

**STORIES TOLD IN 1947 & 1950
OF VALENTOWN
IN THE EARLY DAYS**



This huge, unpainted three-story building once was the center of social life around Victor and Fishers. Christened Valentown Hall, it was designed to become the first building of a village . . . but the village never materialized.

Source: Photo from article in D&C Magazine

Sept. 21, 1947 - by Arch Merrill

**HISTORIC VALENTOWN MUSEUM GRANGE BOOKLET
BOOKLET No. 4 of 6 – 1947/51 Stories Told of Valentown Hall**

Sources: *Excerpt from end of article in D&C Magazine Sept. 21, 1947 - by Arch Merrill and text as transcribed from June 23, 1950 newspaper article in the Valentown. Research compiled by Lynne D. Perry.*

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by Arch Merrill*

**VICTOR: A Homey, Busy Village
That Once Was a Battleground Community
Spirit Whipped 'Hard Times' By Regaining Insulator Industry It Had Lost**

Now our stagecoach rumbles over the hills and down the vales of the old High Road from Victor to the "ghost city of Valentown".

There at a crossroads stands a huge, unpainted three-story building, in startling contrast to its pastoral surroundings.

That is Valentown Hall, built in 1879 by Levi M. Valentine in the fond belief that the Shawmut Railroad, then projected from the Pennsylvania border to Rochester, would pierce that countryside. He chose the crossroads as the site of his "city". The Shawmut never got north of Wayland, and Valentown, a combination of his own name and that of his mother's family, Town, never materialized.

Still the hall was a lively place, a social center, during the 1880s and 90s. The huge building housed four stores and a restaurant, a private school for young men, lodging and Grange quarters and in the third story, a high-ceilinged ball room and community gathering place. There are 56 doors and 71 windows and a ton of square cut nails in the structure.

At Valentown Hall I found an old friend, J. Sheldon Fiser, after whose ancestors the nearby village of Fishers was named and who is an authority on the lore of his native heath. He has reopened the old landmark after 25 years of disuse and has filled it with antiques and relics of the past.

In his collection is an old hand bill. It announced that "Jessie Bonesteel, the child elocutionist, will give readings at Valentown Hall Feb 15, 1883". It added that "little Jessie is highly recommended" and the admission would be 20 cents. In later years theater goers in big cities paid a lot more to hear and see Jessie Bonestelle, the stage star. Her cousins lived in the Bonesteel homestead, the 115-year-old cobblestone house next door to Valentown Hall.

The steam shovels digging the giant Thruway across the hills have added to the Fisher collection a piece of old plank road that once ran from Victor to Bushnell's Basin.

Sheldon Fisher talked about days of yore in that picturesque rolling countryside - of how the first Fisher at Fishers, his great great grandsire, Charles, who came in 1811, caught enough mink in a few weeks near his house to have a fine coat made for his wife... how he sold his forest to the Auburn Road, for fuel for the locomotives, for ties and for coaches... of the many mills that once lined the Irondequoit Creek. of the flour mills at Railroad Mills, long ago devoured by flames.

He told of the race staged in 1904 between an electric car of the Rochester and Eastern "Rapid Railway" and a New York Central locomotive along one mile of paralleling tracks between Fishers and Victor, with electricity victorious over steam... of the days before the railroad telegraph when a train after leaving Fishers for Rochester would have to back up to the station.

It had met another train near Pittsford and its engineer had lost the argument as to which was to yield... of the deposits of pure sand left by the ice age in the region and how before World War I, when the automobile and paved roads were making their bow, the pits were used by the company that made concrete highway guard rails, in which the Republican boss of Rochester, George W. Aldridge, was a silent partner... of the onetime prestige of the area in potato growing, when more "spuds" were shipped from Fishers station than from any other in the Central system and Charles Ford's seed potatoes were shipped all over the land... Now it's mostly wheat, beans and dairying that occupy the farmers of the Town of Victor.

Fisher said the cobblestone pumphouse, no longer in use, at Fishers is the New York Central's systems oldest building. It was built 102 years ago. A decade ago, Fisher, with the aid of Edward Hungerford, the writer, dissuaded the railroad from its plan to tear the landmark down.

As he said goodbye, Sheldon Fisher pointed to the old Valentine barns opposite Valentown Hall.

"In Civil War days" he said, "they called them the Union Barns because they were painted red, white and blue".

Source: Text as transcribed from June 23rd, 1950, newspaper article in the Valentown archives.

Stories Told of Valentown Hall History J. Sheldon Fisher Presides at Ceremony

Valentown Hall relived its past last Saturday afternoon at the re-opening of the famous old first floor dining room and stores when crowds gathered in the ball room to hear stories about the places from those who were closely associated with the building.

Now known as the Ghost City of Valentown because in 1879 Levi M. Valentine build the hall as a nucleus of a city he hoped would develop at the crossroads when a railroad was being built towards his property on a surveyed route from Pennsylvania. However, the railroad fell short of its goal and doomed the bright prospects of business expansion.

The present owner, J. Sheldon Fisher, who has worked on the restoration for ten years, acted as master of ceremonies, and interviewed many who had fascinating stories to tell of the old-time hall.

The first speaker was Mrs. Alviretta Valentine Cermak of Gates, daughter of the builder, who gave the history of the Town family who pioneered the Hall area soon after 1800, and during the War of 1812 provided food for fatigued soldiers camped by the spring. She told of the industries that sprang up only to die out until her father, the grandson of the pioneer Icabod Town tried to revive the businesses of the community.

Carl Wood of Turk Hill, the nephew of carpenter contractors, told of the difficulties surmounted in the construction of the hall, and how one of the men who was shingling the roof lost his balance, but caught on the eaves thus preventing a five-story fall to the ground.

Miss Flora Murphy of Victor born and brought up at the Hall told of early recollections, and how her father helped Dr. Charles Came, famous lecturing scientist, exhibit for the first time in the schoolhouse in 1840, the animated colored lantern slides and equipment now on exhibit at the Hall. She said that the neighbors believed it was not possible to show pictures upon the wall by use of a machine and speculated thus weeks before the show.

Miss Alice Wood, retired schoolteacher, also a niece of the contractor, told of early experiences at the Hall, and gave again her first recitation which she presented as a little girl upon the same stage.

George Bluhm of Fairport told of his part in promoting social events at the Hall. Leander Conover of Egypt related stories of Grange parties and dances snowed in all night, getting their food from the store on the first floor.

Of the many storekeepers who were in business at this place, Herman Gibke was the last one more than 30 years ago and gave an interesting account of activities including the Grange. Mrs. Edward Palmer, granddaughter of Noah Baker, exhibited his Valentown Band uniform of 1880 and told of her grandfather Rugg attending the Advance School for Young Men which was held on the second floor.

Mrs. Lena Thomas of Pittsford was scheduled to re-sing the same song which she and Jessie Bonesteel sang on the stage of the ballroom in 1883. "Little Jessie, Child Elocutionist" as she was billed then, made her start here in a famous career, often coming back for special events. Her stage manager through the years, Frederick Haak of Rochester, presented Sheldon Fisher with a fine portrait of Jessie



He [Frederick Haak] gave an excellent review of her life, explaining how she sought out talent, thus giving many of the present-day actors and actresses their start. He concluded by telling how the Bonstelle Theatre in Detroit was built for her as a gift.

After the program, the old dining room on the first floor was opened to the public.



NOTES: Jessie was born to Helen and Joseph Bonesteel on her father's farm near Greece, New York. She changed it to Bonstelle after, according to legend, seeing it misspelled like that on a theater marquee. Her exact date of birth is unknown, she kept it a secret. She was an actress, producer and theater manager who went by the name "Jessie Bonstelle." She owned and/or managed theaters in Rochester, Toronto, Buffalo, Detroit, Northampton, and Manhattan.



The 1845 Cobblestone Pump House at Fishers.
ward Hungerford, Vice-president of the New York Central
ilroad and noted railroad historian, who helped save the
building in 1937, and J. Sheldon Fisher, Victor Historian.

*Source: Photo from the book "The Groaning Tree
and
Other Stories of Country Folk Life" by J. Sheldon Fisher*

Historic Valentown Museum

The Historic Valentown Museum, owned and operated by the **Victor Historical Society**, promotes, preserves and teaches the history of the **Historic Valentown** site, including the 1879 structure known as Valentown Hall, its collection of related artifacts and the history of the surrounding community.

Using the **Historic Valentown** site, we teach by using exhibits, giving tours and through promoting community. Our goal is to teach the public the concepts and applications of American commerce and the community story, past, present and potential future. Our mission is to create interest and instill appreciation for hometown business and community using our historic collection of documents, our knowledge of the people and generations that came before us, the American made artifacts housed within Valentown Hall, and other settings on the site.

Historic Valentown Museum

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Historic Valentown is owned and operated by the
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