

Decoration Day

by Lynne Belluscio

We've been receiving some great archival material from Doug Hill, whose family includes Scott Skinner, Jr. a local attorney. The family moved to LeRoy in 1875, when he was four. He attended the LeRoy Academic Institute and then entered Union College in Schenectady, graduating in 1895 and then in 1896 he graduated from the Albany Law School. In the box of letters and papers, I discovered two sheets of paper written in a wonderful script, marked LeRoy Academic Institute, S.W. Skinner, Jr. So I think it was a school assignment written when he was about 10.

"Decoration Day"

"The day dawned beautifully, and early in the afternoon large numbers of people began to assemble in the village from the surrounding country to witness the ceremonies in honor of the dead soldiers who fought and died in the War of the Rebellion twenty years ago. The procession formed on Main Street and marched through the principal streets and thence to the Park led by the LeRoy Bicycle Club, their glistening wheels daily decorated with flags and flowers with Captain CP Cocharan as their leader. Next followed the Cavalry commanded by Wm. Cook, then the Drum Corps followed and the horses seeming to enjoy the music, kept time as they marched along and made a fine appearance. Then came the Staunton Post No 396 commanded by A L Cosway. As they marched by with stately and solemn tread they looked like soldiers as they once were and we could but think of them as they marched, years ago, at the call of our National Chief, away from their houses to tent on Southern battle fields. These were spared to return by how many graves are where sorrowing friends may not decorate them. The LeRoy Band did honor to the occasion led by C Halbert and the Fire Department with Tompkins as chief looked



fine in their bright uniforms. Then followed the Catholic Total Abstinence Society and then the Orator of the day, the Clergymen, the Village trustees and disabled soldiers in carriages. At the Park the eloquent speeches of Rev. Copeland and F P Heddon were listened to by a large crowd of people and the music by the Euterpe Society added greatly to the interest of the occasion.

The essay is not dated, but it mentions the War of the Rebellion (the Civil War) as an event 20 years before, so that would mean the essay was written about 1884. The origins of Decoration Day are part of the Civil War history, and although the Town of Waterloo, New York claims to be the birthplace of "Memorial Day" there is good reason to believe that the tradition of decorating the

graves of fallen soldiers first began in the South. In the North, the Grand Army of the Republic, championed by Commander John Logan, claimed that it had started the tradition and it was the GAR that chose the date of May 30 for the commemoration. As a result, in the South, Decoration Day was not celebrated on May 30. It wasn't until Memorial Day became a day to recognize all fallen soldiers from all wars, that the South accepted the May 30th date.

It has also become tradition to mark all soldiers' graves with a flag on Memorial Day, not just those who gave their lives in battle. The LeRoy American Legion has decorated the graves in the "abandoned cemeteries" in LeRoy. And a group puts flags out at St. Francis. Over 400 flags are placed at Machpelah, and if you can

help, please be at the entrance on North Street at 9 am, Saturday morning, May 26. We are usually done by noon. This is a rain or shine project. Memorial Day is an event of community feeling and pride, which in no way can be replaced. We owe a debt of gratitude to these men and women who have defended our liberty for over 200 years.



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