

THE GEBBIE FAMILY

The following is an excerpt from the Gebbie Foundation's 25th Anniversary Annual Report (1989) that was written by the late Alfreda Irwin, Chautauqua Institution Historian, on the history of the founding family.

The Gebbie Foundation's original funds came from the estate of two sisters, Miss Marion Bertram Gebbie and Mrs. Geraldine Gebbie Bellinger. The two women chose to name the foundation in memory of their parents, Frank and Harriet Louisa Gebbie.

Mr. and Mrs. Frank Gebbie appeared to have set a singularly happy tone in their family and home. From the Personals columns of the St. Johnsville, New York newspapers between 1892 and 1909, come items that record the church and community activities that the family enjoyed, their occasional travels and the recurring names of favorite friends. The growing prosperity of Mr. Gebbie's business interests was also evident in the public notices of his company's annual meetings and increases in the company's capital and stock. As he opened branches of the Mohawk Condensed Milk Company elsewhere, his visits to those places were often reported in the newspapers. These were the busy "middle years" for Frank and Louisa Gebbie.

Frank Gebbie was born in Alston, Ayrshire, Scotland, in 1844 and was brought to America in 1851. Reports of the times are meager, but it is believed that his mother's maiden name was Bertram and that his parents came with another couple: Margaret Bertram, his mother's sister, who was married to James Gebbie, his father's brother. The two families separated sometime after his arrival. Margaret and James settled in the Elmira area. The location of Frank's boyhood years has yet to be discovered although there is hearsay evidence within the family that young Frank and his brother, James, often visited their cousins in Elmira.

At any rate, Frank must have matured into a very acceptable young man, for at age twenty-six, he married the daughter of the Honorable and Mrs. Gaylord B. Hubbell of Ossining, New York. Mr. and Mrs. Hubbell were prominent in their community. Mr. Hubbell had served in the State Assembly and had been Agent and Warden of Mt. Pleasant Prison, Sing Sing, 1862-1864. (He served another term, as Warden of Sing Sing 1873-1874.) At the wedding in the Hubbell residence, the Episcopal marriage service was read by Rev. William H. Phraner, an uncle of the bride.

The young couple set up their first home in Brewster, New York, where Frank was already working with Gail Borden, Jr., and the Borden Company. Mr. Borden had pioneered in the development of condensed milk patents and in 1864 had begun producing increased volumes of that product in a plant in Brewster. Frank Gebbie's employment took the couple to Texas and Elgin, Illinois briefly before 1874 when the Gebbies settled in Lockport, New York. Gail Borden's death in January, 1874, might have influenced Frank's decision to enter the food canning business in Lockport that year.

By 1876 the firm of Frank Gebbie and Company is listed in the Lockport City Directory as is the Niagara Fruit and Canning Company. From 1882 to 1892 Frank Gebbie is listed in the directory as the proprietor of the Niagara Fruit and Canning Company. This led to a new investment in St. Johnsville in 1892, when

Frank returned to the condensed milk business in partnership with Michael Doyle. Frank was manager and built up the enterprise so that he very soon bought out his partner and eventually expanded to other locations as well. They named their business the Mohawk Condensed Milk Company.

The choice of food processing as a life work probably reflects a number of influences upon Frank Gebbie's life, as well as his own set of values. One strong influence may well have been the example of the dynamic Gail Borden, Jr. But the picture that emerges of Frank Gebbie as a family man would suggest that he himself placed importance on safely produced food, especially condensed milk, that could be used for the nurture of young children. While he was no doubt alert to the opportunities available to him for success, his business practices were judged to have benefitted not only himself, but others associated with him: the farmers who supplied milk to Mohawk, the young men who were trained in his plants and other employees.

The growth of the Mohawk Condensed Milk Company stimulated dairy farming in the area of St. Johnsville, according to the St. Johnsville Enterprise and News. Milk was brought to the cannery over quite long distances considering the state of the roads and the necessity to use horsedrawn wagons. The dairy farms were said to have kept pace the company's demand for milk, with the result that the value of farmland increased. The dairymen were able to take advantage of improvements in farm machinery, increased acreages of corn and the use of silos to help them meet the increasing demands for milk. In addition, men trained in the St. Johnsville plant went out into industry to work in other places. In the January 2, 1902 St. Johnsville Enterprise, a Local Brief said that "about \$600 was divided among the employees of the Mohawk Condensed Milk Company on Christmas in proportion to the length of service and position filled by the various employees." Mr. Gebbie's sharing of benefits in 1902 may be taken as an indication of his style of management.

He also extended his influence into another business which manufactured farm machinery, the Clark Company of St. Johnsville, where he was a board member and officer. It is apparent that all these efforts prospered and before Frank Gebbie sold his interests in the Mohawk Company in June, 1921, he had established satellite operations in Ft. Lupton and Johnstown, Colorado; Corry, Cambridge Springs and Bear Lake, Pennsylvania; South Dayton and Sherman, New York; Lansing and Holland, Michigan; and Waverly, Iowa.

While Mr. and Mrs. Gebbie had endured the personal tragedy of losing four children either in infancy or early childhood, their lives were graced by the two daughters who lived to adulthood and whose companionship they very much enjoyed. Geraldine G. Gebbie was born in Lockport in 1878. Marion Bertram Gebbie was born in 1880.

Following the completion of her early schooling, Miss Geraldine chose not to attend college, but to study music privately with a professor in Rochester. She achieved concert-stage virtuosity on the violin, but turned away from pursuing a professional career. Music was a great source of pleasure all her life, however. Her enjoyment of music and art would much later draw her into the center of activity at Chautauqua Institution which was only three miles from her Magnolia estate. At Chautauqua she heard

an abundance of good music and met outstanding performers. She and her sister helped many young students in art and music reach their educational goals

In 1908 Geraldine was united in marriage with Earl J. Bellinger, a young man from the Minden area near St. Johnsville. The Rev. Mr. Phraner was called upon again to perform the ceremony as he had for the bride's parents. Miss Marion Gebbie was her sister's only attendant. The couple moved to Sherman where Mr. Bellinger was manager of the Mohawk Company plant.

Miss Marion Gebbie had chosen to go away to school when she was ready for more education. She was graduated from Wheaton Female Seminary (Wheaton College) in June, 1901. But she, too, was inclined to want to be helpful to her parents and to remain at home. Even at this early stage of her life, she was showing some signs of Paget's Disease. This condition no doubt increased her shyness and sensitivity and later restricted her activities. She shared a great interest in art with her mother and sister. They also shared an interest in the new automobiles and a 1907 news item reports Mrs. Gebbie and her daughters' attendance at the automobile show in New York City. Miss Marion was one of the first women in New York State to learn to operate a motor car and she took pleasure in serving as a chauffeur to her mother and father. After she completed her formal schooling, she frequently traveled to Colorado and other places with her father when he was making business trips.

In 1909 she moved with her parents to Rochester where the Mohawk Company offices had been established. She devoted herself to her parents during their last years. She also gave time to charitable enterprises and to individuals who needed various kinds of help. Following her mother's death in 1912, she remained with her father. In the years that followed, they began to travel to interesting places and take extended vacations in Europe or Honolulu, enjoying a quiet companionship.

After Mr. Gebbie's death August 4, 1928, she inherited a comfortable patrimony which through careful management, she increased five-fold by the time she passed away in 1949. She lived the last almost twenty years of her life with her sister at Magnolia and took great pleasure in helping others through a bountiful sharing of her income.

Mrs. Bellinger had a busy life during her twenty-two years of marriage. Her husband had a wide reputation for being an extremely active man and a very hard worker. He not only managed the Sherman plant, but also other Mohawk plants in the eastern part of the United States. The couple also owned five big dairy farms, where progressive scientific farming was practiced. They produced large quantities of milk on the farm near Columbus, Pa., for example, for the Mohawk plant in Corry. Her husband had also inherited from his family two farms near St. Johnsville. For Mohawk he had invented a process to fill cans through a pinhole in the bottom to keep them airtight, with the small hole sealed by a drop of metal. The Bellingers were often in Corry for business reasons. There they stayed at the Phoenix Hotel rather than maintain a second home. Later after the Mohawk Company had been sold, Mr. Bellinger formed The Peak Products Company in Corry with some associates, to distribute fluid milk to the New York area, and to manufacture butter.

The couple were apparently popular and appreciated in all their different locations. When they were about to leave Sherman after the sale of the Mohawk Company, a newspaper article expressed the

community's regret, commenting on the Bellingers' "open-hearted generosity in every good cause. Their interest in the young men of our community has meant much to the development of our youth. The number of young men who 'have had their chance' through their influences is legion," the writer said.

Mr. and Mrs. Bellinger began spending summers at Magnolia and planned to build a permanent home there. Plans were somewhat delayed when Mr. Bellinger became ill and died in 1930. The home and the beautiful gardens of the Magnolia estate were completed following Mr. Bellinger's death.

Mr. and Mrs. Bellinger were the parents of a daughter, Janet, born in 1914. During some of Janet's school years, Mrs. Bellinger maintained a home in Jamestown where her daughter attended school. Later Janet attended National Park Seminary in Washington, D.C., and Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. While studying music in New York City, she met and married William I. Parker. She and her husband lived in New York City until after World War II when they moved to Williamsville, New York, where Mr. Parker had established a business. While living in Williamsville, Mr. and Mrs. Parker became the parents of three children: John, who died in infancy; Bertram Bellinger Parker and Geraldine Marion Parker. Janet Bellinger Parker died in 1957 and is buried in the Glenwood Cemetery in Lockport, New York.

While living at Magnolia, Mrs. Bellinger was active within the Jamestown community and belonged to the First Presbyterian Church, the Garden Club and the Fortnightly Club. She had particular interest in the YWCA and especially during the Depression supplied the means by which personal problems could be solved for many women and girls. She always remembered her friends in Corry, as well, and maintained an active interest in the Corry Memorial Hospital. At the time of the construction of a new building, Mrs. Bellinger equipped the nursery and children's ward.

Mrs. Bellinger was a trustee of Chautauqua Institution. She served actively from 1938 until 1961 when she was elected an honorary trustee. She was an original member of the board of the Chautauqua Foundation, Inc., and served until her death which occurred October 14, 1963. Burial was made in Glenwood Cemetery in Lockport, the burial site of her husband, parents and maternal grandparents.

Geraldine's son-in-law, William I. Parker (husband of Janet Bellinger), was one of the five incorporators of the Gebbie Foundation, and the first secretary serving until his death December 7, 1994. Her grandchildren, Geraldine Marion Parker and Bertram Bellinger Parker, were dedicated board members for over 4 decades. Bertram Parker attended the Nichols School in Buffalo and graduated from Kenyon College. Geraldine Parker attended Temple University in Philadelphia, her studies included working with Special Needs children. Nancy Waddell Gleason, great-granddaughter, became a board member in 2005, and has served as Secretary, Treasurer, Vice-President and President of the Foundation.