

Greene County Historical Journal

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SURPRISE, NEW YORK: ERSTWHILE "FOREST MILLS" BY RAYMOND BEECHER, GREENE COUNTY HISTORIAN

Readers opening their copy of the *Coxsackie News* of November 9, 1889 may or may not have noticed this news item: "Forest Mills, west of Urlton, [sic] has now a new Post Office, but the name has been changed to Surprise. Uncle Sam made the change and it really was a surprise to the people there."

Shown at right: a close view, circa 1919, of the combination Post Office/general store at Surprise, along "old" Route 81. Note the early gas pump, which was installed in 1916. At that time, gas cost a measly 15¢ per gallon!



The names of *Surprise*, *Climax* and *Result* have long been attributed to a sense of humor on the part of the postal authorities. All three are low-density rural areas which at one time consisted of small family farms plus a sawmill or two and general stores.

In the era of the horse and buggy, the local general store fulfilled an economic function as a convenience for those residents needing

supplies. This was further enhanced when the local post office was housed in the same structure, especially before the days of the rural free delivery.

Surprise is such an example. Driving Route 81 between Coxsackie and Greenville today, were it not for the state marker, one might not even know a hamlet existed.

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The change in hamlet name came with the appointment of David L. Hanney. Of the subsequent postmasters, three bore the Losee surname: Roswell E. (1892), Edwin C. (1898), and Omar T. (1900). The year 1894 was shared between Lewis J. Smith and Alonzo G. Holmes. The Robert H. Blenis family came in 1912 and thereafter the Blenis name was practically synonymous with Surprise. In its last years there were no postmaster appointments but rather "officers-in-charge."

Uncle Sam served that community for 99 years.

The Robert Henry and Ada Lacy Blenis purchase of the store from Omar T. and Emmeline Losee occurred in 1912. At that time the property consisted of a two-story wood framed structure with store and post office on the ground floor and living quarters above. The rear section was a 1919 addition for chicken scratch feed and crushed oyster shells. Here also the kerosene barrels could be separated from food supplies. Such heavier merchandise could be more easily loaded and

unloaded with this new addition.

For years after 1912 the Surprise general store provided a livelihood for Robert H. and Ada Blenis, plus their two growing sons Gordon and Donald. Here also was to be found the local telephone switchboard that connected with Grapeville and Greenville Center. The store was also a convenient rest stop for freight haulers to Greenville and Norton Hill, as well as the motorized stage. The latter contraption is shown on page 20, at the rear of this edition.

Old timers might recall the store being some thirty feet closer to the roadway until the state highway construction in 1964 required its movement - at which time it gained a full cellar.

Usually on a weekly basis the various route salesmen called for wholesale orders, generally from Albany or Kingston. A few days later the route delivery trucks would "drop off" the ordered merchandise. Soda in case lots came from the White Bottling Works

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WHAT WOULD YOU FIND FOR SALE AT THE BLENIS' GENERAL STORE?

- The store purchased molasses by the barrel, then sold it at retail by the quart or by the gallon.
- Salt was sold in cloth sacks; sugar was sold in a brown cloth bag.
- Flour was sold by the barrel, or "weighted out." At first, baking soda was "weighted out" for sale, but later it was sold in cans.
- Butter and eggs were both "barter" commodities.
- The matches sold were the wood kitchen type known as *Lucifers*.
- Glass lamp chimneys and wicks were both good sellers.
- Quaker Oats were packaged in square boxes.
- *Coca* chocolate was sold in slabs - first Baker's, then Hersheys.
- Gasoline sold at the pump for less than 20¢ per gallon.



Shown at left:
horse, carriage and
passengers in front of
the old farm house of
Charles and Carrie
Blenis, Rolling Hill
Road, Surprise. Those
unfamiliar with the
Surprise area can
locate Rolling Hill
Road on the modern
map segment shown
on page 15. Rolling
Hill Road is labeled
near the center of the
left edge on that map.

SURPRISE... from page 12

at Cairo, which was then operated by the Benedetto Bros. Candy, a profitable sideline, was purchased from a Ravenna firm, as was tobacco.

Most families had a flock of chickens, hence the sales of scratch feed and oyster shells. Customers could "trade" with eggs. Some of these were resold locally, but many went in egg crate lots to Cossackie for reshipment to metropolitan markets. The Blenis store usually dealt with the Quality Butter and Egg Company and shipped *via* the Catskill Evening Line boats. More locally, at Cossackie they purchased from such feed mills as H. E. Hood and Company (later Pierce and Hotaling), or the Cossackie Milling and Supply.

As the years moved on, fewer and fewer housewives baked their own bread. Most found it convenient to use the National Biscuit Company's products. In those days many staples had to be weighted out. Dorothy Blenis recalls dealing in loose Graham and soda crackers, which came to the store in large boxes. Coffee ranged in quality and price, depending upon the brand. Arbuckle and Mokka were popular labels. Tea drinkers had a choice of black, green or mixed.

For years a single, hand-operated gasoline pump would dispense "motor gasoline" in the

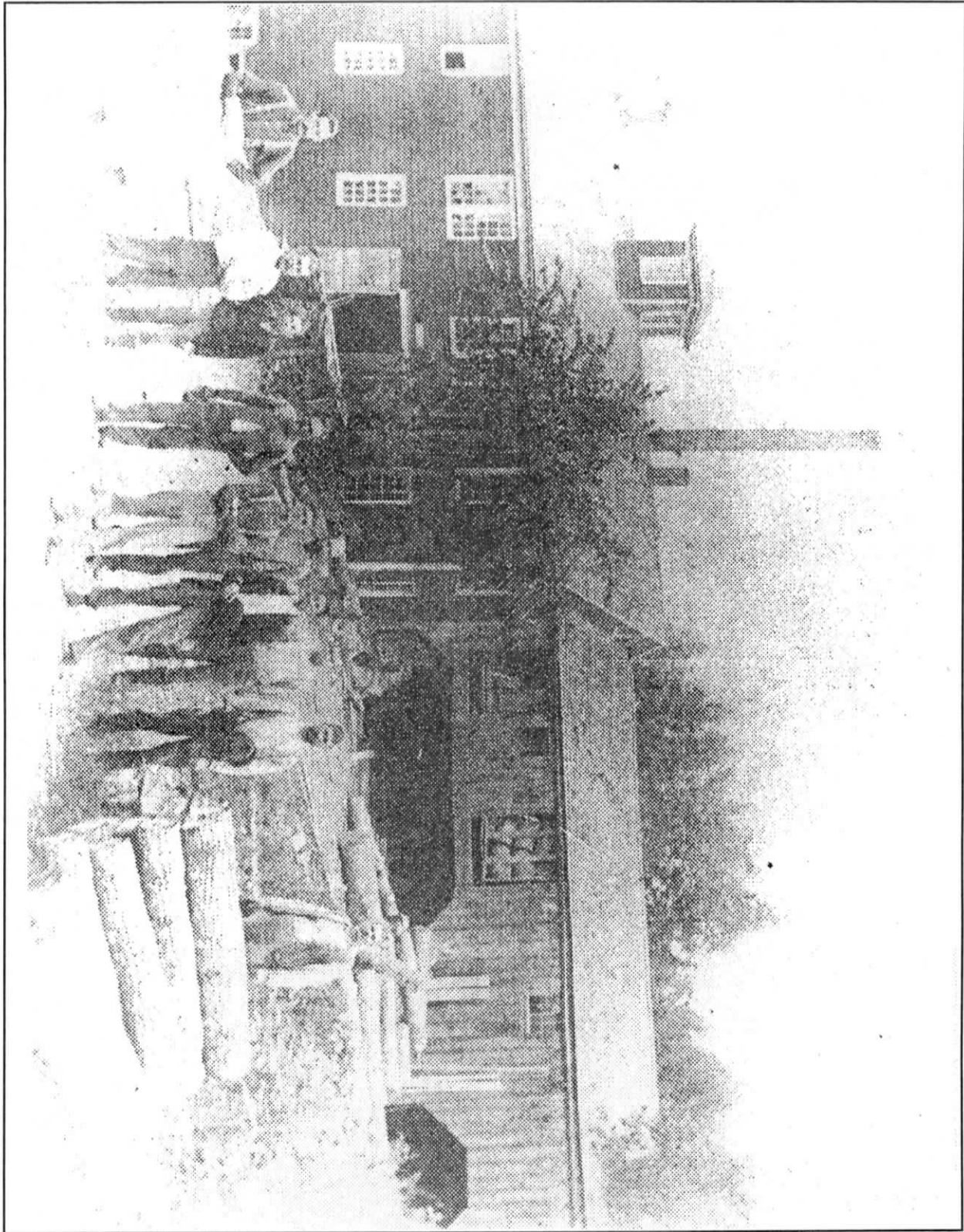
front of the store. Standard Oil Company of New York would deliver as little as 205 gallons, as it did on December 20, 1927, billing the Surprise firm at 17 cents the gallon, less commission. Being a "drop off" spot for the Greenville Photo Company was another Blenis rural service.

As telephones grew in use, contact could be made directly with the Greenville exchange. In 1917 one would use the party line number 37-F4. Four rings was the Surprise store signal.

Then as now, fire insurance was essential for any property owner. The R. H. Blenis family utilized the East Durham Farmers' Fire Insurance Company. Periodically each policyholder was notified of an assessment due for specific fire losses. These costs ranged from several dollars to less than one dollar. A. D. Gibson, secretary, would send out the postal card notices, several of which survive in the Blenis store's papers at the Society's Vedder Memorial library.

The conflagration which destroyed the barrel factory and saw mill on the creek behind the general store almost wiped out the Blenis establishment as well. Disaster was circumvented only by the constant wetting-down of

text concludes on page 19; photos, pages 14 and 20



The present-day map (page 15) shows the creek that runs below Route 81 at Surprise, parallel to that road. On this creek, behind the Blenis store, stood the saw mill and barrel factory shown above. The fire that caused its demise nearly destroyed the Blenis store, as well.

REMEMBERING THE HAMLET OF RESULT, GREENE COUNTY BASED ON ORAL HISTORY FROM LILLIAN WEEKS

BY
ANNE FOSTER

The 1993 postal centennial celebration of their neighbor's hamlet of Climax led to Postmaster Anne Foster encouraging older residents to record their "recollections" which eventually came out in printed format. In turn, this initial effort led to a closer examination of the nearby small rural hamlets. In such a way is local history preserved.

Farms, woodlots, sawmills, blacksmith shops, family-size boarding houses, a combined general store and postal office, one-room schoolhouses, and a cemetery or two - these were all part of the lifestyle of the small rural hamlet known as Result.

Oral history techniques presents unique opportunities for preserving information about bygone days. This article is based on a taped interview with Lillian Weeks on Saturday November 6, 1993. Subject: her memories of life in Result, Greene County.

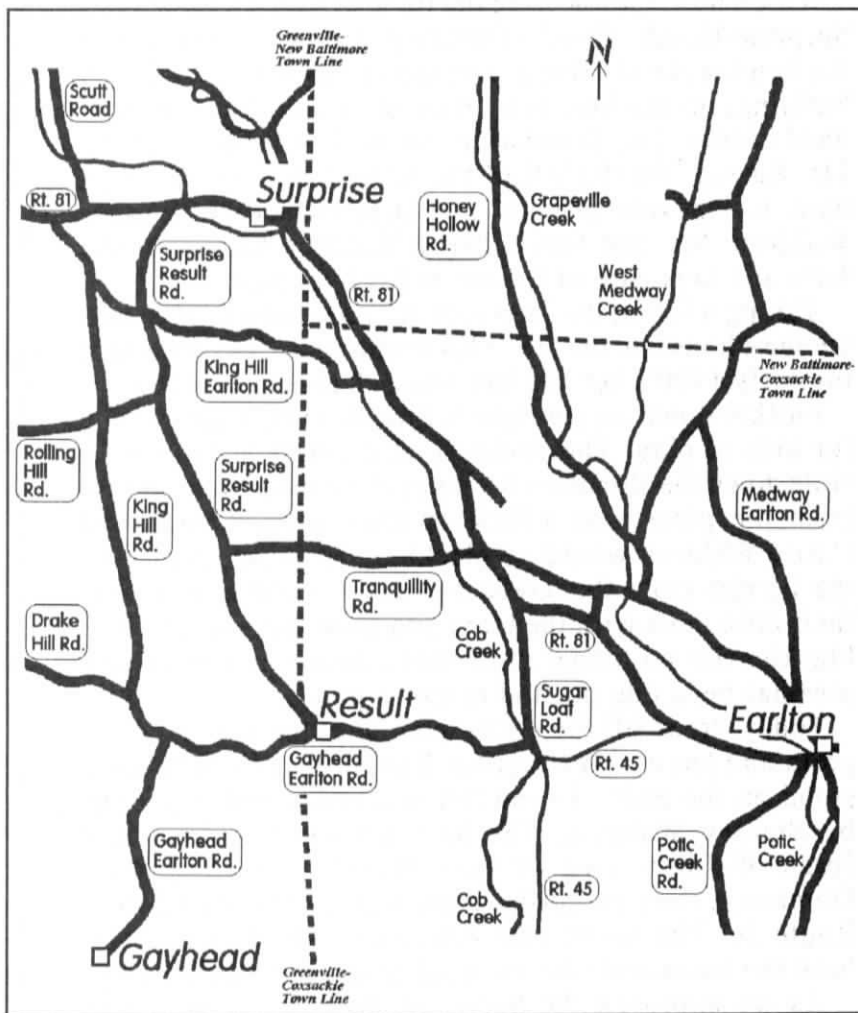
Mrs. Gerald (Lillian) Weeks' "memory trip" to Result New York started with a drive down what is today, Surprise-Result Road, but in the old days the road was known as North Road (from Result).

Coming south from Surprise and passing the intersection on the left to Tranquillity Farm/Camp, the first house approached today belongs to Michael and Patricia Buttino. Today the property is used to raise sheep; it has always been used as a farm of one type or another. The home is also commonly known as "Captain Jack's" since it once belonged to Jack Golzenleuchter, a seafaring man. R. B. Smith also owned the property and operated a general farm there. He was known for his beautiful peach orchards situated on the side of the hill. Mr. Smith later moved to West Cossackie where he operated a boarding house. He had two sons, Raymond and Ernest.

To the left of the road is a swampy area, created mostly by beavers during the last fifteen years. It is uncertain how much water was there in the early part of the century.

Opposite today's Fitzgerald home, was a farm owned by Israel Smith. Mr. Smith was the postman and delivered mail by horse and buggy

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Above: placing Surprise, Result and Earlton in perspective on a modern map. As you can see, the three townships carve up the area, with the bulk split between Greenville and Cossackie. For the sake of clarity, a few roads have been left unlabeled.

during the early 1900's. A Finnish family by the name of Lind owned the property after the Smith family. They had a son named Harry. This property was used as a boarding house rather than a farm. The boarders would be picked up at the railway station in Cossackie or at the boat landing in Catskill. In those days, both the Hudson River Day Line and the Night Line were in operation on the river. Mrs. Weeks recalls that the *Peter Styvesant* was one of the boats often seen unloading passengers.

Today only a shack remains at the site, and lilacs that probably stood near the front of the house.

Traveling on, we see stone walls in a wooded area just before an abandoned roadway to the Result Cemetery. The cemetery is contained by a wrought iron fence. Opposite this, lived Herman Waldron; and further on, lived Efram Hoose. The area is very pretty.

We are now approaching the intersection where today's Surprise-Result Road (formerly North Road) meets Earlton-Gayhead Road (formerly Result Road). A building, its use long forgotten, once stood on the right hand corner. The foundation has now been filled in, by Mr. Kassay. On the left of the intersection, there was a barn which was part of the farm owned by Casper Waldron. Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Waldron took over the farm and took care of Casper in his later years.

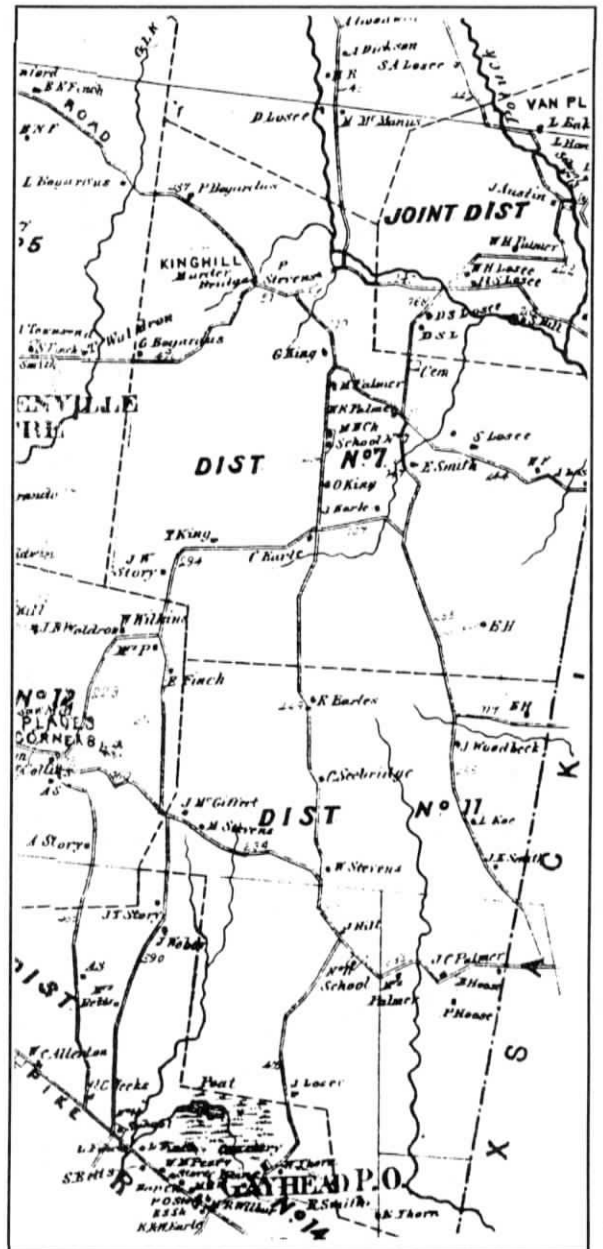
Taking a left at the intersection, proceeding eastward, we see a house on the left. This building has existed since the early 1900's but has had some changes made to it.

Further down on the right is Pine Woods, a great place for kids to play. The children used cardboard boxes to slide down the slopes on the layer of pine needles. Across from the pines was a little swamp where Lillian and Carrie Waldron would go blackberry picking, gathering the berries from the 'creepers.' They could quickly fill their milk pails with the large and abundant berries. The blackberries no longer grow there, however: the swamp area has been dug out and is now a pond.

Today, trees fill the once-open land that was used for grain and haying. A beautiful Barlett pear orchard once stood on the right. To the left is a house that was built by Stanley Waldron. The barn belonged to Will and Jessie Waldron. One of their daughters married Peter Dommery; their grand-daughter married a Rundell from Route 26. The house now belongs to Mr. Kassay, who built the barns and silo. He used to raise Morgan horses.

As we approach the bend, on the left we see some trailers. Wolf's Manor stood there for many years. It was a large three-story boarding house. Many dances were held outside, on the pavilion. Mrs. Weeks remembers attending the dances as a teenager. Shirley Cameron's

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Above and right: map segments of Greenville and Cossackie townships from Beers' 1867 county atlas. Though most roads weren't labeled on these maps, reference to the modern map shows most - though not the forerunner of Route 81 - were already in place. On the Greenville map, modern King Hill Road and Surprise-Result Road run mostly north-south from the center of the map (Dist. No. 7 into Dist. No. 11). Since these maps show buildings, tracing Mrs. Weeks' "journey" here, we find that some of the locations she describes already have structures on them, though labeled owners differ.

Continuing west, on the right, the garage that is now on the property of Raymond and Patricia Juliano was once the general store and post office. The building has had changes made over the years, as windows were a part of the original store.

Records from the United States Postal Service show that Watson Palmer was appointed Postmaster on March 17, 1890 and that Lester B. Palmer became Postmaster on January 7, 1899. Postal service was discontinued out of Result on May 31, 1908 - the mail was then sent to "Urlton" (Earlton). However, Mrs. Weeks remembers that in 1914 Lester Palmer was still Postmaster in the Result store. Mr. and Mrs. Lester Palmer ran the store.

The main house on the site belonged to Lester and Libby Palmer. Then it changed hands to Jim and Libby Waldron, and then to Mr. and Mrs. August Franchi, who had relatives over in Jackass Hollow. Then a couple from the city bought it, then Vivian Waldron's sister, Alice Powell and her brother-in-law, another owner, and then Frank C. Dobert bought the property. Frank sold it to the current owner, Raymond Juliano. The pond, across from the house, was dug out by Frank Dobert.

The Waldrons used to have a barn on the site with a hand-dug well in the back. When neighbors' wells went dry, people would come and get their water from this well. The area was still swampy, but the Waldrons would have their vegetable garden in front of the barn.

The property for the next house on the left, is situated on the Greenville/Coxsackie Township line. Mr. Hoose originally built the smaller part of the house for his daughter. In 1914 Charles Olrey sold the house to Mrs. Weeks' parents, Frank C. Dobert and Emily A. Dobert. They purchased it to use it as a summer retreat and each June, after school was finished in Rutherford (New Jersey), the family would come up and stay until September.

There were many raspberries and plum trees on the property. Water was supplied by a hand-dug well that would sometimes go dry during the summer. In 1936, the family moved up permanently and had a well drilled that hit an underground lake, which is the aquifer for the area. Mrs. Weeks' family then became the supplier of water when their neighbors' wells

went dry.

The cost for drilling the well was \$99.00 - a large sum in those days! Electricity was added in 1936 as well, by Fred Kaiser Sr. and his sons, Fred Jr. and Harold. But the house did not have a telephone: instead, people would go to the home of Charlie Waldron.

The brook that crosses the road and passes down by the house had a dug out area that the children could take a quick summer's bath in. After playing all day with bare feet, the three-to four-foot deep area was refreshing. The pond in the back was built by her father for the ducks and geese. On the side of hill stood the barn for cows and sheep. The road used to be quite steep, but has now been cut down to a gentle incline. Today, Mrs. Weeks' homestead is owned by her nephew and his wife, Frank and Regina Dobert. There is an apartment attached where Frank's mother, Ruth Dobert, lives.

The house down the dead end lane on the left was owned by Willis and Fronnie Cronk. They had a farm and a boarding house. The family would hay the fields. Their children were: Fronie, Myron and Emma. Emma was an excellent cook and Mrs. Weeks still has her recipe for Cinnamon Jumbles.

Just before Paradise Farm house, in the back lay a small Palmer family cemetery. Annie and John Palmer owned the house at Paradise Farm in 1914. The property boasted a large pear orchard; the fruit would be packed in barrels and brought down to Coxsackie by horse and wagon to be loaded onto boats headed for New York City. In addition to this, during the winter, bales of hay would be shipped to the city, supplying horses and livery stables there. Carl Butler and his wife, Bertha Mae King (Clair) Weeks (Gerald Weeks' mother) lived here after the Palmers. The property was then sold to Ernest Gilda, whose daughter married Bert Swanson. The Swansons farmed it for a while and then sold it to the Angelielos.

On the knoll, the next place on the left was owned by the Palmers. When the barn burned the house was left to run down.

The next property was purchased from the Palmers in 1914 by Earl Smith's parents. Earl's father was Calvin Smith, brother to Israel and R. B. Smith. Calvin Smith had two daughters,

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VEDDER LIBRARY NOTES

■○■ All those involved have reason to be pleased with the three "Open House" events which provided members and the public with the opportunity to tour this new Greene County Research Center. It was an excellent send-off for the expanded operation. On May 18th, an orientation session was held for new VML volunteers: Eric Maurer, Dr. Clesson Bush, Mrs. Jane Bush, Ted Hilscher and Angelo Scaturo. The Library will be open Tuesdays and Wednesdays, three Thursday evenings the month and one Saturday. Specifics will be published in area newspapers. The library's telephone number is 731-1033.

■○■ The photography collection is being re-evaluated with individual items being encased in transparent protective sleeve coverings. This project benefits from trustee Harvey Durham's attention. Lois McCulloch (RSVP) has the responsibility of updating the George and Alice Peters publication *Powells of the Hudson Valley and Allied Lines*. She has also been copying family genealogical notations in a number of old Bibles coming from various sources.

■○■ To genealogists, old family Bibles with genealogical content are a treasure trove of information! This late winter member Stanley Whitbeck, Coxsackie, presented the VML with three containing the surnames of Whitbeck, Youmans, Planck and Losee. The Whitbeck Bible commences with the marriage of William Whitbeck and Catharine A. Conine on October

10, 1846. Holman's edition of the Holy Bible, records that of Madison Planck to Annie E. Youmans. Subsequent entries strengthen our knowledge of these nineteenth century Greene County families. *Thanks, Stanley!*

■○■ Ron Dobrowski of Palenville, Helen Eckler of Leeds (RSVP), and Sid Castle of Catskill are undertaking the monumental task of re-organizing the huge collection of newspapers. Acid-free boxes have been purchased.

■○■ The trustees of the Rensselaerville Historical Society arranged for a special evening tour of the Library. They expect to repeat the evaluation process with other trustees and members. Group visitations are encouraged by making appointments with the librarian.

■○■ The accession records have more than reached the halfway mark with Emma Lou Hamilton's completion of the regular size books; she is now into the oversize collection. It is a time-consuming task, but the new IBM typewriter is helpful.

■○■ Sharing her technical expertise with the library staff is Judith Rundle of Greenville. Gradually settling in, she will be working primarily with the backlog of boxed holdings not heretofore catalogued.

■○■ Checks continue to arrive augmenting the Catharine S. Beecher Memorial Fund. The Greenville faculty's check of \$200 brought the amount to over \$1500. Several memorial items are being considered.

SURPRISE... from page 13

the roof and extinguishing the flying sparks.

Son Gordon Blenis took over the store and postmastership in 1954, assisted by his wife Dorothy. He also had begun serving as a Greenville Central School bus driver after the Greenville Free Academy consolidated. At the time of his retirement he was one of the pioneer school bus drivers.

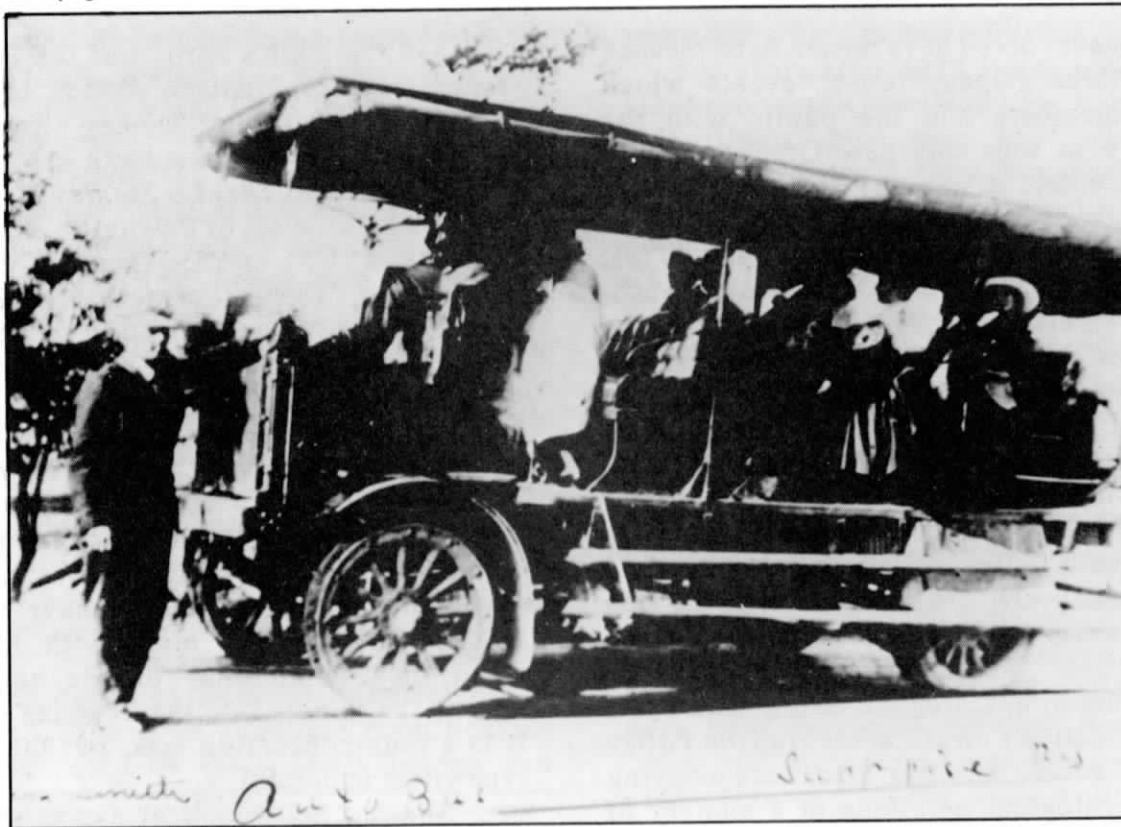
Information for this short local history article comes from the Gordon and Dorothy Blenis oral recollections, written notes, and the store records in the Vedder Memorial Library. Marie Katerina Carich called attention to the *Coxsackie News* notice of 1889. The photographs are from the Blenis Collection.

RESULT... from page 18

Irene and Clara, by his first wife. Earl, Harold and Gladys were children by his second wife, Lyla. The children had to do much of the farm work, haying and milking the cows. Earl Smith married Mary Burgess. Today this property is the Schindler residence.

To the left, now stands a small house which once served as the Result School House. On the side, was a double outhouse joined with one door for the girls and another door for the boys. Some of the students who attended school here, were: Lawrence, Donald and Dorothy Waldron; Lillian Dohert Weeks (for a few days in June each year); and Earl, Harold and Gladys Smith. Robert Weber was one of the school masters, followed

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Shown above: early 20th-century "motorized stagecoach" in front of the Post Office at Surprise, New York. Take a close look and you'll note that this *AutoBus*, as it was called, used wheels more appropriate to a horse-drawn wagon. And the tires were hard rubber! The gentleman at the left of the photo, in front of the vehicle, is identified as Jim Smith.

RESULT... from page 19

by Ruby Flansburg (Rundell). She later taught at the Greenville School. Dorothy Irish and a woman named "Della" were also teachers. Ethel McCarty taught at Result as well as Climax School. It was usual for 8th grade graduates to become teachers in the one-room schoolhouses.

Across the road was the Palmer Falls (Result Falls), which flows seasonally depending on rainfall.

Past Drake Hill Road on the right, the property was owned by George M. White, a cattleman who raised registered Guernsey stock. After his first wife died, he married Molly White. George travelled much of the country showing his cattle.

The next residence was home to the Ondreks: Steve, John, Helen and Joe (Judy Halsted's father).

From this point north, the area was generally considered part of Surprise, New York.

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