

By
Clarence A. Lacey, Town Historian

Richford is located in the northeast corner of Tioga County, with an area of 21,835 acres. Its hills are the highest in the county at 2000 feet above sea level. The population in the 1990 census was 1153. The name is from an early settler, Ezekiel Rich, who donated half of the public square. The town was formed from Berkshire, first as the town of Arlington in 1831. Its name was changed by an act of legislature in 1832, the same year the town was officially organized. In the beginning, most of the businesses located in Richford dealt with lumber. Other businesses included gristmills and an assortment of shops that made everything from harnesses to hats, but most of the people were farmers.

At the turn of the century, most farmers made a living with twelve to fifteen milking cows and a few acres of corn, potatoes, oats, buckwheat and a few green beans. Many cars of potatoes were shipped out of Richford in boxcars in the fall by the Lehigh Valley railroad. Businesses in the early 1900s included the Franklin Bliss Milling Company had a gristmill and made excellent buckwheat flour. In the 1920s and 1930s there were many poultry farms. Orchard Hill Farm was one of the best. It was located 800 feet above and to the east of the village. Feed and supplies had to be hauled up a steep hill by horses. Later, land was bought and more level road was built to route 79. It was known as Geer Hill, once owned by George M. Geer, a former Tioga County sheriff. Two city men, George and Lester Wright bought the 200-acre farm in 1925. They gave up good jobs in New York City to become farmers. They turned the substantial old mansion into a modern two-family dwelling. One half of the basement was used for the incubator room and an apartment for washing and packing eggs. The incubator had a capacity of 21,000 eggs. The chicks and white leghorns were shipped to eastern states. Wrights shipped their eggs from 3,000 laying hens and some broilers to New York City markets. After many years, George sold the farm. There have also been a lot of sawmills. Around 1900, Clarence and Hotchkiss Finch had a large mill in Richford village near the Owego

Creek. They used steam power fired by their slab wood. They built their own homes and some for their workers. All lumber, framing, flooring, trim, doors and window frames were made from native timber. They sawed large and small timbers for railroad and highway bridges. The mill was sold in 1910 to Franklin Bliss. George Meacham operated it until the early twenties when David I. Munson purchased it. He made potato crates and wooden wheelbarrows. He used to have his children nailing crates together after school. He also made a wooden snowplow to mount on large trucks to plow the highways. He plowed at a speed of about seven miles per hour, but sometimes when his son got behind the wheel, it moved faster and took off some mailboxes and small trees. He sold quite a few to nearby towns. A few years later about the same design came out in steel and he couldn't do anything about it. The mill is gone and the town bought the land and built highway department barns in 1938.

By the 1930s many of the farmers were getting too old to carry on and sold their land to the state. Around 1941, Frank Clark, of Clark Seed Farms bought 1500 acres from some of these older farmers who were glad for the opportunity to move off the hill. Clark had approximately 400 acres of potatoes at the peak of production. At first potatoes were harvested using baskets and barrels by local people anxious to earn some extra money. Later, when local help became scarce due to WWII, Clark turned to immigrant field help. At first these laborers stayed in old farmhouses, but later, a large cinder block camp building was erected. Over the years, a number of people were employed, including German prisoners-of-war held in New York State. Potato warehouses were constructed with a capacity to hold 100,000 bushels. Ed Eastman, a farmer and one-time publisher of *American Agriculturist*, enjoyed checking out the west Richford potato hills. Eastman wrote many articles about the Clark Seed Farms. Edward R. Eastman was an educator, author, lecturer, editor and a member of the New York State Board of Regents.

John D. Rockefeller was born in Richford, and after he became

wealthy, he would come back for a visit, usually in July. He would park his chauffeured car in front of Bert Rawley's store and give away new dimes to anyone who stopped by.

The Richford Hotel had a long and varied history. Built in 1821 by Ezekiel Rich, it was used as an inn, was used for the first town meeting when the town was duly organized, and was the voting place from the time the town was organized in 1832 until 1891. It was once called the "old abbey," and another time, "Rich Tavern." It burned down on December 3, 1991.

Today, most of the farms have disappeared. Even the public square donated by Ezekiel Rich. The Richford volunteer fire department, organized in November 1928, still serves the town. The old Richford grade school is still standing, but the students are now bussed to other school districts. The Congregational Church is faithfully attended and cared for and the Elected officials consist of a Supervisor, three Councilwomen, Town Clerk and Collector and Superintendent of Highways.