

## The Halperns and Their Houses

by *Robert E. Halpern*

In the late 1880s, Simon "Sam" Halpern, my great-grandfather, would come up from New York City to travel down the rutted roads of Delaware County as a peddler of goods to local farmers. In those days peddlers would walk from one farm to another selling whatever they carried on their backs. Simon was the middle brother who brought over from Russia his older brother Albert and youngest brother Maurice (Morris). These three Halpern brothers married three Goldman sisters who were from Pine Hill. Albert married Bessie, Simon married Laura, and Morris married Clara. I bet that made some interesting "discussions"!

Sam Halpern became so successful as a peddler that he opened up a department store on Main Street, Margaretville that is now part of the Commons building. Originally these were two separate buildings. The Halpern Brothers Store was in the one to left. The middle portion was an alleyway. Halpern Brothers did well enough that they opened another store in Fleischmanns where the current municipal parking lot is. In the 1930s on a cold winter night my father watched this building burn to the ground as the Fleischmanns Fire Department vainly tried to get the frozen fire hydrants open.

Sometime in the 1890s Sam Halpern brought up his family from New York City. They lived in a hotel as their house at the corner of Orchard and Maple Streets was being built. This house was so close to the original Margaretville School (where the fire hall is now) that my grandpa, Sigmund Harry, known as "Zeke," would sneak down to the school quite often. They apparently couldn't keep him away. Grandpa Zeke was the youngest to graduate Margaretville School at age 15. Zeke's parents let him go to New York City to do all the buying for the store due to his sharp business mind.

Sam Halpern owned one of the earliest automobiles in the village. To the left of the Halpern house is one of the first

automobile garages built to house their horseless carriage. I do not know who built this beautiful Margaretville house or a similar one on Wagner Avenue in Fleischmanns. I am not sure which Halpern brother lived in the Fleischmanns house but I believe it was Morris, who used to make dill pickles in large crocks in the basement.

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**Sam and Laura Halpern, shown in front of their Margaretville store early in the last century, had this beautiful house built on the corner of Orchard and Maple Streets in Margaretville.**

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For many years the Zeke Halpern family lived over Halpern's Hardware Store in Fleischmanns. At some point, there was another fire that partially burned the second store. In the 1950s Zeke had a house built in Arkville off Route 28. It had been written up for being one of the most modern designs in its time. It had a sunken living room floor made of slate that was heated. In order to have a strong floor Zeke had steel I-beams put in the basement to hold up the floor joists. (It was reported that the Halperns were building a bomb shelter!)

After Grandpa Zeke died, my Grandma had an apartment in the Gill house on Church Street, Margaretville (currently Gerri Conland's.) This house has a large steppingstone with the word "GILL" on it. As a child I thought it was a funny spot to put a gravestone until I was told that in the days of the horse and buggy this stone was placed so people could step out of their high carriages. The Mattino house next door to the Gill house was at one time a farm building that was moved forward on rollers to its present location and then converted into a small house. Be-

hind the house was the old barn's stone foundation. I carried these stones up the steep bank to make the small retaining wall to the left of the house.

The stucco house on your left as you enter the hamlet of New Kingston was the first home of my parents, Walter and Mary Ann Halpern who purchased it in 1957 from Iris Archibald. The Archibalds had some strange pets. A clawfoot bathtub was removed instantly when my mother found out that the Archibalds had kept an alligator in it. There was also a cage in the garage for their pet monkey and mountain lion footprints in the basement floor. My father and Uncle Morris



**Three Halpern Brothers married three Goldman sisters: Top, l. to r., Bessie, Laura and Clara, behind husbands Albert, Simon (Sam) and Maurice (Morris). Sigmund (Zeke) and Louis, sons of Laura and Sam, are in front.**

## STRONG WILLS, SHARP TONGUES!

One time the power company wanted to put a telephone pole up in front of Halpern's store in Fleischmanns. Zeke told them that he didn't want them to put the pole in front of his store window, but the electric company dug the hole for the pole anyway. Early the next morning Zeke got up and dressed, put on his hat and trench coat, went downstairs, got into the hole and stayed there all day. He even had the men of the store deliver his meals! Because of his protest the telephone pole never went up in front of his store.

Another old story goes back to when the Halpern Brothers had the department store in Margaretville. One day a woman came into the store looking for a hat and Bessie Halpern waited on her. This woman tried on one hat after another. She said, "This one isn't the right color, that one doesn't look quite right, that other one doesn't fit well," etc. This went on until the lady had tried on all the hats that they had. "I just can't find a hat to suit me," she said. A tired and exasperated Bessie replied, "Lady, we sell hats, not faces!"

insulated the house while Ralph Stern (one of the last local WWI veterans) did the plumbing and heating. The house had French doors in the living room that kept blowing open. To correct this my parents had gotten some plate glass windows that Grandpa Zeke had gotten from a New York City storefront and had it put over the doors.

We later moved to Upper Kennedy Heights in the Village of Margaretville to a house that was built by Richard Zimmerman in 1964-65. It was the last house in the village. The street pavement ended just past our house before the sharp turn. The land had also been part of the Gill farm. In back of our house had once been an apple orchard that had become overgrown with other trees. The deer loved to stop by at the "Halpern Café" for a midnight snack of apples. (Current residents Geoff Samuels and Donna Samuelson report that they still do!) The house had many interesting features including bricks in the fireplace from the Dairymen's League Creamery in Margaretville (most recently Brookside) where the Halpern Plumbing Supply had been located from 1963 to 1977.

# The Halperns: A Brief Family Chronicle

The Halpern Brothers' story is the rags-to-riches, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps All-American tale that began in Russia, in a little town on the Polish border, where Simon ("Sam") was born July 10, 1861. He was 19 when he came to this country with brothers Albert and Morris. Within a few years, Sam was peddling household wares from a pack on his pack in this part of the Catskills. By 1892, he had opened a store in the basement of the Akerley House, a large hotel on Margaretville's Main Street. Soon he was joined in business by older brother Albert, and they acquired the building next door to the hotel (the left half of today's Commons Building).

Albert extended the business by taking the store on the road, selling goods throughout the countryside in a horse and buggy. *The Catskill Mountain News* of July 24, 1902 related that Albert would "return at the end of the week with an empty cart, but a full pocket, and a smile that would knock a spoke out of a wheel." Albert's wife Bessie operated the store's millinery department.

Youngest brother Morris soon joined the fraternal partnership. They carried quality clothing (in 1906 they won the contract to outfit Delaware & Eastern Railroad conductors

and trainmen), as well as household items, books and school supplies, and other dry goods.

The Halpern Brothers were so successful they opened a second store in Fleischmanns in 1898. In 1902, they built a bigger, block-sized store in that busy resort village, where the municipal parking lot is today. Albert and Morris were also among the principal supporters of Bnai Israel Synagogue, built in 1921.

All the while they were building families – the brothers had married three sisters – and impressive homes (see Sam's great-grandson Robert Halpern's account on page 1.)

By the time Albert retired in 1919, Sam's sons Sigmund ("Zeke," born in 1891) and Louis (born in 1897) were assuming the reins from their father and uncles. They closed the Margaretville store around 1921 but continued the Fleischmanns store for many years, despite two fires. They moved the store from Fleischmanns to the former Dairymen's League Creamery in Margaretville in 1963. Zeke died on June 16 that year, leaving the now mostly plumbing business in the hands of the third generation – Zeke's sons Walter and Peter. Walter took a job in the New York State Commerce Dept. in 1968, and Pete hung on until the late 1970s when they moved to New Mexico.

## "Lost Arts" celebrated at festival

The Eighth Annual Margaretville Cauliflower Festival will be held rain or shine Saturday, Sept. 25 from 10 to 4 in the Village Park, Margaretville.

This free festival, sponsored by the Central Catskills Chamber of Commerce, is a celebration of local food, community, and the region's agricultural heritage. HSM's contribution this year will be "Lost Arts of Farm and Home," demonstrations of traditional skills including blacksmithing, chair caning, quilting, spinning and dying fabric using herbs and plants distilled over an open fire. The History Tent will, of course, feature photos, artifacts and memorabilia from the heyday of the cauliflower industry in the Catskills.

Highlighting the entertainment offerings this year will be the popular Horseshoe Lounge Playboys, and the legendary Schoharie Valley Cloggers. Other highlights will be an 11:30 a.m. parade of vintage and modern day tractors, and cooking demonstrations by area chefs.

A tent with exhibits and information from a number of area environmental organizations will be featured. Local farms will sell produce, including bushels of cauliflower, and there will many other vendors. Authentic fare ranging from cauliflower soup to barbecued ribs will be available. A variety of children's activities will be organized by Kids in the Katskills.

This annual event is a cooperative project of many regional organizations. It is coordinated by the Central Catskills Chamber of Commerce and supported by Delaware County Economic Development and several area businesses.



Learn about one of the oldest techniques of human civilization — the art of dying using blossoms, stems and leaves — when fabric artist Rita Schwab demonstrates this ancient process at the Cauliflower Festival September 25. See colors created in cauldrons over an open fire, and then choose your favorite hues to dye a silk scarf to take home.

## THE LITTLE RED HOSE HOUSE WITH A HISTORY

The little red building in the center of the hamlet of Halcottsville, home of Wawaka Hose Company, was built in the summer of 1916 by local carpenter Daniel Humphrey. The *Catskill Mountain News* and *Roxbury Times* reported it cost \$675 to build.

The fire company was formally established in 1909 just months after the community's first water system was inaugurated. A two-wheeled, hand drawn hose cart was purchased in 1910 to carry coils of hose and a couple of nozzles, but it only offered protection to buildings near hydrants in the hamlet. Still, it was better than a bucket brigade. The hose cart was stored in George Griffin's barn next to the post office until a proper building was constructed in 1916.

The new Hose House held the hose cart and another cart that carried ladders. A rack on the north interior wall of the building held a plank with holes in it. Bill Sanford remembers that metal buckets used for the occasional bucket brigade were stored on the plank, their rounded bottoms fitting neatly in the holes.

The fire company held its meetings in an upstairs room, unless the weather was especially pleasant, when they might meet downstairs, amid the equipment, with the door thrown wide open. In 1922 Thomas Tidd wired the Hose House for electric lights, and in 1929 the foundation was shored up because of "chances of it falling into the Delaware River." Jack Constable of Kelly Corners, assisted by several firemen, accomplished the work.

In the 1940s, the building was repainted (it has always been red), and repaired. An oil furnace was installed, and an electric siren replaced the Methodist Church bell that had historically called volunteers to a fire. An Army surplus pumper was acquired around 1946 and for the next 3 decades was kept in the hose house with the antique hose cart.

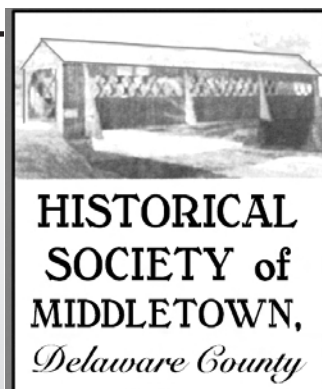
In 1976, a new fire house was built across the street, and the



little red Hose House reverted to a storage facility. The venerable hose cart, which was put to use at several Halcottsville fires since it was proudly first paraded through the streets in 1910, is still at home there.

The Halcottsville Fire Department is 100 years old and the community will hold a birthday bash as part of the Fire Department Auxiliary's annual HOG (Halcottsville Old Grange) Festival Saturday, Sept. 18 from 9 to 9. The event will feature music, food, an art auction, and a 2 p.m. parade. There will be history exhibits in the Grange Hall, which is owned by HFD whose members have worked long and hard to renovate the landmark structure. Diane Galusha's 1990 book,

*As the River Runs, A History of Halcottville, NY* has been republished and will be available for sale.



*We  
need  
you!*

HSM is looking for some new blood: Consider joining the Board to make history happen in our community! Call Andy VanBenschoten (586-4283) if you'd like to join us and we'll add you to the slate of officers and trustees to be elected at the Annual Meeting Oct. 23.

# New Kingstonites Mark their Place in Time!



Several generations of New Kingstonites gathered for a portrait at the historic marker which was unveiled in June by Honorary Mayor Fran Faulkner and her grandson, Brian. Bill Birns regaled the audience with remembrances of several Catskill Mountain folks, after which visitors socialized while viewing a display of historic photos and memorabilia arranged by New Kingston Presbyterian Church pastor Shirley Davis, who also happens to be Middletown Town Historian. The marker, the third erected in the town by the Historical Society, was funded in part by the New Kingston Valley Association.



## MONUMENTAL UNDERTAKING

Brian Wheaton and George Hendricks (standing) have righted and reinstalled 13 monuments at the Arkville Cemetery this summer. Several other volunteers have helped to fill in holes and depressions, spread grass seed and hay and trim brush from the venerable burial ground which is being restored thanks to a member item from Assemblyman Clifford Crouch to the Town of Middletown. HSM is coordinating the effort. Much work remains and volunteers are badly needed. If you can help, please call Brian at 586-2294, or George, 586-3614.



# 'T WAS A GRAND AFFAIR!

It was standing room only — twice — at a program on the Grand Hotel held at Skene Memorial Library in Fleischmanns July 25. Poughkeepsie-based historian Annon Adams graciously presented her well-researched slide show on the legendary Highmount hotel a second time to accommodate the overwhelming demand. HSM teamed up with the Greater Fleischmanns Museum of Memories and Skene to bring Adams to the area.

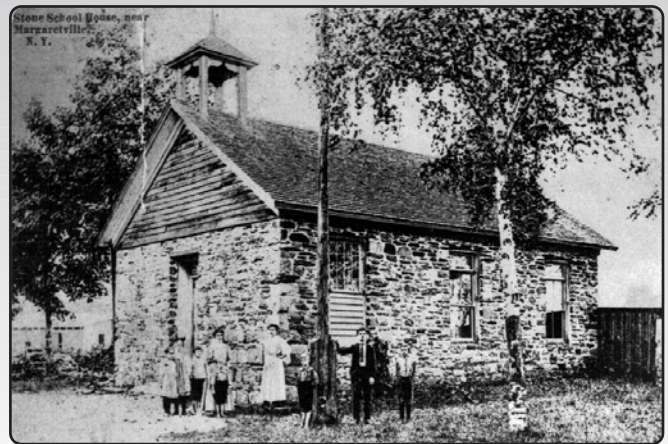
This (right) was the lobby of the Grand Hotel, circa 1947, photographed by Bob Wyer, and a postcard (below) from approximately that era. The Grand Hotel opened in 1885 and closed in 1962. It was torn down in 1964.



## The Old Stone School's open again – come get taught!

The Old Stone Schoolhouse is closing in on two centuries as a witness to community history. The building has been lovingly cared for by an association of volunteers who have recently painted the trim and pointed some of the stonework. There is more to do, though, and they need some help. Your donation of any amount would be greatly appreciated. Send checks payable to the Old Stone Schoolhouse Association, in care of Berna VanBenschoten, PO Box 455, Margaretville, NY 12455.

If you'd like to know more about this cherished Dunraven sentinel, or would like to get involved in its upkeep, attend the Old Stone Schoolhouse Annual Meeting Saturday, Sept. 18 starting at 11 a.m. A local history program will follow a pot luck lunch.



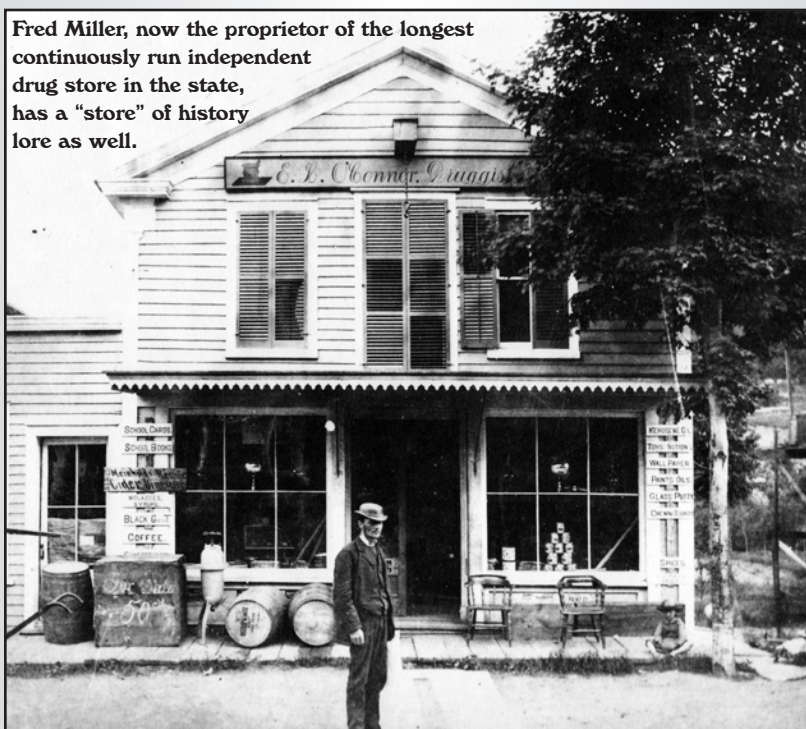
Stone School, teachers and students, c. 1918, courtesy Betty Utter. The school is located in Dunraven, just west of Margaretville on Route 28.

## A TALE OF TWO STORES — OR MAYBE JUST ONE?



Can you help solve this mystery? The photo above shows E. L. O'Connor's pharmacy (the current Miller's Drug Store) on Main St., Margaretville around the turn of the century. The one below is also E. L. O'Connor's Pharmacy, in what appears to be a different building at an earlier time. But could it be the same building, with a third story added, as E. L. is reported to have done?

Fred Miller, now the proprietor of the longest continuously run independent drug store in the state, has a "store" of history lore as well.



Linda Russell, former balladeer with at the National Park Service Federal Hall in NYC, will perform a lively program of 19th century campaign music at HSM's Luncheon and Annual Meeting to be held at La Cabana restaurant in Fleischmanns October 23.

## Three great reasons to mark Saturday, Oct. 23 on your calendar

- ① Good food at La Cabana Restaurant in Fleischmanns;
- ② Excellent musical history by balladeer Linda Russell;
- ③ The first look at HSM's new website!

It'll be our Sixth Annual Meeting of Society members and you are cordially invited! Come at noon for lunch, see the new website on the big screen at 1 PM, and hear Linda's program of musical electioneering at 1:30. Enjoy a wonderful afternoon among friends and fellow history fans.

### HSM EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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[www.margaretville.org/tfc/middletownhist/index.htm](http://www.margaretville.org/tfc/middletownhist/index.htm) [history@catskill.net](mailto:history@catskill.net)

## THEY'LL BE HISTORY SOON: DON'T MISS THESE EVENTS!

**SAT**  
**SEPT**  
**18**

9 AM - 9 PM. Halcottsville Old Grange Festival, art auction, food, music, parade at 2, history exhibits in Wawaka Grange Hall. Halcottsville, off NYS Route 30, between Margaretville and Roxbury. See story on page 4.

**SAT**  
**SEPT**  
**18**

Old Stone School Association Annual Meeting and program. 11 AM - 2 PM. Pot luck luncheon – bring a dish to pass and memories to share. Stone School is located on Route 28 in Dunraven, just west of Margaretville. See story on p. 6.

**SAT**  
**SEPT**  
**25**

Eighth Annual Margaretville Cauliflower Festival, 10 - 4, Village Park (behind Fresh-town). Food, entertainment, family activities, artisans, tractor parade at 11:30, produce vendors, environmental exhibits, and the **History Tent**, with demonstrations of "Lost Arts of Farm and Home." Free! Sponsored by Central Catskills Chamber of Commerce.

**SAT**  
**OCT**  
**23**

HSM Luncheon and Annual Meeting 12-1:30; Program 1:30: historical balladeer Linda Russell performing a program of "Campaign Songs from the 19th Century." Lunch is \$15, reservations required (845-586-4973). Program is free and open to all. La Cabana, Fleischmanns. Story on page 7.

**FRI**  
**NOV**  
**26**

Holiday Reception & Silent Art Auction. 2-5 PM. Featuring paintings of area historic sites and scenes by East Branch Delaware River Plein Air Painters. Upstairs in The Commons, Main St., Margaretville. This is a benefit for HSM!



**Robert Axelrod, here capturing the play of light on a Victorian building on Walnut Street, Margaretville, is among several East Branch Delaware River Plein Air painters who are creating paintings of historic buildings and signature views to be sold at the second annual HSM art auction Friday, Nov. 26 at the Commons in Margaretville. The event will feature a delightful reception, music, good company and a chance to support your Historical Society while you do your holiday shopping! Proceeds will fund more historic markers throughout the town.**



**HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY of  
MIDDLETOWN,**  
*Delaware County*

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