



The following article may be use free of charge with no prior authorization provided that it is used for nonprofit purposes and appears with the author biography at the end of this article intact. Please [email us](#) with any details of its use so that we can keep the author or other interested parties informed of the use of this article.

# Gilboa One Hundred Years Ago (More or Less)

*Katherine S. Harrington, Town Historian Gilboa, N.Y.*

My story was supposed to be about Gilboa, one hundred years ago—but I am going to cheat a little; since I am, most of the time, a land surveyor, I shall use the surveyor's privilege; you know land is always described as "more or less"; so, since I know far more about Gilboa in 1870—some 90 years ago—than I do about it in 1859, that's the time I shall talk of, for old Gilboa did not change much in a few years, and undoubtedly was the same in 1870 as it was 10 years before.

This is Gilboa as it was.

The soft May sunshine spills over the hilltops into the long, narrow Valley of the Schoharie, onto the street that runs along the river. It gilds old houses and newer ones; warms into brightest green the young grass on the valley floor. Purple lilac bushes nod in the dooryards; there are jonquils and iris—the flower our ancestors innocently called "flower de luce," blandly unaware of its French pronunciation. Along the flagstone sidewalks, piles of stove wood are neatly stacked, and from these, even this early—for it is only about six o'clock—aproned women and shirtsleeved men are taking in armfuls of wood to build the breakfast fires. This is an early-rising village; the work day for most begins at seven. Stores open then; so do the mills, the blacksmith shops, the cooper shop. Now and then a "rig"—a team or single horse-drawn wagon—trots into town. Here and there a Nottingham lace curtain is pulled aside, as someone peers out to see who is going by.

Down at Luman Reed's store, a redheaded grocery clerk is sweeping out the accumulation of matches, papers, and quids of "chawin' tobacco" that lie around the cracker barrel from last night's session of the local club. That cloud of dust briskly approaching from up Flat Creek way is Dr. Philip Zeh, returning from an all night session with a "confinement case." Here he comes in his two-wheeled doctor's gig, drawn by a rangy sorrel coming on at a fast trot. Tired as he is, the doctor is whistling; you can see everything is all right; there's a fine boy at Jim Kingley's; a boy who will be named, in grateful appreciation, Philip Zeh Kingsley. No wonder Dr. Zeh smiles; he has, besides, two dollars in his pocket for his good night's work.

While we have been watching the doctor, a number of men have appeared on the street, heading up toward Strykersville (West Conesville to us). They carry tin dinner pails; up on the Manorkill stands the Gilboa Cotton Mill, toward which they are hurrying, for the mill is a thriving concern; presently, at seven, you will hear the

steam-whistle blow to start the day's work. This is the town's clock, for it blows at seven, twelve, one and six. Other men are bound for the foundry, which stood lower down in the village. There goes an early farmer with a load of scrap iron; Jim Ellis at the furnace will melt it down and turn it into something useful. In spare time, some of his workers will cast the little fancy iron trivets to hold flat irons or teapots, trivets which are now eagerly bought as antiques. And here comes a farmer with a new Middleburgh plow in his wagon. He had to go all the way to that village to buy it, because, due to some freak, the company's franchise gave them the right to sell and deliver their plows only within a twelve-mile radius of their plant!

Look over there, down the street. The hitching racks and posts in front of the stores are filling up. There goes Newell Goff, from up west of Mackey, with his neighbor, Dave Brown, the man for whom Dave Brown Mountain Road is named. They are going into Dave Friable's harness shop for some hame straps, then back up to Broome Center to the cooper shop. Both are prosperous dairymen; they are going to order some "hard cooperage"—butter firkins to store their summer's crop of butter. In the fall, the butter buyer will come through to pick it up. Meanwhile, it will be carefully stored deep in the cool cellars.

Now what are they laughing about as they come out? That old story about Charles Harley of Moresville (Grand Gorge). Charlie, it seems, went out to California in the gold rush of '49, but he didn't go to the mines. Instead, he saw the need of a ferry on San Francisco Bay, started one, and made more money that way than many a miner in the hills. When he came home, he took to shopping produce out to the west coast by sailing ship—butter, eggs, etc. One day he got a letter from his consignee:

“Dear Sir: For Heaven's sake, don't ship any more eggs or butter 'round the Horn; send it across the Isthmus, or else wait till there's a railroad; the stuff's spoiled when it gets here!”

That yarn is always good for a big laugh among butter-makers.

Well, well—here comes an oxcart drawn by two fine red Devon steers: It creaks to a stop in front of the harness shop, and we can see that it is Origen Goodfellow, from 'way over in Bates. Perched on a bag of shearings which his father is bringing in to trade at the store is little John Goodfellow, a lad of eleven, who sits staring round-eyed at all the sights of the town. Mr. Goodfellow with his family of some six or eight children still lives in a log cabin; not one of his children has ever yet been inside a schoolhouse. He must have started in the middle of the night to get here by nine, making all that long trip up over Leonard Mountain. He has stopped, too, at Harvey M. Bliss's Mill on the Plattekill, to leave two bushels of prime winter wheat to be ground. Bliss's mill is famous; it has four run of stones and can turn wheat into the finest flour, better than any other mill around.

Let's look at curly-headed little John, sitting solemnly on his bag of wool. This remarkable youngster spurred to ambition by what he is seeing on this very trip, perhaps will, when he is fourteen, go voluntarily to work for his board and room in the home of the schoolmaster James Chichester of Broome Center for the sole privilege of going to school. “So,” he tells us in late years, “that I shouldn't be beat out of all I earned.” He studies hard, and his teacher wisely concentrates on reading, spelling and arithmetic. John learns to speak and write very well. When he can read well enough, Mr. Chichester gives him a history book so that he shall know something about his country. At seventeen, he goes out to work for himself, at Lamb's Corners in Albany County, but, eager for self improvement, for three years more he buys copy-books and painstakingly fills them; his writing is beautiful and legible to the end of his days. In the last year of his long life, at eighty-four, John hears over his radio that the government wants more food for World War I so he grows, cleans and bags 11 pounds of navy beans, which he sells in Albany; they are so clean that the commission dealer gives him a premium price!

That good-looking young man there coming out of the tailor shop with his father is one of the Mattice boys. He will be twenty-one next month, a man. In sign that his dependence his family is over, and he is on his own, his father is giving him a new suit of clothes and \$100, to start life on, and he has just been measured for his suit. What fun he will have just as the clock strikes 12 midnight on his birthday, running down stairs waking everybody with shouts of “Ma—there’s a man in the house!”

There comes Solomon D. Mackey from Flat Creek, just pulling up his fine team of Morgans at the blacksmith shop. Mr. Mackey, whose farm on the Flat Creek Road is one of the showplaces of the section, contemplates a long drive to Catskill on some business, and wants to be sure his horses’ shoes are well set for the trip. Also, he thinks the tires of his carriage are a bit loose on the feloes, and plans to drive down the creek and through the ford to tighten them up a little; the water will swell the dry wood, and he doesn’t now want to spend the time to have the tires re-set.

There goes the noon whistle! The Moresville stage has just pulled up in front of the Gilboa House, and minehost Charlie Stryker comes bustling out to greet his guests; two travelling men and a very pretty lady with three hat boxes, a trunk and a carpet bag; look, she’s wearing the new, narrower skirt, with rows of ruffles; must be from New York—what, Kingston? She’s a visitor coming to Daniel Wyckoff’s? What’s that fellow carrying? Oh, one of those new-fangled cream separators, that some say may replace milk pans; he probably is going to try to sell one to Lemman Reed; if Mr. Reed should stock them in his big store, a good many will be interested, especially the women; they do all the skimming of milk. Going to make the girls lazy, I’m afraid!

Postmaster Alonzo Stryker is taking in the bags of mail; he’ll have the Albany papers, with the newest word from Washington; looks as if President Grant would be elected for another term, although there are rumors that he isn’t doing so well in the Whitehouse; he’s too easy going.

There goes Justice John I. Jackson, with Lawyer Andrew Baldwin, up the steps of the Gilboa House; that man with them is Ovando Tallerday from Livingstonville, renting agent for Anthony Livingston; may be some of that old anti-rent trouble, seeing he’s with two lawyers, although that business has mostly blown over, and the patroons have sold out. You know they say that Ovando can hardly read or write, and can’t count above a hundred, but he’s a shrewd man, just the same, and owns land all over Albany county and in Conesville, too.

There’s the school bell, for one o’clock. See the children hurry; they don’t want to be late; they know if they don’t get in on time, they may have to stay after school.

. . . Comes the long afternoon; lazy, warm and dreamy; farmers out in the flats are ploughing; women are planting gardens; teams come and go, in clouds of dust; sun-bonneted women go in and out of the stores, buying calico and gingham, molasses, tea and coffee—things they cannot raise or make at home. Now one goes in to the cobbler’s shop to be measured for a pair of shoes, or into the millinery shop for a hat. A long funeral procession winds through town toward the cemetery, the women swathed in black crepe veils, the men solemn with crepe on their plug hats. What would they say, I wonder, if they could know that their departed friend, yes, and themselves too, would one day be lifted from their quiet graves and moved far away upon the hill, when Gilboa is no more a village, but a giant lake?

The light goes out slowly—faster in the valley, but on the hill-tops it lingers a long time. The farmers have gone home to do the chores; the mill and the foundry are silent; folk gather ’round the supper tables; the lamps and candles are lit; the town grows still, save for some laughter from the bar room of the hotel, and the sound of organ music where the choir of the Dutch Reformed Church is practicing next Sunday’s hymns.

A dog barks briefly; a serenading cat from the grist mill strolls by; up the hill, a hoot-owl cries. . . .

Dream on, old Gilboa. It will be eighty years and more before the waters cover you; you will see floods, and wars; Custer and his men will die bloodily at Little Big Horn; Wall Street will have it's Black Friday, and the repercussions of it will make you tremble; the dread black diphtheria epidemic of the eighties will sweep over you with merciless fury; there will come an abortive railroad, with promise of prosperity, only to meet defeat at the "paddy-hole;" the paddy-hole, now a village dump, grave of the nameless Irishman of long ago, who died there in a cave in. Dream on, unaware that the city will come and swallow you at last—Good night, old Gilboa!

---



Katherine Harrington (1893–1986), a focal personality in Gilboa and the county during most of the twentieth century, was a teacher, surveyor, town historian, and author of a book of poems on rural New York life (*Ballads of the Hard Hills*). She celebrated the fact that “the old rocking chair had failed to stop” her, continuing to write stories and articles until her death.

This article, originally printed in the Spring 1964 Schoharie County Historical Review, was reprinted in the Fall 2009 Gilboa Historical Society *Newsletter* and is available through [northerncatskillshistory.com](http://northerncatskillshistory.com).

High-resolution [art](#).

[.pdf](#) file    audio file

To use this article in your newsletter or as a handout, click into the article; select all; copy; and paste into a MSWord file.

Please remember to [let us know](#) of this use so that we can let the author or other interested parties know.

Copyright © 2009  
northerncatskillshistory.com  
[contact.northerncatskillshistory.com](mailto:contact.northerncatskillshistory.com)  
March 22, 2010

