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SUBMITTED PHOTO

Employees of Watson's Farm prepare apples for shipment. Preparing apples and fruit for shipping required expertise.

Apple packing required knowledge and finesse

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS: Area's fruit was shipped by the barrel

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MEDINA — Taken sometime in the 1890s, an image shows a group of men preparing apples for shipment at Watson's Farm on Route 31 — likely the farm of Dudley Watson.

The man standing on the right is identified as Milton Johnson, a day laborer from Albion. Barely visible are the hindquarters of a dog that's occupied with something behind the crates and barrels of apples.

Johnson holds a hatchet in his right hand as he stands adjacent to a barrel header.

Coopers would manufacture wood barrels for shipping apples using the Erie Canal or railroads. Each barrel was required to have six hoops — the presence of some allowing barrels to be stacked more efficiently and preventing them from splitting during shipment.

In the center of the image is a grading table.

Apples were emptied from

bushels and crates onto these tables for sorting based on size.

The packers would first face the bottom of the barrel with one or two layers of fine-quality apples to provide the illusion that the entire barrel was filled with an outstanding product.

The practice was later remedied by U.S. packing requirement that required all faced apples to be representative of the barrel's entire contents.

The produce was then placed into the barrel by the half-bushel and "racked" by the packer after each load to ensure that the apples distributed evenly throughout the container.

As the barrels reached maximum capacity, the apples often created high spots, as seen in the image.

The packers would use a "shaker" or "follower" to "ring tail" the barrel. The process would evenly distribute the apples, helping to decrease possible damage caused by the pressure of applying the

barrel head.

A novice packer was never left alone to ring tail a barrel, but an experienced packer was capable of tailing 125 to 150 barrels daily.

As this year comes to a conclusion, I think it is important to acknowledge a recent accomplishment in the documentation of Orleans County history as it pertains to our agricultural heritage. This past weekend, Holly Canham and her son Andrew released their new book entitled "Mom and Pop Farming in Orleans County, NY."

In recent memory, I believe one would be hard-pressed to find a similar substantial work on the history of Orleans County outside of Signor's Landmarks of Orleans County or Pioneer History of Orleans County by Arad Thomas. I am continually grateful for those who continue to commit such time and effort to ensure that our history, especially those oral histories and recollections, for generations to come.