

Growing up on an Apple Farm, in Ransomville, NY

Honoring Henry Harrison Hand

by Jan Brooks Johnpier

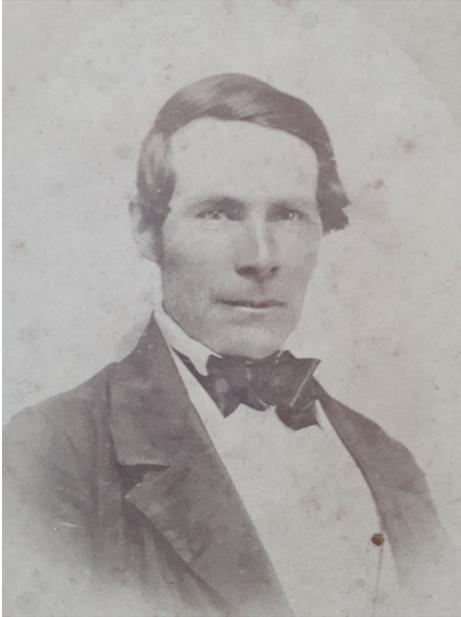


Picture from Brooks' Apple Farm with the
1985 Honda three-wheeler (ATC) – which still runs today!

I had the privilege of growing up in a small farming community, north of Niagara Falls, New York, in a hamlet named Ransomville. Ransomville, New York, is located in the Town of Porter, in Niagara County. It is about 400 miles north west of New York City and as of the 2010 census, had a population of 1,418.

My family goes way back to the early beginnings of Ransomville, when my second great grandfather, Henry Harrison Hand, came up from Mississippi in the middle 1800's and purchased a large farm, in Ransomville.

Henry Harrison Hand is the ancestor that I joined the National Society Descendants of American Farmers on. I chose to honor Henry because if it were not for Henry Hand, I most likely would not have grown up on an apple farm, in New York.



Henry Harrison Hand

Jan Johnpier's 2nd Great
Grandfather

Henry was born on April 24, 1823 in Rushville, New York which is located in Ontario County. Henry's father, Eli Hand, fought in the War of 1812, and his grandfather, Nathaniel Hand, fought in the American Revolutionary War. Shortly after Henry's birth, the family moved to the Niagara region. During the 1830s, Henry's father, Eli, seems to disappear from the family history. We are not sure if he died or if he left the family? Around 1846, Henry's two older brothers, Miles and Sheldon Hand, took charge of the family and decided it was time for a fresh start. When Henry was in his early 20's, the family moved down to Mississippi where the natural resources of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, would bring prosperity to the Hand family.

The family settled on Bayou Bernard, which was first named Buena Vista and later changed to Handsboro, in honor of the Hand brothers and L. J. Burr, the founders of the new settlement and who were leading citizens. Henry's brothers, Miles and Sheldon, acquired the land on the north side of the Bayou where they built the first sawmill, the first foundry and identical homes for their families.

One of the first projects of the Hands' foundry was the making of the famous New Orleans grill work and iron lace balconies. In one year, the Hand foundry produced 25 engines valued at \$62,500. During this time period (1846), it was common to have slave labor and the Hand brothers took full advantage of this. Their younger brother, however, was not thrilled at all, and went about causing trouble.

The following story has been passed down through the family, directly from Henry's daughter, Helen Hand Sanger, Jan Johnpier's great grandmother:

Henry would go into town and visit the local "watering hole" and after indulging in spirits, he would go about expressing his dislike for slave labor. Out of grave concern for their younger brother, one night the oldest brother, Miles Hand, woke Henry from sleep, and gave him a large sum of money and told him to get out of Mississippi and never come back. So, Henry left! He went back up to New York and bought a large farm in Ransomville, (Niagara County) New York. Henry was mad about what had happened, after all, his family just kicked him out! So, he went back down to Handsboro, Mississippi one last time and demanded more money from his brothers, which they gave him. He arrived very late at night and needed to cross the river, so he called out for someone to come get him, and a slave woman responded with "I will be right there, Henry." Henry asked the woman how she knew it was him, and she replied, "Why, Henry Hand, I would know your voice anywhere, even in Heaven."

Henry returned to his farm in New York and never returned to Mississippi, again. He never saw his family again. He married Maria Johnson and hired a local builder named Alonzo Brookins, to build a beautiful farm house. He started his own family and lived out the remainder of his life, farming the land.

The Hand farm land and farm house is still in our family today, and the land is still being farmed! In the 1960's, my grandparents gifted 60 acres of the original farm to my parents, and my father planted an apple orchard. Growing up on an apple farm, was a lot of work, but a true blessing. I have such wonderful memories of working out in the orchard with my family, and all of the wonderful baking that my mother would do. Apple pies, apple sauce, apple muffins, apple crisp and more!

My mother would give a bushel of apples to all of my school teachers and my school bus driver and I can say, I never failed a grade! I recall getting off the school bus and walking into the house and smelling apple pies baking in the oven. Fresh warm apple pie, straight out of the oven, with a glass of milk, is absolute heaven!

On Saturday mornings, I would go down town with my father to the local restaurant. All the farmers would be there having coffee and breakfast, and talking about their farms. I would sit with my father, enjoy a chocolate milk and a donut, and take it all in. After, we would go back to the apple farm and do whatever needed to be done. Each winter, we would trim the trees. In the spring we would fertilize the trees. In June we would thin (prun) the apples, and my father would manage the spraying of the apples, as he did not want us around the chemicals. I would watch out of the house window and see my father driving the spray rig, spraying the trees.

At five years of age, my father taught me to drive the tractor, a Massey Ferguson 50. I remember how difficult it was to push the clutch in! The clutch was very stiff and hard for me to push. My father would yell to me, "push it hard!" I recall helping my father fixing the spray rig. He got inside the spray rig tank, and then he lowered me down into the tank, with him, so I could hold the light for him, while he welded the tank. I was scared, but I trusted my father. Thankfully, I never had to do that again!

My favorite time of year was harvest season. Each September – October, and into early November, we would put a large sign out by the road that read, "U-Pick Apples, Pick Brooks" and people would stop in and go pick, and buy, our apples. It was such a joy to watch families come out from the city to pick and spend the day at the farm. It was wonderful to meet people and talk with them about apples, farming, the weather, and so on. Any apples that were left at the end of the season, including drop apples, we took to the local juice plant to have apple cider made.

The orchard was cut down in 2010, but the land is still being farmed. Today, we are growing "cow corn" which is also known as field corn, which is used to make silage for livestock at the local dairy.