

By Bill Lamale

Society Seeks To Ferret Out Masons' Secret



MYSTERY — What sort of workmen were the cobblestone masons?

With waterworn lake stones and handmade mortar, they built the knobby-texture walls of homes, schools, churches and even blacksmith shops still standing in the northern fringe of counties in Western New York. These structures are more than a century old. They're vanishing slowly as did their builders.

Last October one of them, a schoolhouse in the Orleans County hamlet of Childs, was up for sale. It could have been converted into a garage or roadside restaurant. But about 50 lovers of cobblestone masonry hastily assembled and raised \$125 to purchase the building.

SOCIETY FORMS—That was the beginning of the Cobblestone Society, which is made up of 200 persons who live within cobblestone walls or who don't but join with the others in hoping to preserve these landmarks.

They were called together by Cary H. Lattin, who has spent all but 15 years of his life in a cobblestone house.

"One of the first things we realized was that our knowledge of the cobblestone builders is only fragmentary," declares Lattin, who is also county historian. "The generation that watched the cobblestone masons on the job is gone. Their work is a lost art. We don't even have any of their tools."

LUXURY HOMES—Lattin says the cobblestone capitol is the Town of Gaines, which has no less than five schools and a church built by the masons. Ridge Rd., Rt. 104, which lies between Lake Ontario and the Erie Canal, is sprinkled with this distinctive masonry. Other examples are found east of Rochester, and some have been located in Ohio, Michigan and Indiana.¹

They were built between 1825 and the Civil War, and were luxury dwellings of that era. Some homes had cobblestone fronts; others only cobblestone foundations. Sorted and matched according to size and color, the stones were laid in courses like bricks, with a generous filling of mortar binding them together. Herringbone patterns,

made with flat stones, were popular.

Lattin says that when the Erie Canal was completed, masons who had been employed on the locks, turned to other construction. Some of these became the cobblestone masons.

PLENTIFUL SUPPLY—They worked with the almost endless supply of smooth stones gathered up on the shores of Lake Ontario, or found in glacial deposits along the Ridge Rd., which is a historic trail. A wagonload, drawn by oxen, cost 50 cents.

Yellowing account books show that a cobblestone building might cost as much as \$300, but that many of them were paid for in butter, corn, cornmeal and wheat. Lattin says the cobblestone craftsmen would leave their homes in the spring and be gone until fall. They'd have three houses under construction at once, allowing a course of stone to set and harden in one while they worked on the next.

BUILT IN 1847—Lattin's house was built in 1847 by a slip of an Englishman named Cyrus Wetherhill, who may have originated the herringbone pattern. It's been in the family three generations, and Lattin refers to it as "the old stone house." The front is cobblestone, the sides are fieldstone. Thick walls make for a cool interior and on summer mornings Lattin starts off the day by turning on the furnace.

Even as a boy he realized there was something different about the homestead.

There was an old, old man in the neighborhood who had watched the house go up, stone by stone, and liked to talk about it. Boy-like, Lattin listened and forgot.

DETAILS LOST—"We know that the cobblestone masons burnt their own lime, and used some sort of a straight edge to hold the stones perfectly in line," he says. "But how they finished the elaborate mortar ridges and all the other fine details of their workmanship are lost."

Lattin, who with others has experimented in the restoration of the walls, says the best tool found so far for applying new mortar is one's forefinger.

¹ Editor's Note: To-date, references to authentic cobblestone structures having existed in Indiana have not been found.