

plow opened a narrow furrow - a timing device allowed a small amount of water to run into the furrow - and the two "setters" would alternately set a plant at each spurt of water. Three acres per day was considered better than average.

I would say that in the late '20's and through the '30's the raising of cabbage plants became a big and probably profitable business for some growers who owned muck land in the Montezuma and Savannah area. One grower, Eugene Doty, with whom I was well acquainted, raised about 15 acres. Some were early plants and some were late variety. For a few years he would pull the plants and roll them in burlap and deliver them to DeWitt's kraut factory where the farmers who desired could get them, take them home and sort them and, with DeWitt's supervision, agree on the number of plants set and pay accordingly.

Eventually Mr. Doty discontinued delivering but plants were always available at his farm. Early in the season the buyer could sometimes choose either sand or muck grown plants. He had several acres of sand near to and west of his home but by crossing the road and driving around a small mountain, you would drive into 100 acres of muck land as level as a ball diamond, planted to all kinds of vegetable plants, very few weeds, and incredibly straight rows.

The farmer would tell Mr. Doty how many thousand plants he needed and a certain number of feet would be measured off for 1000 plants per row and a given number of rows staked off. It was simple and very accurate. The price ranged from \$1.00 to \$1.50 per thousand for cabbage plants. Tomato plants at that time were \$2.00 per

thousand.

Of course there were other growers in that area who raised plants for sale but several Skaneateles farmers that I knew of patronized Eugene Doty, possibly because of his association with C. P. DeWitt.

The sauerkraut business in Skaneateles is apparently at an end. The building is gradually disintegrating and will in a few years become just a memory. For a few years after decline of the cabbage industry in the vicinity of Skaneateles red kidney beans seemed to take the place of cabbage but today very few fields of red kidney beans are seen in this area. One hundred years ago teasels were the main farm crop; fifty years ago every farmer was interested in cabbage; twenty years ago red kidney beans seemed to be the money-making crop for farmers. Today many farms have become building lots - the draft or farm work-horse has been replaced by riding horses - some good tillable crop-land has been changed into airstrips and even farmers who depend on producing food for human consumption are rapidly disappearing. This is 20th Century progress. I wonder if it is in the right direction.