



1877 Comes to Life

by Karen Livsey and Fenton History Center staff

The Fenton History Center is always glad when hometown history that has strayed returns home. Such is the case with a small diary from 1877. This diary had found its way to California and the new owner looked for a location to which it should return. By using census records, which are searchable on-line, she determined that some of the people mentioned in this diary were living in the Town of Ellicott around the time that the diary was written. This brought the diary eventually to the Fenton History Center in Jamestown, the city in which it originated.

Last week we told about Proudfit Clothing Store. This diary was written by someone who was a salesman there. We did not know his name since he never called himself by name in the diary. If he had written his name on the inside cover, that was gone as the diary at some point lost its covers and some of the front pages but all the daily pages are intact. Each day he recorded his activities and included the weather, as everyone seemed to do then. There were clues within the writings as to who he was. His wife's name was Lotta or Lot and they had a son, Lionel, who went to the Kindergarten Sunday School class. They were members of the Presbyterian Church which burned that year. The writer was elected an elder in that church on April 3rd. He often attended services at other churches until the Presbyterian Church was rebuilt. With a name like Lionel, we should have been able to easily find the family by searching for Lionel in the 1880 U.S. Census. But he did not show up. There were a few Lottas but none had a husband who worked in a clothing store or had a son named Lionel.

Eventually a clue came up that led us to his identity. On May 23rd he writes “There was an alarm of fire. Mrs. Rosier’s house was on fire. They put the engine at my well and kept it under control and finally saved part of the house”. He had to live close to that house for the firemen to use his well. In the 1880 U. S. census, Mrs. Rosier was the household listed just before that of R. P. Robertson, who worked in a clothing store. His wife was L. S. and his son was L. E. The son was age 8 in 1880 making him 5 in 1877 - the right age for kindergarten classes. No wonder we did not find this family looking for Lionel, since only initials were recorded by the census taker. There are references in the diary to Augusta going places and doing things around the house and, sure enough, the census recorded an Augusta Stramburg, domestic servant, in the Robertson household. In the collection at the Fenton is a card that listed the personnel at Proudfit’s in 1895 and R. P. Robertson was a salesman.

So now we know who wrote the diary. We also know that Joel Danforth bought \$26.70 worth of clothing on April 2nd. The same day a brakeman named Rufus bought a suit for \$30.00 and paid \$5.00 down. This type of information was recorded frequently along with the total of his sales on many days. This gives us an idea of the amount of business conducted at the Proudfit store. He also comments that he “closed the store about 9 tonight”. We do not know how many salesmen they had at the store and how many hours each worked. In 1895, there are six salesmen listed along with two cutters and a bookkeeper as employees of the store. City directories fill out more about Robert P. Robertson, such as his addresses over the years and that he was the vice-president of Proudfit Co. in 1909.

From Lake View Cemetery, we learned that Robert, Lotta and Lionel are all buried there. Lotta died in 1900. Lionel, who at one time was an architect, died in 1929. Robert died in 1922. Their obituaries give some additional information. But none of these records give the daily life of this family like the diary does. Robert occasionally mentions both Proudfit and Osmer going somewhere but never says why they are going. The diary does start on an unhappy note. On January 2nd he went to Proudfit’s and Augusta, Proudfit’s 8 year-old daughter, was dead. On August 9th, “Osmer & family went up the lake to Fair Point. I bought some dried beef and ham this eve at market. Osmer went down to Jamestown House to an Old Soldiers’ meeting & staid late”. We learn that their horse’s name is Kit and that they often take the horse and carriage out for a drive around town. On May 30th, “Decoration Day - I hitched up Kit & Lot drove up to Fentons.” Robert also served on a coroner’s jury when a man was killed by the cars at the Boat Landing crossing on September 11th. On May 13th, a Sunday, he writes “I arose this morning at ½ past 4 & Lottie and I started for Gerry at ½ past 5, got there at ½ past 8. Found father better than I expected”.

Diaries and journals give us a look at life at a different time period. Diaries from earlier times are a recording of daily activities and are not the “inner-most feelings” of the writer as the diaries of teen-age girls of the 20th century are often thought to be. The Fenton History Center is interested in collecting diaries and journals that relate to the Jamestown and Chautauqua County area. Many years from now, our diaries will be of great interest to future historians and researchers.