



Crates of violets ready for transport from Rhinebeck to the Rhinecliff dock.

Clinton's Violet Industry *by Craig Marshall*

Over 75 people attended the May 4th viewing of the new documentary *Sweet Violets: A Film by Tobe Carey* about the large violet industry in the Rhinebeck area in years past. The Town Hall gathering was jointly sponsored by the Clinton Historical Society and the Clinton Community Library. This large turnout was expected, following the film's recent showing to standing-room only crowds at Upstate Films in Rhinebeck.

At the industry's peak just prior to World War I, Rhinebeck was known as the "Violet Capital of the World." A century ago nearly 400 violet houses dotted Rhinebeck and surrounding villages, supplying 25%

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of the U.S. violet crop. While the film focuses on the violet industry in Rhinebeck and Red Hook, our town of Clinton was also a significant player in this industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

We were fortunate to have Town Supervisor and CHS Past President Jeff Burns relate how his ancestors in Clinton were among the many town families who supplemented their farm income by building greenhouses and raising violets. Most of this industry centered in the northern part of town, through which passed a main wagon transport route from Dover Plains to the Rhinecliff docks, which was known as the Farm to Market Road. This route came into Clinton from Dover via Route 44 and Route 82 to Clinton Corners Road to Salt Point Turnpike in Clinton Corners. Then it proceeded to Schultsville Road to Centre Road to Fiddlers Bridge Road at Schultsville, which benefited the Schultsville store and post office. It then continued along Lake Drive at Long Pond to Kansas Road to Slate Quarry Road, where it exited Clinton and went through Rhinebeck and thence to Rhinecliff, which had the principle river dock for shipping goods to New York City.

Knowing that the Kansas Road area has somewhat treacherous terrain, Jeff once asked his father Pete why this route became a main business route for the horse-drawn wagons. Pete replied that at that time most roads were maintained by the owners of the property through which local roads passed and maintenance was lacking—particularly in the winter. However, the Farm to Market Road was maintained by the town and was thus kept in better condition. Jeff noted that nearly every farm in the northern part of Clinton had greenhouses to raise violets, with Eighmyville and Schultsville large producers.

One personal anecdote shared by Jeff shows how important the supplemental income from raising violets was to the families of small farms. Prior to 1933 Jeff's grandfather Stephen Burns owned a dairy farm and grew wheat at what

was then cleared land at the intersection of Schult Hill Road and Fiddlers Bridge Road. (The farmhouse is now the residence of longtime CHS members Tom and Barbara Myers.) Stephen built three 80-foot greenhouses to raise violets to augment his farm income and was doing well. Jeff's father Pete was born there. In 1933, when Pete was 14, a violent hailstorm struck the area and destroyed the glass greenhouses. Insurance was a rarity at this time, and having no means to rebuild his greenhouses, Stephen was unable to pay the mortgage and soon lost the farm to foreclosure. He was disheartened and died 18 months later.

Jeff noted that the growing season for violets ran from September through May. Young plants would then be transplanted to the greenhouses for the winter, which were kept heated by either coal or wood boilers running hot water through a cast iron pipe network. While Stephen ran the farm, sons Pete and Jim had the job of keeping the heat running in winter. Their two sisters picked—and packaged the violets, highlighting how common it was for all members of the farm family to contribute to this important business.

Blooms were picked five months of the year, with Easter and Mother's Day bringing the most demand. These blooms were packed in wet newspaper and would last as long as 30 days, more than enough time to get them to Rhinecliff by wagon and then New York City by boat, still "fresh" for customers.

Today there are no violet greenhouses in Clinton, nor any signs of the industry that once was. From time to time, homeowners and contractors dig up glass fragments and wonder where they came from ... Pete Burns could tell them. As fashions changed and the demand for violets declined, the "Violet Capital of the World" passed into memory. 🌸

Editor's Note: We are indebted to Jeff Burns for this oral history about an important—and largely unknown—part of Clinton's past.



Greenhouses in Rhinebeck and Red Hook were typically 200' in length.