

# HORSE THIEVES RAMPANT IN COUNTY AFTER CIVIL WAR

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The Centennial of the Civil War puts the spotlight on many fascinating stories which have been forgotten.

The lawless enterprise, a lucrative one, was born right after the end of the Civil War. It flourished 17 years. Beginning with 1864, time wove it into one of the legends of St. Lawrence County, a legend which even now in the conversation of older settlers is retold to revive the story of a similar business that cropped up in the same region with the War of 1812.

During the War Between the States gangs of renegades ranged between the Union and Confederate lines. Sometimes they killed unoffending menfolk, ravished women, stole, burned and drove helpless citizens to despair.

Among these characters were deserters from the Northern and Southern armies. Others were draft jumpers even bounty jumpers. Many were original outlaws. They were called guerillas. The raiders of the 1812 era were catalogued as horse-smugglers.

Fleeing north, their objective was asylum in Canada, a sort of political haven. They sneaked to safety over the border in New Hampshire, Vermont and New York, mostly by way of New York.

Every fact obtainable indicates that the motley crew which engaged in horse stealing between 1866 and 1884 were guerillas of the worst kind, if there is a gradation in the definition.

Their ill-famed reputation spread like windblown fire in dry brush. Every rural family lived in dread fear. Many of the early settlers thereabouts were Scotch who built their humble homes far back from the main traveled roads. This was after the customs of their fathers in Scotland where robber bands persisted. Many farms outside the village of Rossie where much of the thieving took place are hidden by hills and reached only by narrow winding roads.

To live thus gave a deep sense of protection at night because candle or whale oil lamps were invisible from the dusty highways. While the facts of the horse stealing epidemic that rooted in 1812 have been embellished in many ways during a century and a half, the outlawry of the post Civil War time followed the basic pattern for 17 or 18 years after Appomattox.

By word of mouth and from newspaper items, guerilla refugees in Canada passed the considered opportunity on to like-minded criminals in the states. The American outlaws knew of the Rossie country as a hiding place haunted by their predecessors long before. As the story runs, there was a large cave near Rossie in which the horses underwent a veterinarians tonsorial legerdemain to change their appearance so that identification by owners was impossible.

No such cave has ever been found. It may have been the stolen animals were hidden temporarily in a sheltered ravine. But a contrary tradition insists the equine barbering was done in a log barn near Harrisville. The cooperating horse doctor really performed. With paint brush, dye pot and clippers he disproved by his skill.

Sketchily outlined in the horse smuggling story are two farms in almost inaccessible forest. These were used as a general headquarters. On the land were log houses in which the thieves lived in log lean-to for the animals taken there after the camouflage had been laid on. The buildings rotted down years ago.

One of the attenuated list of residents in the first cabin was Erastus Reynolds. Near the remnants of his home a modern home was built with barn for Alec Clark. This fact was verified by Fred Ross of DeKalb who grew up in the Rossie region. Mr. Ross always knew the Clark property as the Reynolds farm. Real estate transfers show other owners of which one was Henry Hitchman. He also bought farms adjoining. After a while the entire parcel was called the Hitchman place.

As the Civil War neared its end, Reynolds rented the farm to shrewd agents of the horse smuggling gang who soon gave the locale a rebirth of the reputation it had earned in 1812.

The agents told a plausible story to bolster their skill as farmers. And then there appeared two brothers, Henry and William Flitcort. Reynolds quit the property and moved to Oxbow but returned later after a girlish friendship had broken the reign of the horse smugglers. Reynolds died in his sleep from an overdose of sleeping pills. Neighbors had walked him around the place two days and two nights to keep him awake. He was buried in Rossie cemetery. The stone carries an

Old English and the dates 1835- 190?. His second wife lies beside him. No mention is made on the marker of the second wife.

Now and then members of the horse stealing band had ranged the Natural Bridge where at the time lived William Draper. The gang hired the Draper barn and, in the floor, built a trap door through which horses were lowered and raised by a sling into and out of the cellar.

Night concealed the nefarious operation which went on into the day too. Draper, becoming suspicious, hired a detective who by rattling a pan of grain caused the hidden horses to whinny. There is no record that the thieves were captured.

Henry and William Flitcroft were described as young and active men who devoted most of their time to running the hideout in the gulchy forest lands of the Reynolds farm and that adjoining.

J. Hermon McLear, a mining engineer who told of these incidents, was born in the Rossie Hotel. As a youth he counted one night sixty-five stolen horses passing the hotel along the curving road through the village. The animals were led or driven by a large group of smugglers to the old wooden bridge over the Indian River. Mr. McLear heard the animals clomp across the plank floor at the southern end of the bridge the horses went down quite a grade. Eventually an iron bridge was built and the road to the meadow was guarded by a wire fence. A locked gate was strung with barbed wire. After the horses passed the interval on which in some places the road was diked, they entered a dense forest cut by ravines. Following the river, they arrived at the hide out by devious trails known only to the men.

Four miles away was a fine well-kept white residence sitting on a sloping lawn adjoining another house rented in season to Grass Lake visitors. Owned by the Harrises when this was written, their own home stands on the site of the Flitcroft log cabin where part of the horse thieves activities were conducted. In the abstract of the Harris deed the name Flitcroft does not appear. It is therefore likely that the Flintcrofts hired the place as they did the Reynolds farm across the Indian River.

Mr. Harris remembered as a young man when the log cabin was torn down. The tradition of the horse smugglers haunts the countryside.

Beyond the Harris place was the Patrick Donnelly farm. There Fidelia Flintcroft, a close friend of Donnelly's sister, Anna, lived. When she overheard the thieves plotting to take five pairs of Donnelly's horses, she walked across to the neighboring farmhouse and told Anna to put her brother on guard.

Donnelly, single handed, repelled the would-be smugglers with a club. They returned in the dark of the moon the next night and were driven off by Donnelly and a group of neighbors after a wild fight with pitch-forks, axes and sticks in the gloomy farm yard. This was the end of horse stealing in the Hammond area.