

The Matriarch of Main Street

The Town Hall in Edwards

by LaVerne H. Freeman

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For fifty years, a daily habit of William Grant, local builder, was to write in his diary. A sampling of the entries is used to tell the story of "Bill" Grant building the present Town Hall. This was the second Town Hall he had supervised, having designed a wooden structure erected 1891-92 on the site of the Post Office and Masonic Hall on Maple Ave. This building burned July 4, 1894 along with the rest of the business section. The town officers felt there should be a replacement.

- July 28, 1894 - Town meeting to rebuild town hall. Clear vote.
- Apr. 15, 1895 - Mr. Williams of Ogdensburg, Architect for the new town hall in town looking over the sights to locate.
- Apr. 18, 1895 - the Town Board located the Town Hall on the Murray lot.
- May 27, 1895 - made contract to build Town Hall for \$7600.00
- May 28, 1895 - let job to Rosco Todd and Norris Rushton to deliver the stone for \$3.75 per cord 128 ft.
- June 12, 1895 - helping square basement to town hall. Dick Moran and Ashabel Earl to work.
- June 29, 1895 - Went down to Gouverneur with Dick Moran. Bought marble of John Webb for \$79.00. Expenses \$3.60.
- July 1, 1895 - Finished foundation. Settled up with men.
- July 2, 1895 - Went to Potsdam to buy sandstone with Miles. Expenses \$5.41.
- July 22, 1895 - began laying sandstone.
- Aug. 7, 1895 - to work on Town Hall ½ day. rain & wind. Water tank run over.
- Aug. 19, 1895 - to work on Town Hall. some rain. masons laid off for to get on joice.
- Aug. 31, 1895 - Iron girders, posts and sandstone came. got them over to Town Hall.
- Oct. 25, 1895 - hired blacksmith to work on roof of hall. began to work at noon.
- Oct. 26, 1895 - to work in shop making window frames for roof and ventilators.
- Nov. 12, 1895 - to work helping fit roofing steel. fine weather.
- Nov. 15, 1895 - to work on town hall, some rain misty. 62 years old today.
- Nov. 20, 1895 - finished chimney on town hall.
- Nov. 26, 1895 - furnace to hall come.
- Dec. 6, 1895 - to work on casings for stage. Men putting in windows in town hall.
- Dec. 10, 1895 - Cross brothers began to plaster town hall.
- Dec. 23, 1895 - Boys laying floor in hall.
- Mar 24, 1896 - Band concert in town hall. Receipt \$41.95.
- Apr. 18, 1896 - helping on town hall cleaning up shavings & painting window frames.
- Apr. 25, 1896 - Around home & village. Special town meeting to vote for \$400 to seat town hall.

June 12, 1896 - to work in shop making letters for town hall.

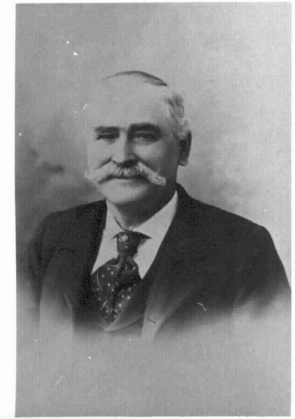
June 13, 1896 - to work in shop. finished letters.

The above entries were page 31 of the Edwards Bicentennial book, "Edwards on the Oswegatchie" and titled "History In A Diary".

The newspapers of the time kept the townspeople abreast of the progress of the building of the new Town Hall in 1895-96 by Wm. Grant, and then described the activities that took place in the building through the years that it was the main site of happenings in the community.

When it was voted to build the Hall the newspaper noted that the firm of Johnson & Williams of Ogdensburg was commissioned to design it. They also had designed the St. Lawrence County Courthouse as well as other north country structures.

After the building was completed the Town Board voted \$400 to purchase 336 "plain oak chairs, guaranteed for ten years". These chairs were for the upstairs auditorium and are still in use, so it appears the Board got their money's worth.



William Grant
1833-1918



The Town Hall ca. 1896

On the stage still hangs the original roll down curtain made of unbleached muslin with an intricate hand painted scene on it. The artists' initials, a B overwritten with a Y, and the date 1897 written in the lower right hand corner are plainly visible. A news item of 6 April 1897 notes - "Great satisfaction is being expressed in the work of Messrs. Yerance and Berry, the scenic artists, who are painting the scenery for the town hall. They gave entertainments in the hall last Friday and Saturday evenings, which were well attended. They present the comedy drama, 'Kathleen's Dream', next Saturday evening."

This upstairs auditorium, with a stage, was termed the "Opera House" and was used for nearly all the programs of interest to the public. One of the programs noted in a news article was - Feb 1898 - "Widow McGinty" was put on by the Masons in the Town Hall. Total receipts were \$68.00. Profit to the Masons \$47.00.

The school in the village had no facilities for public gatherings so all programs involving the students were held in the Opera House. From the first graduating class in 1914 through the class of 1935 graduation ceremonies took place in the Main Street Town Hall in the upstairs Opera House.

Medicine Shows were one of the entertainments that came to town and held the interest of the people with vaudeville type acts while expecting the audience to buy whatever patent medicine they were selling as a way to make a living. One medicine show mentioned in Velma Hall's diary was in September 1918. She wrote that "the Franklin Medicine Show was here all week in the Town Hall - free shows". On another occasion, in 1930, she mentioned that a show played to large crowds and charged 10 cents a show.



A view of the artists' initials and date on the curtain.

Another show that was sure to bring the parents to an evening's entertainment was a "Tom Thumb" wedding. A company specializing in this would come to town, enlist nearly every child in the village to be part of the "wedding" and provide costumes (which weren't very clean and needed mending usually). This took very little preparation on the

children's part and ensured the outside company of a full house of proud parents paying to see their children on stage, thus making a profit for the promoters. The children, while having their "fifteen minutes of fame", were promised ice cream as a reward for their cooperation during the show. While a number of Tom Thumb Weddings were recalled, one has its program preserved. This particular one was sponsored by the Eastern Stars organization and held on 26 May 1922. It is recalled that the little three year old girl (Helena Freeman Evans) who played the Maid Of Honor nibbled on her bouquet all through the performance.

The beginning of silent movies in Edwards wasn't found, but apparently it was before 1917 because Mrs. Velma Hall wrote in her diary on 15 October 1917 that Myron B. Clark and Mott Meldrim bought the movies from "Frenchy". (Frenchy, was found to be Frandy Dulack, who lived next door to the Town Hall).



A view of the "Opera House" in its early days

Silent films needed music to make them "come alive" and one of the early pianists was Ruth Bancroft Adams. Later, Myron Clark's married daughter, Eva Clark Gore, played for the films. At the time Mrs. Gore was the pianist, our present historian, Edith Cleland Duffy was a small child and a friend of Mrs. Gore's daughter, Lucille. She would sometimes sit together with her friend when they were at the movies at the same time. They would watch Mrs. Gore as her very talented fingers followed the plot and adjusted the piano music to the action on the screen - all without any written music.

When "talkies" came into being, Roy and Lee Meldrim, sons of Mott Meldrim, brought them to Edwards Town Hall Theater after a hiatus of no movies for about a year. Mrs. Hall's diary notes on 19 December 1930 - "First talkies started tonight. They were all right. They have not got the machine so it works very good yet."

Movies were held in the Town Hall until television became more popular and attendance dropped off in the mid 1950's. James Edwards ran the theater in the late 1940's until around 1951/2. Then Wm. Clark and Grant Webb bought the business and Clark was the last proprietor.

The room that seemed to be a favorite for conducting businesses, was the ground floor room on the front left. Among the first businesses established there was a dentist's office. Dr. Willis Campbell moved into the village in May 1897 and set up his office there. He attended to the dental needs of the community and surrounding area until he purchased a Main Street building of his own in 1906 where he had his residence as well as his dental office for the remainder of his long life.

This room was a barbershop for a variety of tonsorial artists. One enterprising barber, Fred Dulack, also had a public bath in his shop, presumed to have been in the back of the shop about where the vault is today. A relaxing bath in a large tub of hot water would have been a real luxury in the days when indoor plumbing had not yet arrived in Edwards. Of course this luxury was available only to the male population of the community.

In November 1906 the Post Office moved into the front, left room on the ground floor of the Town Hall. There it stayed until the community organized a bank and that group wanted the bank in the Town Hall. The Post Office moved to the location on Maple Ave. in the Masonic Hall until 1976 when there was a new building erected for it on East Main Street.



The Town Hall ca. 1911

The officers of the First National Bank purchased a walk-in vault, which was installed in the back portion of the much used front, left room in the Town Hall and conducted business in that room beginning 27 June 1914. This same vault is in use today as safe, fireproof storage for valuable town and village records. The Bank did business in the Town Hall until it needed a bigger area and moved across the street in the brick building on the corner of Main St. and Maple Ave.

Now this same front room is used as the Town Board office and business is done there every day.

The center front section appears to have always been a lobby from which people could pass through to the basement, or the rear room, or wait a turn to buy a ticket for a program in the second floor Opera House. At times one could also buy popcorn or soft drink while enjoying intermission, or going to a movie. In 1990/91 a major portion of this space was remodeled into an office for the village officials.

The ground floor rear section was an open room for a long time with only an area partitioned off with iron bars making two cells for unruly townspeople who perhaps had imbibed too much "Tanglefoot" on a Saturday night, or were involved in some other undesirable activity. The newspaper correspondent for Edwards referred to it as the "Blackhole". When it was deemed that the cells were no longer needed, Stanley Given bought the cells to use the bars in the addition to his new dairy barn on the Fine Road, Route 58, in 1964. (Farm now owned by Robert Hathaway).

Town and village board meetings were held in this room and it was noted in an early Book of Minutes that members had to bring their own kerosene for fuel to keep warm during meetings in the cold months of the year. Also on Election Day voting is always held in that room.

The "Opera House" ca. 1976



About 1970, a portion of the rear room was partitioned off for a small museum for the Historian, Miss Leah Noble, in which to house her growing collection of artifacts. In the museum there is a back staircase leading up to back stage so participants in shows could come downstairs to change or wait their turn on stage in the Opera House.

Now the remainder of the room is used regularly for the assessors' office, the judges' office and local court sessions.

Secular programs were not the only activities held in the Opera House. When Edwards Catholics wanted to be active members of their religion, but had no church building, the priests held Mass for them in the Town Hall. This worked fine until a fallen away Catholic objected to religious services being held in a public building (he lived next door to the Town Hall), so the practice had to be discontinued.

One of the citizens of Edwards always took an active interest in his adopted community. He had been born in Russia, but, as a child, immigrated with his parents to Clayton, NY. When the United States was in WWI, the newspaper of 30 May 1917 noted that a flagpole, purchased by Morris Rothenburg, was placed on the lawn of the Town Hall. During WWII he purchased a large sign, and had painted on it the names of all the residents of Edwards who joined the military to serve their country. He then had this sign placed on the front lawn of the Town Hall. It stayed there all during the war, then was stored in the old fire hall behind the Town Hall and forgotten. In 2004 it was discovered, refurbished, and now

hangs in the courtroom in the Town Hall as a memorial to Edwards veterans of WWII.

The Town Hall of Edwards has been the site of some unusual as well as serious events. In the mid 1930's, not too long after Prohibition was repealed, Sherman Brown was driving his 1936 Buick down Maple Ave. toward Main St. and, having been participating in a "Happy Hour", neglected to stop at the intersection and drove right up onto the front porch of the venerable building.



His speed was such, (a resident of Maple Ave. remarked that he went by his house "doing at least 70 Miles per hour"), that the car went through the nearly twelve inches thick stone front of the Hall pushing the octagonal ticket booth located near the front of the lobby to the back of that room, smashing it flat against the wall. The story goes that it was half an hour before the wheels stopped spinning!

Frank Hall, local handyman and mason, was hired to rebuild the front wall in the same design as before the accident, but the ticket booth was beyond repair and therefore discarded. A description of the booth was given as - 'An octagonal booth with a wooden lower portion about four feet high and painted black. The upper section made of glass and the whole structure just big enough around for one person to be inside.' While the building suffered considerable damage, apparently Sherm was not hurt particularly.



The town hall as it appears today.

In 1998 there were a number of renovations to the Hall including a new roof and the trim around the building being painted white (as opposed to the usual dark green).

The Town Hall, built of durable sandstone and marble, stands in a prominent place on Main St., visible and accessible to all. If it could talk, it would have marvelous stories to tell of life in Edwards from 1895 to the present, because it has seen a "heap of livin".