

## Book Review

Lizzi, Dominick C. *Valatie: The Forgotten History. A Rural Mill Village, Microcosm of America*. Valatie, NY: Valatie Press, 2009. 528 pages.

Reviewed by John R. Dunne

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One of America's leading biographers recently acknowledged that during the course of his writing he often fell in love with his subject. The same might be said of Dominick C. Lizzi's recent publication, *Valatie: The Forgotten History – A Rural Mill Village, Microcosm of America*, an endearing paean to a village which he describes as possessing “most of the components that formed this nation and its history.” In his 500-page encyclopedic history of this northern Columbia County village, which grew from a seventeenth-century Dutch settlement into one of the earliest industrial sites in America, the author traces 350 years of history of a mill town community and its blue collar people. Those Valatie men and women have known both the benefits and the hardships of the nation's economic cycles and have survived due to the self-help mentality which enabled the workers and the other inhabitants to endure.

This extremely readable history, richly enhanced with numerous photos, maps, and historic charts, describes in 41 chapters virtually every aspect of life in this “microcosm of America.” You are first introduced to the cotton mills which gave the community the name “Millville” in recognition of the role they played in the success of the community. Succeeding chapters depict the inhabitants' ethnicity and religion as represented by their numerous churches. Lizzi also pays tribute to a society, including its schools, open to all races and religions. In addition to its many cotton mills, the community included a variety of businesses bordering a mile-long commercial district to serve the peoples' needs. As a measure of the economic opportunities beyond the mills, a 1905 obituary notice told of a Valatie businessman who had owned the largest dry goods store in the Village and “had amassed a fortune and was one of the county's richest men.”

A fourth section deals in considerable detail with the personalities and politics of Valatie and its government. Members of the Vanderpoel Family were prominent supporters of neighboring Martin Van Buren and intimate advisers of his presidency. The need for services in this growing community was met by the tradition of self-

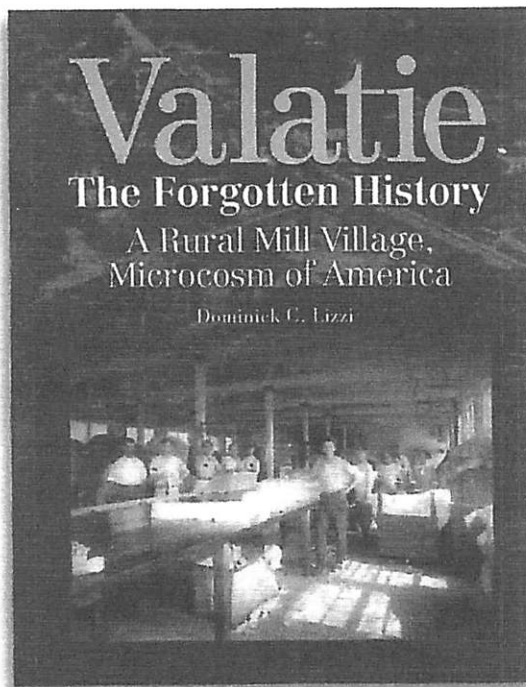
help, beginning in 1825 with the establishment of a bucket brigade to respond to dangers in the highly flammable mills and subsequent formation of the volunteer fire department in 1837. But, in 1856, merchants, businessmen, and mill owners lead a campaign to obtain court approval to incorporate the Village of Valatie in order to achieve “the quiet, peace and safety of our citizens.” The Village then sponsored or encouraged numerous public works to provide water, sewers, gas and electricity, roads, bridges, and transportation through what became a hub of northern Columbia County, linking the Village to Chatham, Kinderhook, and Albany. On a partisan basis, allegiance to the Whig, Democrat, and later Republican parties generated

heated and influential debates in the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps providing an incubator for the career of Valatie native Martin H. Glynn. He became Governor of New York in 1913 and was nationally recognized as “a famed orator, journalist, and diplomat, as well as a highly respected politician.”

Although Valatie had few labor problems when compared with other upstate New York mills in the nineteenth century, it was no Garden of Eden. To his great credit, Mr. Lizzi acknowledged the ugly side of the village culture, described by a resident as “that you were born to go into the mills, you lived in the mills and you died in the mills” and that “the combination of low wages and large families generated great hardship and poverty.” Valatians were the working poor who drove America's industrialization. The Protestant work ethic dominated the thinking of the time. Lung sickness and

physical injuries, the loss of fingers, severed limbs, loss of an eye, scalding, and broken legs were frequent companions to mill work in conditions described as “hot or cold, damp, dirty, cotton fibers floating everywhere, difficulty breathing.” Indifferent to low wages and conditions, mill owners responded to labor demands with lock-outs, blacklisting, and large wage cuts. As late as 1906, workers faced 11-hour workdays six days a week for wages which ranged from three dollars to fifteen dollars a week! But the attitude of the millworkers was one of stoicism; they endured and did what they had to do. The workers were proud, self sufficient, and practiced mutual aid. By the mid-twentieth century, the cotton mill industry had closed due to relocations in the South and increased import of cheaper foreign-made goods. It is interesting to note that in Valatie's post-industrial era, a modern medical arts building now stands on the site of the former great Wild's Mill.

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Among coin collectors there is an interesting conspiracy theory about Hudson's Commemorative half dollars. Just as today you can buy a roll of Van Buren dollars, individuals and coin collectors were able to buy rolls of the Sesquicentennial half dollars in 1935. One dealer in coins writes: "We have learned in intervening years that most of them were hoarded, speculators later releasing small quantities at much higher prices." He continues: One of us knows families in the Hudson area who retain nine original rolls (180 pieces); these families are unwilling to sell in the foreseeable future." He also adds that, "in all likelihood many hundreds, possibly over 1,000, remain squirreled away in upstate bank vaults."<sup>7</sup> As of this writing, some of these coins are offered on eBay for as much as a thousand dollars or more for a single coin. Thus the fairly rare coin has by far eclipsed the 1935 Sesquicentennial itself for a place in history—at least in monetary value and numismatic history. ♣

### Notes

1. See [www.coinpage.com/1935-pictures](http://www.coinpage.com/1935-pictures).
2. See "Hudson, New York," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson>, p. 4.
3. For background information on the coin, see [www.usrarecoininvestments.com/collecting/Hudson-halfdollar.htm](http://www.usrarecoininvestments.com/collecting/Hudson-halfdollar.htm).
4. *Ibid.* See also [www.coincommunity.com/histories/hudson](http://www.coincommunity.com/histories/hudson).
5. [www.usrarecoininvestments.com/collecting/Hudson-halfdollar.htm](http://www.usrarecoininvestments.com/collecting/Hudson-halfdollar.htm).
6. *Ibid.*, and [www.coincommunity.com/histories/hudson](http://www.coincommunity.com/histories/hudson).
7. *Ibid.*

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The author also recounts one of the more creepy episodes of local library history. When Dr. Wheeler died in 1908, his casket laid in state in the library while all 475 students of the Chatham school district passed by in solemn procession and placed violets on the bier. It is safe to assume that modern sensibilities would spare school age children that duty in this day and age.

*Let There Be Light* was produced to celebrate the centenary of the library in 2008 and is probably of interest primarily to the patrons of that facility. It does, however, provide a glimpse into a bygone era where a community's commitment to education and enlightenment was a point of civic pride; when men of immense wealth recognized (for whatever reason) that they had an obligation to return that money to those poor souls they had sweated it from; when a man earned his good name by his good works. It also serves to reinforce the value of that most essential of library activities: reading.

Mr. Lizzi has provided a number of photos, including exterior and interior views and shots of some of the more unusual furnishings and tools dating to the early days of the library. He also includes a picture of the huge Tiffany stained glass window placed in memory of Dr. Wheeler. ♣

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The final sections of the study describe the community's culture, how it defended its peace and safety, and enjoyed resort to sports and recreation. Perhaps its proudest chapters deal with its people's centuries-long commitment to the defense of their country. One hundred years before the American Revolution, Valatie men early on formed defenses to secure the safety of its inhabitants and served in colonial militias, which all able bodied men over the age of sixteen were required to join. They and three centuries of their successors served in the defense of liberty which took an incomparable toll on its families. Numerous public memorials honoring that service are daily reminders to residents and visitors of that proud heritage.

Lizzi's monumental work, with its numerous photos, maps, illustrations, and its comprehensive and sometimes repetitious record of names, dates, and places give a sense that the reader is listening to an old-timer's reminiscences. But that is the charm of this book. Unlike the possible inaccuracy of a meandering storyteller, Lizzi has provided a sixty-one page bibliography of books, newspapers, media, and documents to authenticate his undaunting effort to provide a lasting, reliable, and very readable tribute to his community and its people. In his epilogue, Lizzi paraphrases a quote from the pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church: "If the magnitude and difficulty of the work had been realized, it would never have been undertaken." All of Columbia County should be grateful for his loving gift. ♣

### Sandy Connors continued from page 24

### Notes

1. Bamber Gascoigne, *How to Identify Prints: A Complete Guide to Manual and Mechanical Processes from Woodcut to Inkjet*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 6a.
2. R. J. Beedham, *Wood Engraving*, (London: Ditchling Press, 1921), digitized at [http://woodblock.com/encyclopedia/entries/011\\_11/011\\_11.html](http://woodblock.com/encyclopedia/entries/011_11/011_11.html) (accessed 8 February 8, 2010).
3. Gascoigne, pp. 6a-b.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 6b-d.
5. Gascoigne; E.G. Craig, *Woodcuts and Some Words*, (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1924), digitized at [http://woodblock.com/encyclopedia/entries/011\\_12/011\\_12.html](http://woodblock.com/encyclopedia/entries/011_12/011_12.html) (accessed 8 February 2010); Hans Alexander Mueller, *How I Make Woodcuts and Wood Engravings*, (New York: American Artists Group, Inc., 1945), digitized at [http://woodblock.com/encyclopedia/entries/011\\_10/011\\_10.html](http://woodblock.com/encyclopedia/entries/011_10/011_10.html) (accessed 8 February 2010).
6. Beedham.
7. Wood Engravers Network, [www.woodengravers.net/home.htm](http://www.woodengravers.net/home.htm) (Accessed February 10, 2010).
8. Interview with Sandy Connors by the author, February 10, 2010.
9. *Ibid.*; Sandy Connors, "One Printer's Flowers," Offprint from *Matrix* 28, (Herdforshire, England: Whittington Press, 2009).
10. Interview with Sandy Connors by the author, February 10, 2010.
11. Mueller.
12. Interview with Sandy Connors by the author, February 10, 2010.