

Lee Kibbe, Who Died Last Dec. Becoming Legend In Cortland Co.

MORE COLORFUL THAN AUTUMN IN SOLON POND AREA

By NANCY DUFFY

Rip Van Winkle, Johnny Appleseed and Davy Crockett have nothing on Lee Kibbe.

and broadens grins from every corner of Cortland County. He was 100 years behind the times, a genius, a character, and a living legend more colorful than the early autumn of Chenango.

And his famous saw mill on Sleepy Solon Pond may buzz again.

Since Lee died last December, his mill—the only one generated by water power in the northeast, idled and dust gathered on the levers, pulleys, peep-holes and machines that only Kibbe understood. Not until last month was it sold in a transaction that still surprises the new owners.

"We thought of it as an out-of-the-way retreat," Mrs. William Pitt of Delphi Falls said, "but we found more activity here than at home." When the Pitts realized the extent of their find, they planned the possibility of using it as a small museum.

The spot is akin to Thoreau's the curious as it has for 60 years.

The two social workers from Syracuse have a yen for grist mills and as a result heard of the Kibbe mill. Presently, however, their weekends are being spent learning there is more to the sale



DOWN BY THE MILL — The late Lee G. Kibbe is shown in his favorite old felt hat in his saw mill on Solon Pond. The 80-year-old miller, carpenter,

machinist, inventor, blacksmith, notary public, justice of the peace and historian is fast becoming a legend in Cortland County.

than the mill, granery, woodshed, blacksmith shop and well — with Kibbe's inventive mind turning up.

Kibbe, as a lad of 17 first bought Solon Pond and the run-down saw mill and built the grist mill and living quarters where he was to remain for 63 years. But he never really stopped building as the mill testifies: when he came to an obstacle, he never removed it but just invented something around it.

Millstones and grinding stones now are everywhere, a model T steering wheel is used to turn the power on, rubber pads are placed strategically on anyplace he would be most apt to hit his head, jars and jars of rare herbs dot his shelves and every comfortable space holds a shelf.

A trap door pulley system fills his wood barrel for his wood cook-stove, another pulley opens a

downstairs slot to let the cat out — none of this needless running occurs for a 1000. He has a glass-covered hole cut in the floor in order to see if the light was left on below and a vacuum cleaner motor in the attic to blow a draft for the stove.

His 10 children once all lived in the small crowded third floor quarters where they kept busy making potato crates and learning how to operate the mill. The daughters still can fly down the rickety dark stairs with no effort inspecting the operation which Kibbe rarely showed to visitors.

Everything in the mill-house was run by water power from the washing machine to radio. He would turn one set of wheels to begin a generator and after a few minutes the lights would turn on. Another set of wheels would operate the minor appliances — he was probably one of the few people ever to shave by water power.

(To be continued in four-part series)

Lee Kibbe Was Known By His 1914 Model T Ford With Inventions

FORD CO. WAS WILLING TO TRADE WITH HIM

By NANCY DUFFY

A hank of hair and beard, a 1914 Model T Ford, four or five crowbars and a box of tin cans. And Lee Kibbe, the kindly "bullhead of Solon Pond", would be somewhere near.

Tracking down the erratic genius begins in such an all-American setting as a crude log cabin on Cuyler Hill where he was born and bred, the only other home he had beside a three-room level in his saw mill.

He became set in his ways early — making his own clothing, walking in cemeteries, saving everything he could get his hands on, reading history, writing editorials, inventing and by it all — growing old.

"He would be considered by modern day standards as an odd-ball," his grandnephew, Oliver Stanton, a machinist at Boop's Garage stated. "But he was a great man to solve a problem. He would sit up all night figuring a way to save 15 minutes of his time."

Stanton worked with him in earlier days and recalls having to remove his shoes and stockings while bucking a steel roof. "Uncle Lee felt you wouldn't fall off so easily that way," he explained.

The creative miller had his own ideas for keeping warm during Solon Pond winters, too. He would wear five or six pairs of pants rather than a heavy coat on the



KIBBE'S CAR — Lee G. Kibbe is shown with his 1914 Model T Ford in front of Claude Cardner's old store in Cuyler. The antique car had acetylene headlights, kerosene sidelights

and another set powered by electricity. No matter where he went in it, whether to Cortland, Sydney, Utica or Wellsboro, Pa., he always gathered a crowd.

theory that the more clothes on your trunk, the less you need on your extremities.

He let his hair grow long in the winter to keep his neck warm and avoided sore throats by growing a beard.

Mrs. Mary Cooper Brown, a friend of Kibbe's in the Cortland County Historical Society, remembers people saying "Ice must be off Solon Pond — here comes Kibbe."

But probably he was known to more people in the county because of his Model T, than anything else.

Previously he bought a 1915 Ford for \$5 but when someone in Smithville Flats stopped him and offered him \$100 for it, he

sold it then and there thinking he had made the better bargain. The 1914 car came later.

According to Stanton, the Ford after Kibbe finished with it would have been foreign even to Henry. He created an entirely new braking system, put in a raxtel shift to supply four times the horsepower to pull his trailer loads, added extra headlights, anti-rattle devices and a vacuum-type windshield wiper.

The Ford Company at one time offered to trade any car in its factory for Kibbe's Model T, but he would hear none of it. He wouldn't have trusted them with it.

"I was one of the two people allowed to drive the model T," Stanton said. "He was one of my favorite granduncles."

Kibbe held definite opinions on everything. He was against drinking, smoking and activity on Sunday. He was a vegetarian and ate at least nine of his home-grafted apples a day, with a few in his pail of food in the Model T in case it should break down.

He made his own medicines and solves from old formulas and concocted a brew made with whiskey popular out Taylor way for stomach ulcers.

He could quote law cases by

the dozens and although his brother Herbert was an attorney, he liked to scatter his legal work. He prized his eyesight, walked miles daily, and according to Luke McEvoy, an old friend, kept his annual accounts written on a large piece of brown cardboard.

"He would come into my office and tell names of school children in the different school districts 45 to 50 years ago," the former teacher said. "And he kept on five cent notebooks records from the 1800s; every particularly cold winter there was."

Paul McLaughlin, a native of Taylor, knew Kibbe years ago as neighbors. "The whole family lived in one room in the saw mill," he recalled. "His four poster bed was three feet off the floor with a strundle underneath and a basket hanging overhead."

He had a temper at times, McLaughlin continued, but he was gentle and kind. "When I was 10 years old I had a broken leg from falling off a metal roof of a barn. He drained the small mill channel and caught some live fish for me."

Kibbe could drain the mill pond in a half-hour, catch the flapping fish and keep them alive in a barrel.

McLaughlin also mentioned his remarkable memory. "At one of the Old Home Days at Taylor Center I remember Kibbe saying 'I can recite the name of every person living between here and Cuyler.'"

Not only their names but as town historian he could also recall the activities of their ancestors as the time a Taylor man swapped a pig for another man's wife, or the hunting season when Indians camped in McGraw bogged 50 deer and bear.

The only animal Kibbe had,

however, was a co to "wouldn't you kn bar in the yard. (to be cont

SOLON POND GRANGE WAS THE SUFFERER

By NANCY DUFFY

Mrs. Lydia Fuller of Taylor concealed a grin when her daughter insisted she resembled her famous father the most of all his 10 children.

And her only comment on early life in their Solon Pond sawmill home was, "It certainly got dusty when he was grinding feed."

The Fullers now live just two miles down the road from the old mill where people once flocked to get legal papers notarized, buy odd-sized nuts and bolts or order a steel roof for the barn.

The pond community, still run by the water power of Lee Kibbe's mill, lacks the luster of the days when folks Kibbe would boast to anyone, "I can fix anything no one else can fix and some things that others can." Many who drank his press cider each October were not apt to quibble.

(The only thing they minded was when he turned off the power for the Solon Pond Grange Hall every Saturday night at 11.)

And if Kibbe were alive today, he would probably rebuff his daughter's remark, reminding her that his method of sprinding oil and fine sawdust on the floor settled the active grist mill's dust.

For it was his nature to be right.

As Mrs. Fuller prepared dinner — from time to time opening the refrigerator with the plastic handle pull Lee invented when her door handle broke — she revealed more of the man behind the unique methods and novel contrivances.

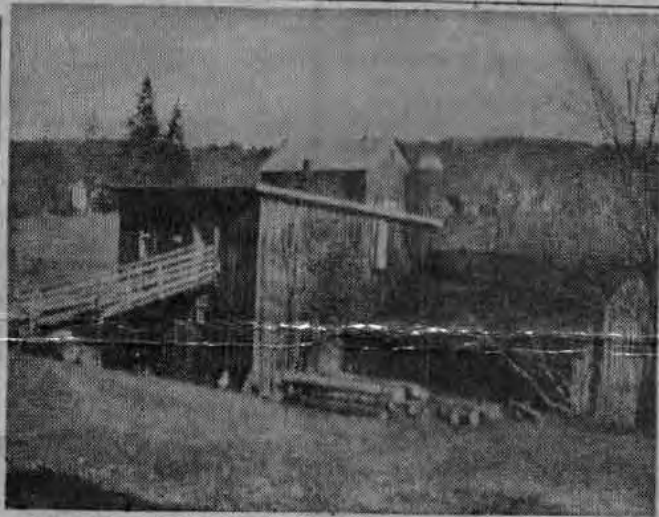
"He ate more apples than any other person in the county," she began. A sealed bin in the cellar kept them for him packed in sawdust. "He stressed truthfulness above everything. He despised liars. Said the Bible said more against liars than any other fault. If he ever caught us in a lie, believe you me . . ."

Kibbe held to the Bible's teachings strictly all his days and often made up sermons to prove it in the community churches.

The Solon Pond miller was nonetheless anxious for a full life — but that didn't include curtains, wearing-out clothes with the washing machine or cuffs on his pants.

He called curtains "ragged shirt tails" maintaining windows were not made to be covered up. As for the cuffs, he once cut them off his best suit stitching the hem around with the sewing machine. "My mother was so embarrassed she wouldn't go to a wedding with him," Mrs. Fuller chuckled.

He was once elected justice of the peace for the town of Taylor on the Republican ticket with the highlight of his term coming the day he married a couple.



KIBBE'S MILL — The main sawmill and gristmill where Lee Kibbe and his 10 children lived is shown. The miller was one of the few who knew how to dress a millstone and do custom grinding. Barrels of his ground graham flour and corn meal can still be found there. He even made his own brand of pancake flour which he sold to a special clientele.



CROTCH DRAG — Probably Lee Kibbe's oldest and most primitive piece is this crotch drag used by early settlers to tear up newly cleared land before stumps and roots had rotted. It was patented in 1870.

He, himself, was married for the second time when he was 75 years old. His first wife died in childbirth in 1924.

"We didn't even know he was planning to get married until a day or two before the announcements were sent out," his daughter stated. "We had no idea he was even courting, although he was taking more trips in his Model T to Sydney then and stopping off longer at New Berlin on the way back."

Lilla Horton, 72, of New Berlin became the second Mrs. Kibbe in a Quaker wedding ceremony in the Keeney Settlement Church. The two had memorized the vows and said them aloud facing the congregation instead of repeating them to the minister.

"The church was packed," she continued, "and he actually had a haircut and a posey in his lapel."

Unlike their father, most of the daughters were married over the mill, the scene of their birth, with Kibbe there presenting each with a hand-rolled rolling pin.

Another daughter, Mrs. Nellie Merchant who works at Brown's Cabins in Cazenovia with her husband, helped clean-up the mill residence when he died. "The one thing we didn't find was

Christmas cards," she said. "He had every piece of scrap he could find, old tin cans, boxes, barrels, egg crates, but not one Christmas card — he thought it was a waste of money to send them and he must have destroyed the ones he received."

Her husband recalls he always wore a turtle-shell hat while working—but when not working he believed in being bareheaded. The Kibbe reason: keeping the head bare preserves the hair. And his hair never did fall out.

(to be continued)

SHEERAR SAYS

By NANCY DUFFY

On a hillside cemetery in Lower Cincinnati, a haughty one-ton millstone reflects the way one person felt about Lee Kibbe, Lee Kibbe, himself.

For the weighty marker inscribed in bold letters "Lee G. Kibbe, Solon Pond Miller" was planned as his memorial and placed there by him four months before he died.

How did others see him? Too often like the elephant described by the three blind men. Few saw him in perspective.

Some remember only that he kept padlocks on his car doors, or that he used no black pepper because he felt it dried up blood, or that he was part Indian and could walk up behind you without a noise.

They pictured him as a Dickens character who came to town in his "cut-away" frock coat and ate dinners with the Historical Society with an old pewter plate, a two-pronged fork and bone-handle knife.

"He was straight as an arrow, had the pink and white complexion of a 15-year-old a month before he died." And the day he died, "he wasn't going to ride in any wheelchair into the Cortland Memorial Hospital, not Kibbe, he walked in."

But one man who knew Lee since 1906, recalls him in another vein.

And John Sheerar, Cincinnati historian, calls it "a pleasure to recall the goodness of a good man."

"People always tend to criticize and find fault with anyone energetic," he began, "most people talk through their hat when they talk about Lee Kibbe."

The owner of Sheerar's Feed Mill can name names and events at Solon Pond too quick to be quoted. "It didn't matter how they looked, if they came from Solon Pond that's all you needed to know. Everyone was honest up there."

And of Lee, he said there were many fine things he did people didn't know about. He catalogued and documented cemeteries, and probed the historical significance of local burial places.

"he discovered that the first man from this area to die in The Civil War was Bronwell Potter on Potter Hill."

Sheerar admitted he was "angular" but talked of the time he brought the court to Solon Pond.

"Kibbe was merely summoned to a trial in Utica as a witness, not as a litigant," he remembered. "But he so impressed the court that they adjourned to Lee Kibbe's mill."

He found a newspaper account of the trial which read: "Judge Edward P. Allen, referee in the U. S. Court accompanied by a stenographer, three attorneys, a patent engineer and a photographer held special session at the wheel pit in Lee Kibbe's mill to see the 64 year old water wheel run and get pictures bearing on the case before the court."

Sheerar keeps files on various people "but only those worth sav-



ANTIQUE DEALER'S PARADISE — Lee Kibbe poses in his sawmill home near the radio — one of the "modern" conveniences which came with his second wife, his 200-year old wooden whittled clock with wood wheels operated by weights and his pigeon-hole shelf once used in the post office of Taylor Center (Solon Pond).

Kibbe kept a barbed warning under the clock which is still there giving his views on daylight saving time: "This clock has ticked off the second for two centuries. It has no objection to ambitious city folks getting up to work as early as they like. But it does refuse to lie an hour to get the lazy cusses out of bed."

ing items about. And there's nobody I can think of more so than Lee Kibbe."

In his file are examples of job-printing done by the miller at his Print Shop in various antique fonts. And accounts of the jack-of-all-trades in his varied other pursuits.

All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't make it to the pond when the road was broken up in the spring, yet Kibbe in his Model T Ford with the two sets of license plates managed.

It was reminiscent of what the second Mrs. Kibbe called life with Lee: "camping out" or the way Mrs. Mary Cooper Brown described the Historical Society picnic there: "in the rough."

Although he often acted indifferent to people, he knew and kept tabs on scores.

People from Elm Stump to Sherwood remember his attending everyone's funeral. Why one woman at his own funeral confided to his daughter, Mrs. Watson Moon of Venice Center, "It seems as if he should be coming through the door any minute."

"Yes, he was a wonderful fine man, he had a good purpose, high ideals, and was public spirited, was the way his friend John Sheerar expressed it.

"I had a very high regard for

his intelligence, his knowledge of what's what and the accuracy of what he said."