

Oswego Commercial Times  
Saturday, March 19, 1859

At a meeting called at the Cobble Stone School House, district number two, town of Oswego, for the purpose of reaffirming the name of Union Village, the Hon. Arvin Rice, of Hannibalville, gave the following account of the first settlers and settlement of this town, as follows:

"There were three brothers by the name of Rice, who came from Wales, in Great Britain, to this new continent, and were among the first settlers. One made his home in Connecticut, one in Rhode Island, and the other in new Hampshire.

"The one in Connecticut had several sons, one of whom was a soldier in the old French and Indian wars of 1754-63, and was taken prisoner by the Indians and kept by them several weeks.

"It was the custom of the Indians to take from their prisoners anything of value, whether clothing or money; but Mr. Rice kept his new blanket by sewing bits of dirty rags around the edges, and otherwise disfiguring it, and his hat he stamped into the dirt his money he put in his stocking and wore it under his foot.

"He had a son named Asa, who served in the Revolutionary War for three years. He helped put the great chain across the Hudson river, at West Point, to prevent the British from coming up in their vessels. He was in the battle of Saratoga, in which Gen. Frazer was killed and Burgoyne was taken prisoner. He afterwards married and had several children. In 1792 he traded a piece of land, poor and sandy, containing four acres, for a soldier's claim to bounty land.

"When the township of Hannibal (now town of Oswego,) was surveyed into Military Lots, the old soldiers cast lots for them, lot number two falling to said Rice. In September, 1797, he started with his family, consisting of himself, wife and eight children, for his new home in the woods far to the west.

"They came up the Mohawk river in a boat, which they had to draw on wheels from the river to Oneida Lake. They came on through the lake, and won the Oswego river till they came to the Rapids. There they engaged a pilot (the family went on the shore afoot,) but he, from some cause, ran the boat on a sunken rock which stove a hole in the bottom. The boat immediately sunk, with all the goods on board. Everything was filled and soaked with water.

"Beds, clothing and all were as wet as water could make them. It was near night, and the goods could not be got on shore, and no inhabitants near; but they found an uninhabited cabin in which they spent the night; but it was so small that after the family lay down on the ground - for there was no floor - it was so completely covered that the boatmen had to stand in the corners to sleep.

"After a day or two they got another boat. After considerable difficulty (such as drawing the boat around rapids and the Oswego Falls,) they arrived at the place where Oswego City now stands. There were living there at that time, three families and a few soldiers. They then wet out into the Lake, then west three miles to the place now owned by A.C. and D.C. Mann. There they landed on the beach at 2 o'clock P.M., October 2nd, 1797. The boatmen immediately left, promising to return in three weeks with the winter provisions.

"There they were in the woods without a friend or neighbor, with only a pillow case

partly full of flour, very little or no meat, or other provisions. They were longer on the road that was expected so that the provisions were nearly exhausted.

"However, the weather was fine and the mother with the girls, spread their beds, bedding and clothing on the shore to dry, (for they had no chance of drying since their misfortune on the river) while the father put up a tent seven feet by nine, which they had borrowed.

"Before night there came a terrible storm of wind, thunder and lightning, and rain. The next day the father and two eldest boys aged eleven and fourteen years, set to work to build a house seven by nine feet of such poles as they could carry, over which they spread the tent for a roof. It had no floor, window or door.

"Provisions soon became scarce, and the father tried his skill in fishing, but only caught one, and that was a salmon. It was a poor time in the year to fish; he however robbed an eagle of one, but these did not last long. he then went to Oswego to buy provisions of the soldiers, but there none to be had. He finally succeeded in obtaining a barrel of flour that had lain in the water for six days and was covered with blue mould. It was brought home but it was so injured that it would not rise, so they had to bake it without, but when baked and eaten it would rise in their stomachs and could not be kept down. Their stomachs were not strong enough to contain it. The children would eat it, then go out and vomit it up; it was so hard that it had to be cut with an axe."

[Here the speaker was so overcome with his recollection of that time of misery and starvation, (he being the boy of eleven years old) that he could not proceed for some minutes and there were few dry eyes in the audience. As soon as he could command his feelings he proceeded].

"It was six weeks before the winter provisions came. In the meantime, the mother and youngest child - then about three years old, were taken sick, so they could not leave their beds. After lingering awhile the child died - died from starvation. The mother lingered till Spring, then recovered. After six weeks, the men returned with the winter provisions; but, having no mother's care, the children suffered nearly as much from eating to excess, as they had done from starvation.

"The boatmen helped build a log house, sixteen by eighteen feet, and covered it with bass wood bark. After it was finished, they gathered together in the evening, and with wine in their glasses, they named the place Union Village."

[The speaker here showed the same wine glass in which he drank the wine, and the broad-axe which they used to cut the bread in starvation times, and some other relics of that early day].

"The next day, the boatmen left, and took with them two of the families, who lived where the city now stands, so there was only one left. During the winter, the boys (for the father was a feeble man,) cleared four acres, ready for a Spring crop.

"The next building erected was a mill, which consisted of a large maple log, set up on one end, and hollowed out like a kettle or larger mortar. The large pestle was fastened to a spring pole, and the boys would work in the woods till eleven o'clock in the forenoon; then one of them would go to the mill and grind (i.e. pound) corn enough for a pudding for dinner, and a Johnny cake for supper. The father also split bass wood logs, and laid the flat sides up, for a floor, and made some other improvements for domestic comfort, their floor previously having been the ground carpeted with hemlock boughs.

"In the Spring, they planted some corn, and had some other crops, but the squirrels,

raccoons, bears and other wild game, destroyed a good share of them. The cattle which had been purchased the fall previous, were sent on from the east, as soon as the Spring opened. They consisted of one pair of oxen, one cow, and one yearling heifer.

"The family then thought they were quite comfortably situated. Summer had come; others had moved into the city; they had plenty to eat, and were getting along finely. But misfortune had not not forgotten yet. The cattle strayed off, and could not be found.

"Finally the father hired some men and agreed to pay them twenty dollars, to find and return them. They were gone 21 days. He then hired some men, who built a log and brush fence from the three mile to the four mile swamp, which enclosed between that and the lake some 3 or 400 acres. The summer passed quite comfortably, but the days of pleasure were short.

"During the fall the family were all taken sick with the lake fever except the mother. The times looked dark and gloomy, their crops were nearly all destroyed, no hay cut for the cattle, their stock of clothing nearly gone, the family sick, and they were about to enter upon another long and dreary winter on the bleak shores of Lake Ontario.

"The mother's clothes were worn to rags, with no change of garments, and the rest equally destitute. Was that mother discouraged? If so she kept it to herself and tried to cheer and comfort the rest. She emptied her feather bed into boxes and barrels, and made new clothing and patched old with the ticking. Trees were cut in the woods and the cattle ate and lived on the tops - so they worried out the second winter, that of 1798. The next spring new settlers came in and the family began to see better times. But still they had no meetings or schools, no mills or conveniences of grinding, sawing or manufacturing of any kind."

The speaker related a good many anecdotes of early times, gave names and dates, and continued the history of the family till they were surrounded with all the comforts and many of the luxuries of life. He himself never went to school in his life till after he was 21 years of age, when he attended two winters at the city, then village of Oswego, three miles from home, which distance he had to travel twice a day, and break his own road through the snow, guided only by marked trees, thee being no road cut through.

During the last war with England, several of the older boys, in fact, all who were old enough to help defend the city, volunteered their services, and the girls cooked and baked food and gave the soldiers as they passed by their door.

The father died in August 1823, and the mother some years previous. Their descendants now number (counting the living and the dead), over one hundred and ninety.