

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin • County Historian



John G. Peters, Harness Maker

"A Stitch in Time Saves Nine"

John G. Peters was born in Albion, N.Y. on July 4, 1877, the son of John H. Peters and Anna Usmus Peters. He attended the common schools and served a three-year apprenticeship beginning in 1895 under Reuben Pridmore, a harness maker in Albion. Following this he was apprenticed to, and for a short while, worked with his older brother, P. H. Peters who owned a harness shop on North Street in the Village of Albion. During these apprenticeships he learned how to make and repair harnesses for horses. On November 19, 1896 he married Corabelle Cain who passed away in 1947.

Around 1905 he moved to Medina taking employment with J. D. Harrigan, a manufacturer of harness and a dealer in horse furnishing goods, on East Center Street. When Mr. Harrigan sold out, Mr. Peters briefly worked for Harry Allen. In 1909 John Peters opened a harness business of his own in a small building on Main Street in Lyndonville, N.Y. He and his family continued to live in Medina and for the four years from 1909 into 1912, John Peters rode a bicycle to and from his shop in Lyndonville. Then in 1912 the village harness maker, a Mr. VanKuren, left Lyndonville and Mr. Peters took over his business on Maple Avenue. Here to this building he moved his family who took up residence on the second floor over the harness shop. It was here in this building on Maple Avenue where Mr. Peters spent the rest of his life and where his eight children grew up. At the present time, seven of these eight offspring are living. They are: John H. Peters, Ruth Newman, Kathryn Conover, Frederick W. Peters, Robert G. Peters, Evelyn MacDonald and Etta Magner. The oldest of the eight children, Lilah Peters Rice is deceased. As a harness maker Mr. Peters did very well for himself to support a family of this size. This suggests that such a business must have been fairly lucrative because there were so many horses in use at the time.

Andrew Coppa of Medina in an oral history interview with the Orleans County Historical Association recalls the following about his father Joseph Coppa: "He worked with John Peters, a harness man...my Dad taught John the shoe repairing business, and Dad picked up a little harness work, too. I suppose the leather work, harness and shoes, went together; so, like I say, they worked together. I don't know how long they were together there, because that was before my time."

Around 1918 Mr. Peters recognized "the handwriting on the wall", as he expressed it, because tractors were becoming more widely used on farms. He then decided to take up shoe repairing which could give him a livelihood when the harness business was a thing of the past. He also added the apple picking bag business to his shop and occasionally repaired riding saddles up to the time he retired in 1962.

In January 1963 John G. Peters died at the age of 85. Following his death, in the mid-1960's, Fred Peters, executor of his father's estate, donated many tools and other artifacts to the Cobblestone Museum at Childs, N.Y. The building which once housed the Peters family and Harness Shop on Maple Avenue in Lyndonville was demolished for a parking lot adjacent to the bank.

The J. G. Peters Harness Shop at the Cobblestone Museum Complex serves as a memorial, not to one harness maker, but also to an entire trade and profession which is all but defunct in the latter part of this century. Mr. Peters served his fellow men as an expert craftsman for over sixty years, providing a needed service and earning an honest dollar doing an honest day's work. On Sunday, July 9th at 2:00 p.m. the Peters Harness Shop, located on Rt. 98 near Rt. 104 will be dedicated in a ceremony conducted by The Cobblestone Society.