

Rebellion in the Catskills

By Dorothy Kubik

We never know when we may be caught up in a vortex of circumstances and events large than our own small world. One day may swallow up the rest of our lives. This was the fate of small quiet farming communities in eastern Delaware County in 1845. The steady, reassuring ritual cycle of plowing, planting, mowing, and harvesting took a back seat to Anti-Rent protest.

The Anti-Rent conflict began in 1839 in the Helderbergs in Albany County. Tenant farmers rebelled against oppressive leases under which they labored as little more than serfs of wealthy landlords, without opportunity to ever own the land. They had also begun to question the legality of the landlords' titles to the land. The outbreak was triggered by the demand of Stephen Van Rensselaer IV for back rents which his father had not collected during economic hard times.

In protest, the farmers refused to pay the rents. When a sheriff's sale of a farmer's property, mainly livestock, was held to collect the rent, armed protesters appeared in calico dresses and grotesque masks, calling themselves "Indians" in the spirit of the patriots of the Boston Tea Party.

The conflict soon spread to Rensselaer, Columbia, and Schoharie Counties, then to Delaware County, especially Andes, Bovina, Middletown, and Roxbury, where the protest was most intense.

Activities of the Delaware County Anti-Renters, organized in 1844, infuriated Undersheriff Osman N. Steele, who had resolved to root them out personally. The Anti-Renters,

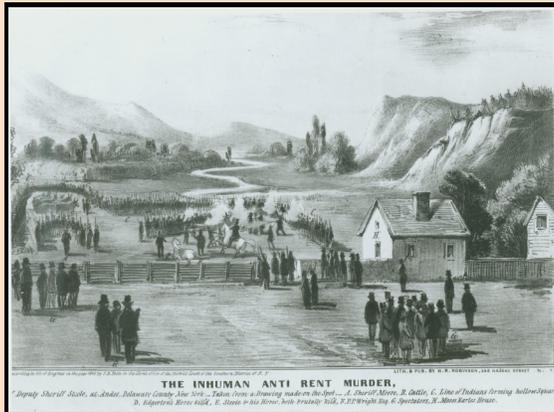
in their turn, hated him as an arrogant bully. Their final encounter occurred when he and the landlord's agent showed up at Moses Earle's pasture in Andes where the sheriff and the "Indians" were discussing the sale of Earle's livestock for rent. Ignoring the "Indians'" orders to keep out, Steele readied to jump the pasture bars. Someone shouted, "Shoot the horses." The "Indians" fired and Steele fell, mortally wounded. It was August 7, 1845.

The "Indians" fled. In the turmoil that followed, over 200 men were arrested, under suspicion for the murder of Steele.

In 1994, while researching that tumultuous period in Delaware County history, I realized that few primary sources had survived. Then, local historian Shirley Houck directed me to the transcripts of the Testimony before the Grand Jury convened after Steele's death. It was as close as anyone could come to interviewing the Anti-Renters themselves. Overwhelmed by fear of hanging for the murder of Steele, most of the Anti-Renters who testified abandoned their oath of secrecy and fidelity to each other, and revealed the inner workings of the Delaware County Anti-Rent Association.

In their own words they revealed that the Association was organized in the spring of 1844 at the Andes Presbyterian Church; had a tightly-knit network of officers, committeemen, and committees to coordinate their activities; and met often, either in small "town" groups or with the whole organization. Of meeting-places they had no lack: churches, taverns, private homes, barns, even outdoors on a hill.

Not all Anti-Renters were



THE INHUMAN ANTI RENT MURDER.
A. Sheriff Steele, at Andes, Delaware County, New York. Taken from a drawing made on the spot. — B. Sheriff Moore, R. Galloway, C. James of Putnam's Farming below Steele's.
D. Ingersoll's Horse Mill. E. Steele in his View North towards Hill. F. Galloway's Hill. G. Galloway's Hill. H. Moore's Hill.

“Indians.” Some sympathized with the protest but were not involved in any activities. Others joined the organization and sometimes served in leadership positions. The most active members—the “Indians”—wore disguises and appeared at sheriff’s sales armed, “to intimidate foreign bidders & so they would not come.” They were also prepared to shoot any animal on which a successful bid was made.

They belonged to tribes, as local groups were called, and were led by a chief and several subordinate chiefs. Sometimes they referred to themselves as “Natives” or “Rocky Mountain boys.” When they rode out in their masks and calico dresses, the “Indians” also wore new identities: Black Hawk, Big Lion, Pompey, Thunderbolt, Red Wing, Jumbo. John S. Davis, a leader in Bovina admitted, “It was said my name was Rainbow.”

A special committee recruited new members. Barbour Stafford, a twenty-year-old farmhand, related how, in the summer of 1844, at Peleg Hilton’s hotel in Andes, “Robert Scott came to me... and wanted me to join...after I signed the pledge H. Scott asked me if I did not want to become a rocky mountain boy I asked him if there was any danger in it He told me no it was nothing but fun and almost every boy was joining it -He then administer the oath to me by the uplifted hand by the ever living God.”

The text of the oath varied in the accounts given by the Anti-Renters, but essentially, the members swore to support the Anti-Rent cause and not reveal the secrets of the Association. This reinforced the seriousness of their purpose, bound them together with powerful ties, and secured their protection.

Although the oath as probably their strongest defense, the Anti-Renters, especially the “Indians,” devised other safeguards as well. When discussing their activities, they used certain code expressions, for example, “going fishing.” Jotham W. Schudder, father of Warren Scudder, when questioned about his son’s activities the day Steele was shot, replied that

his son said he was “going fishing.”

In order to avoid revealing themselves to an unfriendly person, the Anti-Renters devised “countersigns,” as they called them, by which they could identify their colleagues or supporters. William Scudder said, “We had a countersign, the word was ‘liberty’ - we also had a motion by which we recognized each other - we put our hands to our face.”

When going out in disguise, they used great care to preserve secrecy even among themselves. Often they would meet at a certain agreed-upon place on the way to a gathering or sale, and each man would go off by himself and dress.

The Bovina “Indians” who met on McFarland’s hill to plan for the trip to Earle’s sale “came to the resolution not to see each other dress in disguise - They were to dress after, they got there.”

Women were allowed membership, so it was rumored, if the men did not trust them to keep quiet without the oath of secrecy. Whether or not this was true, the women, to all appearances, stood by their men. They made calico dresses and masks, and cooked and baked for the “Indians” whenever their “excursions” required food. James Blish testified that 7 or 8 dresses [were] made at my house - my wife - others - helped make the dresses.” At Earle’s sale, the “Indians” gathered in the woods near a spring where they found a plentiful supply of food, from rolls and butter to meat and potatoes.

Payment of dues of two cents an acre helped support the activities of the Association. When the Anti-Rent movement began in 1839, this assessment was intended to help pay for litigation to challenge the landlords’ titles. The Delaware County Anti-Renters also initially had the same intention.

Whether or not they pursued this plan, they found plenty of immediate uses for the money. If the “Indians” shot a farmer’s animals at a sale, the Association would reimburse him for them. Zadoc Northrup, speaking

of Earle's sale, said it was decided to "Let the sheriff sell and then shoot the property down."

References to the "entertainment" of the "Indians" occur often. One Anti-Renter stated that "when the Indians were called out, their refreshments were paid for out of the funds of the Society." Early in June 1844, James Blish served dinner for 250-300 "Indians" who met at his house. He added: "The Association paid me."

Money seems to have been generously expended to supply the "Indians" with disguises and weapons. Under orders from the committee, James Blish, the treasurer, spent \$30-\$40 for calico and \$5-\$6 for sheepskin. For these purchases and a pair of pistols, he estimated that he spent \$100. Daniel Squires also admitted to spending \$25 for calico, which his wife and daughters turned into dresses for the "Indians." Daniel Northrup added that, besides disguises and weapons, the "Indians" were "to be paid for services if there were funds enough in the treasury." Whether this was ever done is not known.

The "Indians" had a motley collection of weapons: fowling pieces, muskets, rifles, pistols, and sword. At Earle's sale, Warren Schudder, chief of the "Indians," had a sword and a pistol. "It was a crooked sword, silver plaited I saw Scudder present his sword at Wright [agent for the landlord, who accompanied Steele] and Scudder then drew a pistol."

The most interesting account of weapons came from Harry Andrus of Kortright who said he made 25 tomahawks for the Kortright-Stamford Anti-Rent Society. "Col. Butts told me to present the bill for the tomahawks," he said, and the "auditing committee ordered it to be paid."

One "sign of the times" was the Anti-Rent flag. Dr. Stephen Forman related that "at the day of the Sale there was an Anti rent flag raised on the pole." The flag must have been part of the sprit of many gatherings, too. Jotham Scudder said, "On the 4th of July I went to an Anti rent meeting in my own waggon

[sic] with an Anti rent flag over us."

Nelson K. Dart, who admitted creating flags, testified: "Wickham, Preston & Scudder came this spring with a piece of cloth to paint another flag – they wanted me to put a picture of the possee & the indians. I painted one side as they requested. I told them if they would permit me to put on the other what I was a mind to I would finish it and I put on 'Victory by the ballot.'"

In the end, two men were sentenced to hang for the murder of Steele, though no proof was found to link them to the fatal shots, four to life in Clinton State prison, and others to terms from ten to two years. After an outcry from the public, Governor Silas Wright commuted the death sentences to life in prison. In 1847, Governor John Young pardoned the prisoners, and they returned home in triumph, though the wounds from the whole ordeal would remain with the communities involved for generations.

The real winner was the Anti-Rent cause. The Anti-Renters gained political support and power, and achieved several victories at the State Constitutional Convention in 1847. In Delaware County, the Anti-Rent party became the dominant political party. Though the old leases remained, the power of the landlords had been broken.

Sadly, little remains to tell more fully the story of the Anti-Renters in Delaware County. In the confusion and fear following the death of Steele, many valuable sources probably went the way of the books of James Blish, treasurer of the Association. "Some of my family burnt them up," he said. "I knew they were going to burn them up. I did not object to it."

The testimony before the Grand Jury, however, does provide pieces of the puzzle and some insight into who these people were and how hard they struggled for the right to own property freely.