



THE BURNING ISSUES



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Volume 11 Issue 2 Official Newsletter of the Burning of the Valleys Military Association, Inc.

June 2003

From the Deputy Chair

Greetings!

I want to begin by offering my most sincere appreciation for the efforts of everyone who came, and stuck it out at "Cobleskill" last weekend!

First I have to address the weather, and "inaugural" events in general. After last year at Mabee, and this year in Blenheim, someone else better start locking down dates — I'm getting gun shy.

The programs were fantastic! The Ladies Tea (Thanks Kristin, Nora, Kate, and the entire crew) , Grump's surgery (thanks, Dave), the Dance, and the war game (Thanks Terry, Wayne, and Paul) were big hits. Richard, thanks again for the Worship service . And, I especially want to thank those that stuck it out Sunday and let us put on an "abbreviated" version of what we had planned for the battle reenactment.

The site was happy, they'd like us back. Everybody seemed to have a good time, despite the weather. And a lot of people who might not have been aware of the real nature of the BVMA may be looking at us in a different light. Once again, thanks!!!

On another issue, the April 19 "Declaration" has been updated. The declaration deals with how militia should be portrayed in events & specifically the "file filler" issue. It now lists supporters from 10 BVMA units, the BAR, CL, CCMA, LHA, and NWT. It includes individuals who portray Militia and Continental Line, and event organizers, large and small. The focus is not any specific event, any specific year, or any specific umbrella. This is broader than the BVMA . The days when BVMA units

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1778

"The Destructives"

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Behind the Lines

At the BVMA Annual Meeting on March 29th, Behind the Lines (BTL) held a short organizational meeting, and the following officers were elected: Co-Chairs Deanine Kowalski and Sue-Ann Wheadon, Delegates Kristin Gitler and Sarah Yaddow, and Secretary/Treasurer Kateri Scott. This authority structure was formally adopted by the BTL as a group in hopes that leadership and programs objectives can be more easily passed on from year to year.

An historic second meeting of the season was held at Old Stone Fort on April 19th where enthusiastic participation from all members in attendance produced many interesting ideas and projects for this year's season and beyond. Please don't be dismayed if you missed the April meeting because the BTL will hold its third meeting of the season on Saturday, August 2, at 1:00 p.m. at the Herkimer Home in Little Falls, NY. Civilians, mark your calendars and plan to attend!

We hope to have a fourth meeting sometime in December to review the 2003 season and set our sights on the 2004 season with issues and concerns to be addressed at the 2004 Delegates' Meeting. I know December can be a busy time, so we will try to schedule the meeting early in December or just before the Delegates' Meeting in January.

Enjoy the coming season, and we look forward to seeing you at BVMA sponsored and supported events!

Sue-Ann E. Wheadon
BTL Co-Chair

Colonialisms...

Bigwig - a person of real or fancied importance. The size of wig a person wore designated the status of the wearer.

From the Deputy Chair *(cont'd)*

belonged only to the BVMA are past. Many now belong to several "umbrellas". This isn't, nor should it be, an us vs. them issue.

Let's hope the rest of the campaign season is a bit dryer!

JLO
(John Osinski)
BVMA Deputy Chair

The BVMA Online

www.bvma.org

Since the last newsletter, several changes have taken place on the web site. First, the site has been moved to a new & better server, which allows me to do more dynamic programming on the site, as well as being a more reliable and faster server.

Second, as many of you have noticed, we now have online event registrations for several BVMA sponsored/supported events. If you haven't registered for the season's later events yet, check the schedule online, as the Cherry Valley, Fort Klock, German Flats (2nd one), and Schoharie events have online registrations. No more searching for where you filed those event returns! Keep this in mind for next year, as this "perk" is available to BVMA sustaining member sites, BVMA sponsored or supported events, and events hosted by member units.

Third, I've started posting any announcements or news items and information on the home page. Check there every so often for event information updates, web updates, and other news of interest for BVMA members.

And last, at least for now, the long-promised "Search" has been added to the site. Are you looking for something you saw on the site a while back, but can't remember where it was? Try the new Search feature.

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What is "Behind the Lines"?

Civilian BVMA Membership

Greetings from Behind the Lines! We're the civilian side of the BVMA, encompassing all facets of life off the battlefield involving children, women, and men through a wide variety of interpretations. If you're looking for a re-enactment experience that doesn't require a musket or a rifle, we invite you to join us in the BTL!

It's easy to become a member of the BTL! Civilian interpreters who have paid their annual BVMA membership dues through a military unit already are members of the BTL. And good news! It's no longer required that you join a military unit to become a member of the BTL! BTL civilian membership applications are available on-line at www.BVMA.org or from any officer of the BTL. Just forward your completed application with your \$5 dues check made payable to BVMA, Inc. to the BTL secretary, Kateri Scott (address on the website), and you will receive your BVMA membership card for the 2003 season when your application has been approved.

When you become a member of the BTL, you are entitled to receive the Burning Issues, our newsletter, and to join the BTL message board at btb_bvma-subscribe@yahoogroups.com (there is an underscore between the btl and bvma) and the BVMA message board at BVMA-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. Your BTL membership also entitles you to participate in BVMA member-only events, programs, seminars, and meetings, giving you access to special presentations, activities, and information.

Watch for the BTL at all BVMA sponsored and supported events; just look for the BTL banner! Come join us Behind the Lines; it's the best way to have a blast without gunpowder!

Sue-Ann E. Wheadon,
BTL Co-Chair

NATIONAL DAR AWARD PRESENTED TO 2ND LIGHT DRAGOONS COMMANDER

Sheldon's Horse, Second Continental Light Dragoons is proud to announce that the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution has bestowed its *History Award Medal* upon Captain Sal Tarantino of the 2nd Light Dragoons. DAR/CT State Regent Georgia Spratt presented the award to Captain Tarantino on February 23, 2003 at the annual Putnam Cottage commemorative event in Greenwich, CT before a packed house. Signed by Beverly Jensen, Historian General NSDAR, Georgia Spratt and Regent Katherine S. Bacon, the medal certificate cites "in recognition of contributions that significantly advance the understanding of our nation's past through the study and promotion of an aspect of American History."

— *Submitted by Eric M. Chandler,*
Sgt./Adjutant
Sheldon's Horse,
2nd Continental Light Dragoons



The Shakers During the Revolution

by Jennifer Richard-Morrow

During the War for Independence, both outspoken Tories and those suspected of being Tory sympathizers were tried in Albany by the Committee to Detect Conspiracies. Caught up in the furor were a strange group of pacifists who had settled in the colony only a few years before the start of the war. Led by a woman, this group had established a communal farm in the pine barrens between Albany and Schenectady at a place the Mohawks called Niskayuna, in 1776.

Their leader, Mother Ann Lee, was a charismatic figure who was born in Manchester, England in 1736. Ann, a mystic since childhood, was a hardworking, respectable wife of a blacksmith. After losing her four children in infancy, she converted to a splinter group of Quakers called Shaking Quakers. In 1770, she underwent a series of visions that convinced the Shaking Quakers that she was the next messiah; as Christ was the head or father of the Christian Church, she was the mother. This idea of Ann's was very similar to the deputy husband concept, as explained by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in *Good Wives* (36-50). Ann Lee led her followers to the wilderness in 1774, arriving in New York City in August. Ann worked as a laundress while some of the men went north to find a farm. They leased 200 acres from the patroon.

The Shaking Quaker method of worship was an ecstatic, long and loud session of shaking, dancing, singing and speaking in tongues. This consistently scandalized most of those who heard them. Mother Ann Lee's preaching total celibacy succeeded in offending nearly anyone else. Scandalous rumors about their supposed debauches spread wherever they went. The American Army surgeon, Dr. James Thatcher mentions them in his memoirs and wondered if Ann Lee was related to (American) General Lee, a former British officer.

By 1779, the Shakers had a successful and orderly farm built up and had made a number of new converts in New Lebanon, New York (now Rensselaer County). Their un-mitigating (Quaker) pacifism had caused various charges of spying and aiding the British to fly around the area. On July 1, 1780, three New Lebanon Shakers were driving some sheep to the Niskayuna farm when they were arrested and charged with conveying food to the British. Daniel Green, Joseph Potter and David Darrow were brought before the officials in Albany. Darrow had been an officer in the Patriot cause before his conversion, and had protested his innocence. Unfortunately, he now spoke out so strongly in favor of pacifism, and the others agreed with him, they were all thrown in prison. All in all, Mother Ann, her brother William, James Whitaker, Joel Pratt, Hezekiah Hammond, Joseph Meachem, Calvin Harlow and Mary Partington were imprisoned for refusing to carry arms or trying to dissuade others from fighting. The Shakers were used to persecution and even mob violence, and met this imprisonment with fortitude. They continued to make converts from

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The Private's Corner

Instructions to the Private



Woe to the private soldier that does not understand the state of warfare that exists between the officer and himself. Worse yet is the fate of the private soldier that has not learned to outwit his officer (a seemingly easy task).

Should you get to be the officer's servant you may immediately commence to live the life of a gentleman. Should he be approximately of your size you may wear his fine clothes. Should they tear while putting on or off blame him for making them too small.

When he is on guard, you may invite company to his marquis and it should be a easy task to open his canteens remembering to dilute the remains so that the appearance is that they are full.

If you wait on him in the mess it should be an easy task to pocket and liberate some convenient morsel for yourself and companions. It would be awkward and improvident if you can't filch some beer or a bottle or two of wine.

The private soldier must look for himself and secure by whatever means available to him his do and just rewards that are commonly withheld from him by the officer. One must remember that this is best done in small amounts as even the most dimwitted officer would recognize an empty wine bottle.

Wishing you a happy and profitable campaign season

Grumphard

13 September, 1778 — German Flatts, NY

Joseph Brant leading 150 Indians and Capt. William Caldwell commanding 300 Tories raid the settlement. They kill three men, burn over 100 houses, barns, and mills, and lead away hundreds of horses, cattle, and sheep. But they apparently commit no atrocities against women and children, as had occurred at the "Wyoming Massacre." Actually, Joseph Brant reportedly deplores such atrocities – he is well educated and a devout Anglican and has helped translate the Bible into the Mohawk language.

Source: *The World Almanac of the American Revolution*, Edited by L. Edward Purcell and David F. Burg; New York, Pharos Books, 1992



The Shakers During the Revolution *(cont'd. from p. 3)*

their visitors at the city prison. Their loud worship services caused them to be transferred to the old fort at the top of Pinxter (State Street) Hill.

The Committee in Albany decided the best thing to do with Mother Ann was send her south to the British in New York City. She got as far as Poughkeepsie where she was held in the stone Van Kleek house. Mary Partington accompanied her to buy food and necessities for her.

Shakers (and Quakers) did not believe in taking oaths, so the Shaker men refused to swear allegiance to the revolutionary government. Eventually, they were released on £100 bond each. After his release, William Lee went to Gen. James Clinton and asked him to intercede for Ann with his brother the Governor. James Whitaker got Mother Ann released by pleading directly with Governor George Clinton in December, 1780. The Shakers continued their missionary efforts, traveling through New England for the rest of the war. Mother Ann died shortly after the end of the war in 1784 at the farm sometimes called the Watervliet farm. Her sect grew greatly in popularity throughout the 19th century.

Sources:

Francis, Richard Ann the Word, the Story of Ann Lee...., Arcade Publishing, 2000.
Compendium of the Origin, History of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, New Lebanon, NY 1867.
Women in World History, a Biographical Encyclopedia.

Run Away from the Subscriber

Here's one we won't reenact!

ITEM #18359, June 12, 1755
 The Pennsylvania Gazette

NEW YORK, June 9.

We have the following shocking and melancholly Account from Kats Kill, near Albany, viz. That about a Fortnight ago, a Servant Woman in that neighbourhood absconded from her Master, the better to consummate her Nuptials with her Lover, against whom we are told he was extremely averse, and sent out two Indians in order to bring her back: They overtook her on the Road, and demanded her Return, which she readily consented to, and was met soon after by her Master on Horseback, who, regardless of the most moving Intreaties of the young Woman to the contrary, and not apprehending the Consequence, tied her crosshanded to his Horse Tail, who presently after taking Fright, flung his Rider, and tore the poor Creature Limb from Limb; nothing being found hanging to his Tail but her two Hands, and Part of her Arms, after he had run near seven Miles. Her Master immediately surrender'd himself up to Justice.



Skunk Punting: The unknown colonial sport

By Ichabod Doodle

Just the name of this unique pastime gives one pause to think, "What the *#@%*!" The name conjures up a vision of skunks silhouetted against the sky, arcing from feet of doughty colonials. In fact that is a part of skunk punting. But there is so much more fascinating about this bygone sport. It flourished through the Eighteenth Century amongst the Dutch and Palatines of the Schoharie and Mohawk Valleys in the Colony of New York. Despite of having thrived from the 1730's to the Revolution it had disappeared by the early 1800's. Its story was only preserved in oral traditions told by old men and the occasional aged woman. Fortunately, some of these ancients told their tales to some interested in collecting the reminiscences of those alive during the stirring days of the Revolution. In the ramblings of the old, cultural besides military and political history was preserved. Voluminous notes were taken by the antiquarians. However, because the focus of the writings of these men was the Revolution, much valuable cultural information was never published. Such has been the fate of the history of Skunk Punting. Fortunately the original notes of Jephtha Simms survived to the mid 20th Century. A great niece had preserved her famous uncle's papers in her attic in Fort Hunter. Some papers of the Campbell family in Cherry Valley also survived. A few period letters also exist from which allusions to Skunk Punting may be gleaned.

A major reason for this paucity of written evidence is that the vast majority of those involved in the sport, either participating or viewing, were illiterate. According to some of the literate witnesses, besides being illiterate, "Most at the skunk kicking frolic appeared to be searching for their thoughts, when they have one it will be novel. They have no sense," said an English clergyman in a letter to family in England. The observations penned by onlookers, (often from a distance and usually up wind) varied from amusement to disgust.

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Letters of Walter and John Butler after the Cherry Valley Massacre

Onendella Novr 17th 1778

Sir,
After a tedious and fatiguing March our Party, composed of the Rangers and 321 Indian Warriors encamped on the Evening of the 10th Inst. within about six Miles of the Settlement, having the Day before taken a rebel scout consisting of a Serg't & eight Privates, from whom we learned that a Colonel Alden with 300 continental Troops occupied a picqueted Fort, erected for the Defence of the Settlement, and that the Militia of the Place were computed at 150; that the Enemy had Notice of our Approach two days before by Means of an Oneyda Indian; and also that the colonel with his principal officers usually lodged at an House about 400 yards from the Fort. There conven'd the Indian Chiefs and proposed to them that, as in all Probability the Enemy, tho informed of our Coming, were not apprised of our being so near there, we should as soon as the moon rose, march directly into the Settlement and with a Party surround the House and take the officers, while the main Body of Rangers & Indians endeavoured to surprize the Fort: to this they unanimously agreed, but in the mean Time an heavy Rain falling and continuing all Night so much discouraged the Indians that I could not get them to move till Day Light, when it was resolved that Capt. McDonald with two Subalterns and fifty chosen Rangers Should march with the Body of the Indians, and with one Party surround the House and cut off the Communication between the Fort & Inhabitants, while the other began the Attack upon the Fort, which I was to support with the main Body of Rangers. We came unperceived till within about a Mile of the Fort, when the Indians made a Halt and two of them unknown to the rest advanced and fired upon two Men cutting Wood, one of whom tho' wounded made his Escape and alarmed the officers at the House of whom the Major and a few others had Time to get safe into the Fort, many more in attempting to do the same were killed, and the rest taken Prisoners, at the house by the Indians who had immediately rushed forward on the Report of the guns.

The Persons killed were the Colonel, 2 Captains, 2 Lieut'ts, one Ensign & 20 Privates; the Prisoners a Lieutenant Colonel, a Lieut., an Ensign, the Surgeon's Mate, & 10 Privates. The Colours of the Regiment were burnt in the House.

Although our Design of surprising the Fort was thus frustrated, we nevertheless made an Attempt firing upon it for the Space of ten minutes, at about 70 yards Distance, which was briskly returned both by their Musquetry and Cannon, when finding it inaccessible on this Part, I moved with the Rangers to explore the other Side, destroying in our Way a Block-House which the Rebels had abandoned at our Approach. But perceiving the Indians dispersed over the Settlement, killing and taking Prisoner the Inhabitants, plundering and destroying the Buildings &c., I found it absolutely necessary to move again with the whole of the Rangers, and take Possession of an Eminence, which commanded the Fort on the Side we first attacked, in order to prevent a Sally while the Indians were scattered as aforesaid. We remained in this Position till late in the Evening, tho it rained incessantly; we then retired about a Mile further and there passed the Night; the greatest part of the Houses, Barns &c. in the Settlement, together with the continental Store, being burnt, and a great Number of Cattle killed and driven off by the Indians. The next morning I sent Cap't McDonald with sixty Rangers, accompanied by Mr. Brant with fifty Indians, to compleat the Destruction of the Place, while the other Indians with the weakest of the Rangers went off with the Cattle. I remained myself with the Rest of the Rangers to support Cap't McDonald in Case of a Sally, having Men continually going to and from the Fort to give me Notice of all the Enemies Motions, until Cap't McDonald returned after intirely desolating the Settlement and adding a large drove of Horses & Cattle to those already taken. The Garrison all the while coop'd within their Breast-Works remained Spectators of our Depredations which they made no Attempts to interrupt. After having in vain endeavoured to draw them out of the Fort, and finding it not practicable, with our Force to take it, we thought proper to retire and leave it, the only remaining Building amidst the Ruins of the Place.

I have much to lament, that notwithstanding my utmost Precaution and Endeavours to save the Women and Children, I could not prevent some of them falling unhappy Victims to the Fury of the Savages. They have carried off many of the Inhabitants Prisoners and killed more; among the latter is a Coln. Cloyd a very violent Rebel.

I could not prevail with the Indians to leave the Woman and children behind. On the second Morning of our March Cap't Johnston (to whose Knowledge of the Indians and Address in managing I am much indebted,) and I got them to permit twelve, who were Loyalists, and whom I had concealed the first Day with the humane Assistance of Mr. Joseph Brant & Cap't Jacobs of Ockquaga, to return.

The Death of the Women and Children upon this Occasion may I believe be truly ascribed to the Rebels having falsely accused the Indians of Cruelty at Weyomen; this had much exasperated them, and they were still more incensed at finding the Colonel and those Men who had there laid down their Arms, soon after, marching into their County intending to destroy their Villages, and they declared they would no more be falsely accused, or fight the Enemy twice; meaning that they would not in future give Quarter.

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Walter & John Butler Letters (*cont'd. from p. 5*)

I am informed by the Lieu't Colonel Prisoner and the enclosed Letter that the British Troops were about to leave New York (the Provincials in Government Bay remaining to guard that Place) and go to Boston. I am also told by one Anderson who had been Prisoner in Albany, and only eleven Days from that Place, that they had Accounts there, that the Troops who had left N. York were landed below Boston, and that there were large Reinforcements commanded by Gen'ls Howe and Burgoyne landed at N. York, that an english Fleet had burned Egg Harbour and all the Rebels Shipping at that Place, and that the Rebels at Albany were making Preparations for a secret Expedition, said by the Friends of Government there to be intended against Carleton Island in the Winter; I am likewise informed by him and several of the Prisoners that the Rebels intend to invade the Indian Country in the Spring, with an Army of three Thousand Men. How far these Reports may be relied on I cannot say, but it were to be wished that in order to keep the Indians in Spirits and attach them more firmly to our Interest, a Fort were erected and supported at Oswego: indeed the Indians expect it will be done.

It gives me Pleasure that I can mention with Truth the Alertness of the officers in general and Cap't McDonald in particular, whose Activity and Spirit on every Occasion does him much Honour and to whose Conduct I am much indebted.

The Men are in better Health and Spirits that could be expected from the Fatigues and Hardships they have undergone. I shall march without Delay to Quarters, and hope you'll send Provisions and other Necessaries to meet us. We are happy in not having lost a Man; our fife Major one Private and three Indians only wounded.

I am &c --- Walter Butler

Haldimand Papers Add. Mss. No. 21,760, folios 77-80; Transcribed by Judy Longley from microfilm of the Haldimand Papers in possession of the British Library, London; courtesy of Public Archives of Canada

His Excellency
General Haldimand

Niagara Dec'r 1st 1778

Sir

The last Time I had the Honour of writing to your Excellency I mentioned that I expected News from Cap't Butler. I am now happy to inform your Excellency of his having intirely destroyed the fertile Settlement of Cherry Valley on the Frontier of the Province of New York. The particulars of his Expedition brought on Express by Lieu't Hare, are transmitted to your Excellency by Colonel Bolton.

Your Excellency in a Letter of the 9th Oct'r was pleased to express your Wishes that I would consult the Indians on the Expediency of taking Post at Irondequot: as they have been constantly out harassing the Frontiers of the rebellious Provinces, it has not hitherto been possible for me to know their Thoughts on that Subject: as soon however as they come in which I expect will shortly be, I shall consult them thereupon, and faithfully acquaint your Excellency with the Result.

With Regard to what your Excellency was pleased to mention about having Cattle driven in to this Place. I must inform you that as they have no other Way of subsisting when out on their Excursions, the Rangers and Indians consume, themselves, the greatest Part of what they take: your Excellency may however depend upon my utmost Endeavours to hae as many as is possible driven hither: upwards of one Hundred Head have been brought in this Fall. I have the Honour to be

Your Excellency's
most obedient
and very humble Servant

John Butler

Haldimand Papers Add. Mss. No. 21,765, folio 75; Transcribed by Judy Longley from microfilm of the Haldimand Papers in possession of the British Library, London; courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada

Skunk Punting (*cont'd. from p. 4*)

It is only when perusing the notes from conversations with those who had attended the skunk kicking frolics that the true picture of the sport is given. Simms noted that those that had lived with the sport as a part of their lives remembered the experience very fondly. The local heroes that had launched the black and white missiles with their bare feet, all had an air about them. Some became local legends. Simms heard from person after person of the famed punting exploits of Joachim Van Schtencken. Joachim's skunk Pepe was better known along the Schoharie than George whatever his number was. In fact Pepe outlived many kings. The legends of Pepe border on mythology they are so fabulous. The biography of the skunk is another tale.

Skunk punting had rules passed on over decades. The punter would kick the skunk, punt it for distance, before a judge, who would determine the power factor. Skunk punting was a spring sport. As soon as the snow had melted and the fields were the consistency of spoiled milk it was time to play. There are various theories as to why in the spring? One is that skunks were coming out of hibernation and were slow and easy to catch. They were put into an icehouse to store them before a big match. Another thought was after a long winter and no baths, a diet heavy on beer and sauerkraut, being sprayed by a pissed off skunk was an improvement. There were local champions that came forward to prove their prowess in punting. He may represent a hamlet, a dorf, or a section of valley. Gambling was rampant. Fortunes changed with the kick of a skunk. Farms were won, lost, orchards, and crops to be grown were wagered.

Scoring was simple, the distance from the point the kick was made was paced to where the skunk landed. So kicking a long way was good, but not a sure ticket to win. The Judge would determine the power factor. The Judge would stand within 3 arms distance from the kicking station. It was the judge's reaction to the skunk's reaction that decided the power factor. It was possible to have 0 to 25 in figuring what the punt's power factor was. Needless to say 0 was almost never given. However, a 25 was nearly as rare. The judge signaled the factor score by waving, for example one hand and one finger of the other hand. This signaled 6. Above 10 his feet and toes were included in the signals. Again, for example 20 would be signaled by the Judge laying on his back and waving his hands and feet, fingers and toes extended. The Judges were highly respected in their communities being able to be dexterous and able to count to 20. Twenty-five could be awarded if the Judge was unconscious for more than a few minutes. This determination was made when someone called for a doctor. There were several scandals when members of the crowd tried to silence those who attempted to call for medical assistance for the Judge. They had bet on the other punter. There was, just before the Revolution came to the valleys, an instance where the Judge expired after a kick. However, that is the only known fatality during a match, (excepting the skunks of course).

Less certain is how the factor was used in figuring the score. Some eyewitnesses claimed the distance and the factor were "counted". This would indicate they were added. Others said they were ciphered. Simms particularly noted that when ciphering was mentioned the old folks would roll their eyes and shake their heads. He made a point to ask if they meant counting or adding. The respondents would moan and say they couldn't say. What was agreed upon was that the scorekeeper was often a schoolteacher and some times a minister. Some, noted Simms, chuckled as they told him the schoolmaster would be hired for a month only, just to get a scorekeeper in the area. Simms believed that ciphering would mean the factor multiplied the distance. It is quite likely both methods were used.

The method they kept score was also very unique. The crowd became the scoreboard, at least many individuals did. Each individual with all their fingers and toes counted 20. People having suffered amputations or frostbite were prized on frolic day as they were needed to count in between multiples of 20. A double amputee with but five fingers on his two hands was especially popular during his lifetime c.1726- 1784.

Matches or frolics as the larger gatherings were called, consisted of one on one matches. The more contestants, the more matches were required. Each winner would advance to another match until one finished undefeated that day or days. Frolics could last for several days. Each match would be the best of at least three. Although, some one on one grudge matches could be the best of up to 15. Each contestant would provide his own skunk or skunks if he was fortunate enough to have more than one. If a skunk expired during the match its kicker would have to use his opponent's skunk or forfeit the remaining kicks. The highest scores usually came with the first time the skunk was punted. These skunks were especially bred for their pungent odors. They were also especially fed and groomed so when kicked, the judge would become the most incapacitated, earning the highest power ratings. Few skunks lasted more than a season or two. A few, however, spanned generations of kickers. Again, the mythical Pepe is the prime example of the long lived punting skunk. Good punting skunks could give a powerful spray on the first kick. Great punting skunks could give a gaseous blast on the last kick. Indeed, the famed Pepe was said to give a pleasant odor if kicked by an opponent.

Skunk Punting (*cont'd. from p. 7*)

With mud often to their knees and skunk spray all over the kicking area, it is understandable that punters wore just old shirts. These were burned at the end of the gathering. If they could get a fire started before leaving the odiferous location. Farmer's fields were used only rarely and usually by mistake. Crops grown on a field used for skunk punting grew well, but all agreed they tasted "funny". Even cattle and hogs refused to graze on such locations for years. Therefore the best locations were waste lands, or most favored, Indian fields. Now with any large crowd in the Eighteenth Century large amounts of alcohol were consumed. Late in the century it became the custom for everyone to strip off their clothes and toss them into the fire at the end. Many sermons were preached condemning the drunken nudity that was occurring at the end of frolics. Not only nudity, but indiscriminate coupling occurred. Some had to explain for the rest of their lives of having awakened with the same sex, and they were not happy. Midwives came to dread December, over half the inhabitants of the Schoharie Valley were born during December or early January. In fact a local saying referred to children, indeed adults, born then as "punt fruit".

The sport originated in the Schoharie Valley and when Palatines moved to the Mohawk Valley they took this custom with them. Until the late 1740's the valleys' punters did not compete against each other. Competitions between Valley champions did not occur regularly until beginning 1749. This championship of skunk punting was held continuously to 1776. There was an attempt to restart the championship frolic after the Revolution. It was held in 1785, but only a few punters remained. Many had died during the war. The battle of Oriskany was a cruel day for the sport of skunk punting. Dozens of experienced punters were killed or maimed. The novice punters were even more cruelly served. All the young men that showed promise as punters were killed that day. It was said the Indians sniffed them out wherever they were.

During the glory years of skunk punting (1749-1776) Joachim Van Schtencken was the dominant punter winning the penultimate match 20 years straight 1753-1772. He also was victorious in 1751, and 1776. Also notable were Jothan Van Snell, who won in 1749-50, and 1752, Dieter Schemerhorn broke the Van Schtencken streak in 1773, but did not repeat, finally Hortence du Fusse won in 1774-5. Van Schtencken was the Schoharie champion until he retired from punting in 1774. He performed one last hurrah in 1776. He disappeared during the war years and his fate is unknown. Some of the most stirring matches had to have been between Van Schtencken and Van Snell. However, there were virtually no witnesses alive to describe their feats when Simms and Campbell began interviewing. What was collected was an excellent mass recollection of the 1776 Valleys' championship. This pitted an elderly Van Schtencken against Seamus McPhlegm. McPhlegm as a punter demonstrates that the sport was beginning to cross the cultural boundaries between Palatine, Dutch, Scots, even some English born. However, it was agreed by all interviewed that the English never punted a skunk more than once. They had no stamina. However, Scots proved to be well adapted, it was thought that since most slept with their swine and cattle for warmth in the winter, smells of the punting field were just some more putrid odors to the Scotch. Being 1776 those that attended were distracted by politics. The Whigs favored self-government, the Tories proclaimed their loyalty to the King. Sir John Johnson had groomed Seamus McPhlegm to be the new punting champion. As with all of the clan McPlegm, Seamus was often congested. The McPhlegm Clan originated in the lowest dankest vales of the Highlands. These locations led to the clan members to be heir to near permanent head and chest colds. When medicine began to be taught at the university at Edinburgh so many clan members were examined ejecting viscous fluid that it was nicknamed "phlegm." So was born the name of a body fluid.

Sir John had provided all that Seamus needed while he trained west of Johnstown. Seamus was promised a grant of 1,000 acres if he won in 1776. He trained assiduously where the water smelled already. The stench of the springs would place his training camp at the Saratoga Springs. Sir John planned to have Seamus speak for the side of the Crown after he was champion. The endorsement of the reigning punter carried considerable influence in the valleys.

Joachim Van Schtencken was largely apolitical. He had never been able to smell very well and he was now near 80. His hearing was mostly gone also. But Joachim was sponsored by the Whig supporters in the valleys. They hoped to use this living legend to block Sir John's plans. Joachim's best days as a punter were long gone. Fortunately, he still had the skunk with which he had his 20 year reign, Pepe. Pepe was about 25 himself, which is quite old for a skunk, particularly a punting skunk. Joachim had supported himself during his brief retirement by going into taverns and being bribed to leave, so the patrons could breath more freely.

The judge was provided by Sir John and was reputed to be a John Smith. The Whiggish crowd held that he was to make sure that Seamus won. He was also rumored to be a spy for Governor Carlton in Canada. It is known he was a recent arrival to the valley. The site of this contest was on the "Dead Field". This was 3 miles north of Johnstown. It was called the "Dead Field" mainly because nothing would grow there until shortly after the War Between the States. Crops now grow well, but are said to have a peculiar taste. The vegetables grown in a Victory Garden in 1918 on that site had to be thrown away.

(Continued on p. 9)

Skunk Punting (*cont'd. from p. 8*)

All that had been present that day remarked how much farther the kicks of Seamus were that day. Joachim's punts fell many paces shorter than Seamus's. Seamus's chances were dealt a sour blow when his skunk "blew out" on his first kick. With his skunk expired Seamus was forced to punt Joachim's Pepe. Seamus had done very well on his first kick the Judge threw himself to the ground and waved his feet and hands toes and fingers extended, for 20. They must have been ciphering that day for the witnesses describe a line the length of 3 dutch barns. However, the next 2 kicks were with the amazing Pepe. Seamus kicked well for distance, but the Judge was nonplused when hit by a blast of flowery perfume. He raised one finger to his nose and signified a one. The bodies were lined up before he realized what he had done, it couldn't be retracted.

When the scent hit the crowd all swore they had never smelt such a pretty smell. Most all the women pressed to be close to the punting area for Seamus's last kick. Pepe put forth another pleasant effort and those near used the clothing exposed as finery for several years. There was a market for small swatches that were used as nosegays after the clothing had worn out. Again the Judge could only hold up one hand as he was doubled over in laughter. He managed to give a five. Seamus's line went over the kill and up the hill on the other side. The Tories were bragging and strutting about. Even the Whigs doubted whether anyone could beat Seamus that day.

Venerable Joachim came to the kicking spot. His eyesight was so poor that he had to be pointed in the direction to kick. He spoke softly to Pepe for a time. Some thought he had nodded off on his feet. Those knowledgeable of the famous duo fled the kicking area. Flights of birds rose and flew a good half mile up wind. Joachim kicked and Pepe sprayed. None of Joachim's punts were very far. On the first kick the Judge went down as struck by a pole ax. He had the presence of mind to keep one toe curled. Kick one was a 19. All agreed that the Judge was an incredible man to remain conscious despite the stench. Joachim's second kick was like the first, mediocre at best, but the Judge went down again and again signaled a 19. When he was helped to his feet it was observed that he had lashed a finger down. The crowd grew ugly as cheating by a Judge was unknown and an incredible affront to the frolic. The Judge claimed it had been inadvertent and the power factor was changed to 20. The line of Joachim's score was just over half the length of Seamus's. The Tories were sure they smelled success.

Joachim spoke again to his valiant skunk. Those near enough observed tears in the eyes of the punter and his skunk. Joachim drove the skunk well very well for a man as aged as he, but well short of the kicks of Seamus. The crowd gave a collective gasp when Pepe's final effort hit their olfactory. All within four barn lengths were laid low. Even Joachim keeled over, he had never lost his feet in a match. With everyone in distress it took some time before anyone noticed the Judge was down. He was not only down, he was dead. The power factor of 25 was declared. When the final person of Joachim's line was added, (the aforementioned five fingered double amputee) Van Schtencken and Pepe had out scored the Tory champion by one digit. The old amputee waved this digit at the Tories and thus started the famed American one fingered salute.

Sir John and his minions were dumbfounded and furious. They screamed that the Judge had been assassinated. They had Pepe declared a danger and had the law search for him to put him down. But Pepe had been spirited away. He reappears at significant times throughout the American Revolution, at Quebec with Montgomery, with Arnold at Saratoga, with Washington at Trenton, at West Point, and finally at Yorktown. He was rumored to be seen throughout the theaters of the war.

It was a more genteel generation after the war and punting became more and more rarely practiced. The lively free for all at the end of the frolic evolved to punting things other than live skunks. Small piglets were tried but they didn't go much for distance and tended to run away. After a few died while they were being recaptured it was discovered that their bladders kicked well, even better when someone thought to inflate one c.1825. The roughhousing with skunks after a frolic evolved into roughhousing with a pig's bladder, which by the late nineteenth century was the infant form of American Football. The act of punting remaining throughout the evolution of the present sport. All Football Fans should reflect on the courage of the first Skunk Punters as they watch or attend this truly American sport.



From the Publisher

I had hoped for this issue to have an article on the Cherry Valley Massacre, but it was not ready in time, so watch for it in the next issue.

We are sorely lacking in articles of a more military nature — battle histories, After Action Reports from our events, tactical instructions, etc. There’s a lot of knowledge out there—let’s share it!

New! Starting with this issue, the Burning Issues will be available on

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the web site in html format as well as pdf. It won’t print as well as a pdf will, but many of you have told me that you can’t open the pdfs. So watch for this issue in the next few days to show up online.

— *Kristin Gitler, Publisher*

NEXT ISSUE SUBMISSION DEADLINE

The next issue will be published in September, 2003. Please submit articles, ideas, questions, etc. at any time or by August 30th for the next issue.

— *KG, Pub.*

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The BVMA Online (cont’d from p. 2)

Coming soon, an expanded Behind the Lines section. We have been woefully neglectful of that portion of the website, and a group of us are working on it now. Watch for updates in the coming months.

And as always, your suggestions and feedback are always welcome!

BVMA/BTL Lists

As many of you know by now, the BVMA has two lists on line with Yahoo groups: the BVMA list, managed by Dean Barnes, & the BTL (BVMA_btl) list, managed by Kate Scott. These lists are open to BVMA members only. To subscribe, send an email to:

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