

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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A HORSELESS CARRIAGE



This is absolutely the very earliest photo I have ever seen of an auto locally. It is a rare snapshot which comes to us out of an old photo album from the Blake Family, courtesy of Ellen Blake. What adds to the richness of this picture is that it was labeled and dated in the album as follows: "Dr. Sherwood, A.T. Blake and auto, Pat Hassett looking on. Fairhaven, N.Y. 1899." So often we run across wonderful old photos without dates which can be very frustrating because their historic value is thus inhibited.

Of course, we know Fairhaven as Childs today. The name was actually changed in 1897 in honor of Judge Henry Childs when a post office was to be located there. This was because of another Fairhaven in Oswego County, N.Y. However, it took a number of years for the local gentry to get accustomed to that change.

Aside from the identification of the people and place, we can clearly see the front porch of the historic Village Inn in the immediate background. Towards the center background we can see the old country store operated by George Geringer where a post office was located until 1902. This store which stood very close to the intersection of Routes 104 and 98, was torn down in 1960 to make way for the H & A Superette parking lot. The exterior walls were stucco but in the demolition process it was discovered to be cobblestone underneath which had later been covered up. In fact, we can just barely see the edge of the roof on the Cobblestone Church just beyond the old store. We note that the Ridge Road is a dirt road which was not paved until 1926.

And now back to the people in order as they appear from left to right: the dapper young gentleman with cigar, posed against the dashboard is Allen T. Blake, son of Ashley and Mary Hardy Blake and a brother of Francis H. Blake, Sr., all of West State Street, Albion, at the time. The 1903 Orleans County Directory lists Allen as a student.

He would have been in college at that time. We know he became an engineer and worked on the Panama Canal where he contracted a disease which eventually caused his death in 1922. Dr. Frank G. Sherwood is next in the photo which shows him doing something to the horseless carriage. He is also listed in the 1903 directory as a physician and surgeon. He died of pneumonia in 1911 at the age of sixty. In the 'teens' Dr. David G. Cooper bought the Sherwood residence and doctor's office on Main St. in Albion. The third person "looking on" is also listed in the 1903 directory as Patrick Hassett of West Avenue, Albion, a laborer. I guess we can assume that from his work clothes.

And finally, to the horseless carriage. It's anybody's guess as to what is actually taking place here on a beautiful sunny afternoon in 1899. We can only assume this novelty belongs to Dr. Sherwood and that he and A.T. Blake were together on this occasion. Whether the doctor is making some kind of adjustment or starting the auto, we'll probably never know. As to him and Pat it's a candid shot. Note a tiller in the middle rather than a steering wheel and the kerosene headlamps. The horseless carriage also sports a fine tufted leather seat and rubber tires which look to be inflated. One thing is plain, there's no license plate. This had to be one of the very first autos in Orleans County. By the turn of the century there were several manufacturers of autos in both Rochester and Buffalo. I think it's entirely possible the auto could have been made somewhere in New York State. At the time there were a number of small manufacturing works producing either steam, electric or gasoline-propelled vehicles in limited editions. If we had a profile view of this auto, identification might be simpler. The make and model of this horseless carriage remains a mystery to date. Perhaps some antique car buff can help me out on this one.

Office hours: Mon. 9-Noon, 1-4; Thurs. evenings 7:30-9:30; Fri. 9-10 a.m. Phone 589-4174.