

The following narrative is from a taped interview with Mrs. Carl Beck (Marie) on November 15, 1995. Taken and transcribed by Dianne Freeman.

#### CARL BECK, PROSPECTOR FOR FERNS

.....These people lived up there in Grafton, and they would pick the ferns and store them in the special way they had to do. They were kept cool and so on. Twice a week, I believe, Carl used to go to these different places to pack. They were always anxious to get rid of Carl because the quicker he went, the quicker they could get back in the woods and pick. It made them very, very cooperative with each other. They really worked beautifully together. Carl would have the empty boxes, and he would count "two, four, six, eight," and so on as the bundles were put in the boxes. Before they put any bundles in the boxes they would put in a layer of hemlock to line the box. Then they would take newspapers and put those on top of the hemlock, and then the ferns on top of that. The ferns were in bunches of twenty-five - a thousand to each box.

.....They were kept fresh because they were not kept very long, and the packers were paid right then and there, and they were loaded right on to the truck. Carl counted and handled the ferns, and he could readily tell if there were not twenty-five in a bundle, and the packers would quickly open up the bundle and make it right themselves; they could make a mistake when they were picking so fast, you know. Every time the packing was done for one individual, then that individual was paid. I used to go with Carl once a week, and I would say, "Carl, it's wonderful the way they work together." And he would say, "Sure, they're wonderful about it because the quicker they get rid of me, the quicker they get back in the woods." A man and his wife could go out and pick quite a lot. At that time I think it was fifty cents a thousand, and a couple could make a good bit in a day. They would keep their ferns in the area where they were picking, Carl would pick them up and take off. He might be in Grafton in the morning, and then come on back to Taborton, and then into Albany to cold storage. That was the important part; the quicker they got into cold storage, the better it was. Then he would come back up here, load up the truck with packing boxes and head for the Adirondacks. Twice a week he would do this.

.... I'm not sure just where they were in this area, but they were all around the woods at Blue Mountain Lake - the fancy ferns - a very unusual fern. I believe the pickers would start in late August, through September, October, and, hopefully, into November. The season was longer around here because the snow would curtail Carl's trips into the Adirondacks earlier. Carl sold to wholesale florists as far away as Kansas City, and, of course, to New York City. His

father never had anything to do with NYC. His father, Charlie Beck, began the business, and the ferns were what built this house. The family moved down from Taborton, where Carl was born and lived until he was about eight. Carl's father moved down here, giving him a place to start out from to go to Albany to get the ferns into cold storage - that being the important thing. In Rensselaer County, everybody went to Troy for everything, all except Charlie Beck. He didn't go to Troy because there was not good cold storage; that you had to have. He had a large cold storage facility in North Albany near Boardman's discount store.

.....I got to know Carl when I was at Russell Sage. But my brother used to pick ferns for Charlie Beck when I was a very little girl. My brother and my grandmother would be out in the woodshed with a lantern light, and they would be doing something. I was too young to know what it was, and, my land, they were counting and bundling ferns, twenty-five to a bunch. He was just a young kid, and we were living in Poestenkill, where my father had his first church. So he was picking for Charlie Beck, my future father-in-law. Years later, the brother that was picking ferns for Charlie Beck, became the brother-in-law of Carl and the manager of the wholesale house in Syracuse.

One time Carl took me and our two boys up to Taborton to the house where he was born. The man who owned the house at the time came out and invited us in. The house looked just the way he had remembered it.

.....Carl's business was called Carl Beck Wholesale Florist. He incorporated, and then it became Carl Beck Corporation. In Syracuse, it was Syracuse Floral Corp. When he opened up his wholesale houses, he handled the ferns and many more flowers and accessories for arranging. The use of ferns was gradually replaced by other things. It was hard to get the help. Carl went to a state convention, where he spoke about how they used to use the fancy ferns, and he demonstrated the making of like a funeral piece for those at the convention. Some students from Cobleskill sent him the most beautiful picture of his demonstration. They were enamoured with the way the ferns had been used, and so forth.

.....The gathering of princess pine never waned. Carl prospected for both princess pine and laurel. He found the laurel in Connecticut. He was always going out and looking for places where he could send people, or where there were people who were already picking. Princess pine was picked late in the fall and brought in in great big gunny sacks. Balsam was another local product, but then the huge trucks came down from Canada and came in here at two or three o'clock in the morning and unload branches for making wreaths. He had to send out because he had a need for more than he could get locally.

.....From now on until Christmas eve, local people were making wreaths and roping. They were doing it in their homes and in Albany at Carl's wholesale facility. There was one person who was great at this, and that person came every single day and made the wreaths. We had a man who worked for us, Clayton Teale, and he would come in in the morning and go up in the back, and he would load up one of our trucks, and in he would go to Albany. There was another fellow a winder, and he would wind wreaths all day long. Jennie Momrow, who is now 100 years old, was a wonderful winder. For years and years and years she wound wreaths for Carl. She would say, "How many wreaths do you want, Carl." and she would wind, and wind, and wind - princess pine and balsam. These wreaths were not single; they would wind it on one side, then they would flop it over. Marshall Hoffman was another one of local persons who worked for Carl. As time went on, the balsam wreaths became very popular, so that he could not get nearly enough balsam without going to Canada. They did thousands of yards of roping too between now and Christmas eve. Carl had a barn down here in back of where the carpet store is now. First he used the barn for cattle, but later he opened it up, and he had about four or five people making these different evergreen products on site. It was no longer a barn.

..... Another thing he did down there was manufacture baskets. Eventually that too went by the way. I think that one reason that Carl could be as successful as he was was that he kept moving. If something changed, he changed with it. He couldn't get the material that he needed for the baskets, and they were not as much in demand. Styrofoam was coming in, and the basket materials needed came from Europe.

Carl's reputation grew and grew; he's was known as being the "first with the most."



# Historical Highlight

Sand Lake Historical Society

Volume 22, No. 1

Fall 1995

## A Taborton Industry

*Winifred Edwards*

[based on notes transcribed by Dianne Freeman from an interview with Mrs. Carl (Marie) Beck November 15, 1994]

What is a Fancy? a Mountain Fragile, a Brachen, a Powdery Cloak? a Cinnamon? You guessed it, these are ferns. In the forest and deep woods on Taborton Mountain, ferns were gathered for sale. Wreathes, roping and charcoal were some of the earliest cash crops — and part of the history — of this region. The flora included ferns, trillium, blue-bead lily, Canada Mayflower, Indian cucumber root, starflower and hobblebush. Maples and oaks, birches and beeches contrasted with the conifers. In fact, if you travel up Taborton today, you will still find the ferns, the conifers and the deep woods.

Carl Beck's father, Charlie Beck, started a wholesale business suited to this area. Beck Wholesale Florist later became the Carl Beck Corporation, and in central New York it was the Syracuse Floral Corporation. Carol handled the ferns, flowers and accessories for arranging floral pieces and funeral wreathes.

The ferns had to be kept fresh; they did not keep long. They were put into bundles. Pickers gathered 25 ferns to a bundle, 40 bundles to a box — 1000 ferns, for which a picker was paid 50¢. The ferns were put into the boxes with a layer of hemlock lining the box, then newspaper on top of the hemlock and ferns on top of that. Carl would pick them up and take them to Albany to cold storage.

The gathering of princess pine and laurel was also important to Mr. Beck. (He looked for laurel in Connecticut.) Princess pine was picked in the late fall and stored in great gunny sacks.

*[continued next page]*




The forest and deep woods yielded still another cash crop - ferns! Ferns were one of the earliest cash crops of the area. To get the very best, top quality ferns, it was necessary to travel deep into the woods. Fern season ran from early August through September. During this time, many pickers would camp in the woods rather than travel back and forth to their homes. Hilton Cottrell tells of some of his family members who lived in a tent on Perigo. It was a wild, beautiful area with hundreds of "fancy" ferns just waiting to be picked. On Fridays after school, Hilton's task was to take groceries to his grandfather and uncle who were "camping in the woods". He usually stayed with them for the week-end, and what fun that was, especially as a child. He laughingly tells about an owl whose presence was welcome indeed. This friendly creature usually perched on the branch of a large tree which partially sheltered the tent. After the lantern was lit at dusk, the owl would hoot from that moment until the lantern was extinguished as darkness settled over the forest. The folks looked upon this owl as a friend in the woods. — from *West of Perigo; Poestenkill Memories*, by Florence M. Hill, Troy, NY, Whitehurst Printing and Binding Company, 1979. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Balsam was another product found locally. Eventually Carl had to send to Canada for balsam, because he needed more than he could find here. His business was growing. He hired "winders" to make the wreaths. Some would wind all day. The wreaths were not single-sided, but both sides full; they became very popular.

Jennie Momrow, now 100 years old, was a wonderful winder. Thousands of yards of roping were made in the fall. Until Christmas Eve, local people were busy making wreaths and roping. They worked in their homes or in Carl's Albany facility. He had a barn (where the carpet store is located now) which he opened up into a workshop. Four or five people were kept busy making evergreen products.

Carl tried making baskets, which was not successful. He couldn't get the material (from Europe) needed for the baskets. Styrofoam™ came in about this time, too.

Carl's reputation grew and grew; he was known as being the "first with the most." 

## Sand Lake Historical Society Scholarship Awards

Kyle Vogt and Abby Williamson are this year's winners of the Sand Lake Historical Society Memorial Awards (this year in memory of Barbara J. Worcester and Irene S. Maguire). The awards are given to two Averill Park High School seniors who excel in history. Both Kyle and Abby were awarded \$100 in scholarship money to the college of their choice.

Kyle is the son of Rodger and Ruth Vogt of Averill Park. He will be attending Colby College in Waterville, ME, in the fall, majoring in international studies. Abby is the daughter of Lynn and Joy W. Williamson of West Sand Lake. Abby will be attending Earlham College in Richmond, IA, and is undecided about her major.

Congratulations and good luck to Kyle and Abby! —  
Erin Lilly

## Sand Lake Summerfest

Our purpose in participating in the Kiwanis Sand Lake Summerfest was to sell items that had been donated for the (canceled) Tailgate Sale, to promote the organization and to be active in community events. Elinor Zaki donated many items. Ross French provided and set up a tent for sun protection. Dianne Freeman, Pat Detmar and John Allendorph welcomed the public, invited them to become members and looked for people interested in local history.

Bea Danks and Helen Deyo helped with sales. We made \$140 and some new contacts, and we had a good time. — Linda Ormsby, Chairperson

## From the President

This past year has been rich in historical adventures for me, and I'd like to make mention of some of these "adventures" by way of interesting you in participating during the coming year:

- Interviewed Marie Beck, former teacher in Averill Park, with vivid memories of her father-in-law Charlie Beck, prospector for fancy ferns, and his son Carl, who became widely known in the wholesale distribution of fancy ferns, flowers and floral supplies. [see story, p. 1]
- Encountered one-time Sand Lake cabinetmaker James Cotton through his unique products and place of work, and photographed both.
- Leafed through clippings related to the Troy-New England Railroad at the Town Historian's office, by way of helping the Rensselaer County Historical Society prepare a profile on James K. Averill.
- Roamed the Sand Lake Union Cemetery, surrounded by "friends" from the pages of Sand Lake history.
- Took a literary ramble over *Taconic Trails By Auto and Afoot* (in the SLHS collection) with author and Taconic hiker Edward T. Heald. Bailey Mt., Burden Lake and The Boston Post Road were highlights.
- Went in search of transformed and changing vistas about Sand Lake. Lingered long over photos of structures long gone, adapted to new uses, former mom-and-pop stores (early post offices) and elm-lined avenues.
- Discovered the surnames of SLHS members and other friends in the community in the earliest history of Sand Lake (especially while engaged in the study of Town Supervisors).
- Received a copy of School District #7 Board Minutes for our archives, found by the donor at a lawn sale.
- Shared ideas, learned and planned for the future with historians and members of other historical societies throughout Rensselaer County at a series of meetings in Troy.

Do you have stories, photos or artifacts to share with us based on your "adventures"? Come and join us this year for wonderful programs, swap adventures, bring a friend. If you can't find adventures in history as close as your own basement or attic, become involved in a SLHS adventure. **Oh, do it anyway! We need you!**

— Dianne Freeman



In the Spring issue of *Historical Highlights*, the feature article on Sand Lake Village commented on the "air of...stability to the old cross-road" by the 175-year-old building known for so long as Nash's and later as The Country Token store. We note the building is again occupied, now by *Jill's Hidden Gardens*; perhaps "the golden aura of...Sand Lake Village [again] lives on..." — the Editors

