



The Western New York Historian Project

THE ROLE OF A TOWN HISTORIAN “IN HER OWN WORDS”

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In an article in the previous JOURNAL, I described the WNYGS Historian Project, which surveyed historians across Western New York. We wanted to hear from the historians themselves about their job of recording and preserving their locality's history. We wanted to learn from them about the historic items and records their municipalities might have, and which of these the historians considered “gems.”

Jeanne Mest, who is the historian for the Town of Sheldon in Wyoming County, completed the WNY Historian questionnaire. She also sent me a document where she expanded upon her answers in order to give me a better understanding of the work she does both as town historian and with the Sheldon Historical Society. After reading it, I thought our membership would enjoy reading about her job “in her own words.” Therefore, I will be quoting large parts of her email to give you a glimpse of how history is being preserved in this small town in Wyoming County. There are hundreds of villages and towns like this in WNY. This is an example of one of them.

Note: Jeanne has given me permission to share her words and photos with you.

Here are Jeanne's words:

Since 2009, I have served as Archival Curator for the Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum, located on Main Street in Strykersville, Wyoming County, New York. In February 2019, I was appointed as the Town of Sheldon Historian by the Sheldon Town Board.

The Town of Sheldon owns our Schoolhouse Museum and covers many of the expenses, so I use the museum office to meet with and assist visitors with their inquiries or who come in to share or donate pictures and records, which I scan, preserve and record in our files. I receive correspondence from all over the country with people who are researching their roots from this little country town. Thanks to the record keeping of many Sheldon Historical Society volunteers, I've been able to help with all of these requests in some way. We are fortunate to have a great relationship with our town board, and they pay me a small salary, cover any of my historian related expenses, and pay for me to attend conferences and seminars.

The Town of Sheldon Historical Society

The Sheldon Historical Society was formed in 1976, at the time of our country's Bicentennial. In 1984, we were granted an Absolute Charter by the NYS Board of Regents. Our mission is to maintain an educational museum and promote historical

study by providing archival material and artifacts for research, and to collect, preserve and display records, relics and other items of historical interest. Three of our curators worked together to create an award-winning historical cookbook, “Home, Heart, Hearth,” for the Town of Sheldon Bicentennial, 1808–2008. We have held one yearly fundraiser, the Strykersville Town-Wide Yard Sale, on the first weekend in June, for the past 29 years. The funds raised, along with our membership dues, go to maintain the museum and cover the cost of printing and mailing our newsletter. The Sheldon Historical Society also gives scholarships to seniors at three area high schools, to students with an interest in education or history.



Betty Reisdorf, Classroom Curator, shows maps, books and materials that were used by teachers and students in 1890.

The Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum

The Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum itself is truly one of our “gems.” It is a beautiful historic building, constructed in 1891 as a two-room schoolhouse. The interior of the schoolhouse is maintained by the Town of Sheldon Historical Society. In 1996, the members raised enough money to install a handicap ramp, making the building accessible. In 2010, after a donation from the local windmill company, we were able to update the facility by adding a rest room, a new heating and air conditioning system, and a new office, with wifi.

One room is a fully restored school classroom from the 1800s. For many years, it was the scene of 4th grade field trips from the Varysburg, Holland, and Pioneer elementary schools. The students came by bus and spent the day with our “teachers” and really experienced what it was like to attend school in the olden days. We often have visitors come in who remember coming in the 4th grade and even recognize their teachers. People also come in who either remember attending the actual school, which was open from 1891 until 1971, or they recognize their ancestor’s name written on the blackboard. The second room contains our research materials and a collection of 19th and early 20th century artifacts and displays.

In our Schoolhouse Museum, we have a room dedicated for the use and displays of the Town of Orangeville Historian, Laury Lakas, who is an active member of our Sheldon Historical Society. We are fortunate to have her working with us and she has recently taken on the responsibility of our classroom.



The Sheldon Historical Society Newsletter

The Sheldon Historical Society Newsletter is another one of our “gems.” It was started in 2011 by one of our curators, Mary Ann Metzger, a co-author of our historical cookbook. It is an eight-page publication, sent out quarterly to our membership and other interested readers, with a circulation of about 160 people. Although it is not a subscription, many people think of it that way and often sign-up as members in order to receive it, so much so, that our number of out-of-town memberships exceeds our local ones. We write some of the historical articles ourselves and welcome submissions from members and others.

Other Gems

We have a Facebook page, *History of the Town of Sheldon, New York*, with historical photos. Our newsletter is available there. Previous issues of the newsletter can also be seen on the Town of Sheldon website.

Over the years, our members have worked hard to acquire scrapbooks, family histories, genealogies, maps, photographs, cemetery transcriptions, obituaries, and newspaper clippings.

We had the *Sheldon Democrat*, a local newspaper from the early 1900s, microfilmed, and it is now available online at fultonhistory.com. We have books on local and county history, and a small library of historical books that can be borrowed.

In 1976, one of our founding members, Josephine Almeter, copied records from St. Cecilia's Roman Catholic Church in Sheldon and compiled a 200-page, hand-written book of family genealogies, which is often a good starting point. St. Cecilia's was the first Catholic Church in Sheldon, started in 1839 by Father John Neumann, a traveling priest from Buffalo. The majority of inquiries we receive are researching their ancestors who belonged to this parish. Some of the church records were microfilmed and only available at the LDS Family History Library. Other than one scanned copy of St. Cecilia's 1848 Census, most of the actual records were unavailable until recently. This made it necessary to call the church and ask them to look up information for you. But recently all the church record books from both St. Cecilia's and St. Mary's in Sheldon, as well as St. Patrick's and St. Nicholas's in Java, have been moved to the St. John Neumann Church Office at St. Mary's Rectory in Strykersville. This office is directly across the street from the Schoolhouse Museum, and the church clerk has been very gracious in allowing me to borrow one book at a time and scan it. Having these records scanned into our computer is a huge help to our research. The Town Board purchased an upright book scanner to make this process go more smoothly.

Another outstanding gem in our collection is a set of original church record books from the Strykersville Baptist Church. It was the first church in Sheldon and the first of the Baptist denomination in this area, formed in 1809, shortly after the town of Sheldon was established. There is an exciting reference in the first book, about church being cancelled, "For fear of the Indians," during the burning of Buffalo in the War of 1812. We have scanned these books, along with some records from the other early churches of the area which no longer exist.

We have scanned the record book beginning in 1865 from St. John's German Reformed Church, which was formed in 1839 and is still open today as the United Church of Christ. We have all those records available electronically and also in printed form. These old church records are usually one of the first places we look for information, which can't be found elsewhere, so they are valuable gems.

The Census records from 1810 through 1880 have been transcribed and printed into another helpful book, along with a copy of the registrations of Civil War soldiers.

Another important source I have used often is the book, *Revolutionary Soldiers and Widows of Wyoming Co., NY*, by Anita Ripstein Hayes. It is a great resource for anyone researching Revolutionary War era ancestors and has been helpful in providing records needed for DAR and SAR membership. Mrs. Hayes has been a historian and genealogist for over 50 years. She was a former historian for the Town of Sheldon, and was also Deputy County Historian, having written several books on local history for the towns of Varysburg, Attica and Bennington. She is definitely one of our gems, since much of the history recorded at our museum was through her efforts, and to this day, she is still the best person to contact when you need some information that you just can't find. If Anita doesn't know it, no one does! Even though she is retired, she works with the Attica Historical Society and recently wrote a book on their Civil War Dragoons. I contact her quite frequently for help, and I also work back and forth with the current Wyoming Co. Historian, Cindy Amrhein, and her assistant, Sally Smith, and local historians in the towns of Java and Bennington.

We have a long-distance member in Arizona, who grew up in Sheldon and created an online index of Sheldon people from the microfilms at the LDS Library. Scott Barvian's

index and records have been thoroughly researched and are always accurate, and that is another place I go to for information, often contacting him with questions.

Our collection also has a book from 1976 on the *History of the Town of Sheldon*, by Josephine Almeter, as well as a book by Mary Ann Metzger on the life of former Sheldon teacher, Dorothea Kirsch, who taught at the Sheldon schoolhouse for decades and established our historical lending library. A complete set of *Historical Wyoming*, a publication of the Wyoming Co. Historian's Office since 1947, is also a helpful resource.

Some of our current displays are: Local Authors and Their Books, Local Church Histories, Winter in Sheldon, Old-Time Kitchen Gadgets, The Sheldon Band, Let's Play, Emily Peck's Autograph Book, and the George Family Immigrant Collection.

New for 2021:

- We are planning a special publication, "A Gallant Lady," about Mary Von Matt, a courageous young woman who came to America from Switzerland in 1919 and eventually settled in Varysburg.
- We are also planning to publish a collection of our newsletters from the first ten years, 2011–2021. Upcoming articles in our newsletter will include the Wyoming County Almshouse, and Part 2 of the Zahler family history of their journey to America.

Jeanne has written of many of the historical items and records which her town and county are so fortunate to have in their possession. Using these, she often helps family genealogists learn about their ancestors. Town historians do not have to help family genealogists in the search for their relatives. According to the interpretation of their job description, they only are to point these family researchers in the direction of where to look. But Jeanne has two roles. She is Sheldon's Town Historian and the Sheldon Historical Society's Archival Curator. This doubles her willingness to help those from all over the country, both near and far, whose ancestors lived or passed through the Town of Sheldon and Wyoming County. In speaking with her and reading her words, it is obvious that she loves her work.

In the Western New York Historian questionnaire, we asked the Historians what goals they wanted to achieve within the next four years. Here is what Jeanne is planning:

Currently I am working on the project of scanning old church records from the Catholic churches in Sheldon. So far, I have completed scanning most of St. Cecilia's birth and baptism, marriage, and death record books. This is going to take a long time but will be well worth it.

In addition, she plans to:

- Apply for some historic signs, through the Pomeroy Foundation. We should have one for our schoolhouse and also for the historic area churches and pioneer cemeteries.
- Help the historical society to obtain 501c3 status, enabling us to apply for grants.

- Have our 1853 map preserved.
- Create a complete history photo book of the town.
- Develop a website of our own.
- Find volunteers who can continue this work so the local history can be preserved in the future.

I am very excited about my work as Sheldon Historian and Archival Curator and look forward to serving in this way as long as possible. Thank you for the opportunity to share this information. I look forward to learning more about the work and experiences of other historians through the WNY Historian Project.

Jeanne Mest
 Town of Sheldon Historian
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I am grateful to Jeanne Mest not only for her email and completion of the Historian Project Questionnaire, but for her willingness to permit me to share her words and photos with you. Jeanne is but one of many city, town, village, and county historians in Western New York. Unfortunately, not all are as fortunate to have as much municipal and volunteer support as she does from the Town of Sheldon and those living in the surrounding areas. However, based on what we have learned from the historians who responded to the WNYGS Historian Project, all are dedicated to preserving their municipality's past, while entrusted to record their current history for the generations that follow.

As genealogists and others who are interested in the history of the area, let us support the work and accomplishments of our Western New York historians. Visit the various historical societies and museums across WNY and check out the historic records, artifacts, and "gems" held in these buildings. However, beyond the wealth of local and family history found in these depositories and in local Clerks' offices, much of it is saved in file drawers, boxes, and on shelves in the offices or homes of local historians. If you are able, volunteer to help them with their work in any way you can. Support their activities and events when they have them. Let these historians know that we appreciate all that they do.

The Western New York Genealogical Society will share with our membership more of what we have learned through the Historian Project. In future issues of the JOURNAL, we plan to present more of our findings and share with you the rich local and family history found within the eight counties of Western New York.

Currently, we are using the results from this Project to explore ways our society can assist WNY historians in meeting their goals over the next several years. We are doing so because we recognize that our organization and WNY historians all share a common goal of wanting to preserve WNY's history for future generations.

HAVE YOU JOINED THE WNYGS FACEBOOK GROUP?

As part of the Society's expanded offerings, members also have the opportunity to share, learn, break down brick walls, and get the latest updates by joining the WNYGS Facebook Group at www.facebook.com/groups/WNYGS.