McKownville Road Promotes History

By WILLIAM D. MOHR

(Mr. Mohr is a Central Office foreman with the N. Y. Telephone Co. His interest in local history grew from reading articles on the subject in the Times Union. Since then he has spent many hours searching out old road and tavern sites in this area.)

This hamlet, in the Town of Guilderland, derives its name from the McKown family, although its existence and growth as a community has been mainly dependent upon the Great Western Turnpike, now U. S. Route 20.

In 1786 William McKown, a native of Scotland and founder of the family name in America, petitioned for and was granted the lease of the 5 Mile House by the Common Council of the City of Albany. This tavern, an establishment of some age when occupied by McKown, stood five miles west of the Hudson River on the old Albany-Schenectady road, its site is today marked by the 18th Green on the golf course of the Albany Country Club.

Foreseeing, in some manner, the coming of the Turnpike era, McKown in 1793 erected a large frame building to serve as a tavern and residence. This new structure he built in a wilderness clearing a short distance from the 5 Mile House.

His information, or intiution, proved reliable when in 1799 the New York State Legislature granted a charter to the Great Western Turnpike Company permitting the construction of a road from Snipe Street (Lexington Avenue, Albany), westerly to the settlement of Cherry Valley, N. Y. The projected turnpike was not a public undertaking, but was financed entirely by private investors confident of turning a profit.
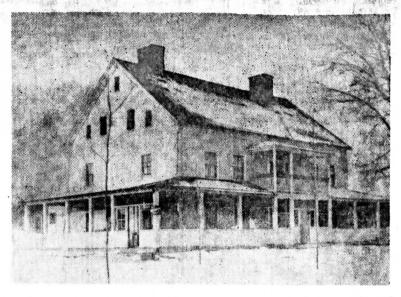
William McKown is reported to have granted the Turnpike Co. a right-of-way over his holdings, comprised of some 600 acres surrounding his second tavern, for 6 cents. This provided the company a strip of land 6 rods wide and about three-quarters of a mile long and insured the innkeeper of business coming to his door.

Completed in 1804, at a cost of $17,388.93, the turnpike was broad enough to allow opposing traffic to pass comfortably, yet its surface was little better than the average improved road of today. For the privilege of using the road travellers paid graduated fees at the many toll-houses and gates located every few miles along the route. Monies so collected went by way of the company treasury to repay investors and to keeping the road in good repair.

In its prime the pike was a bustling thoroughfare on which could be seen droves of livestock and poultry, stagecoaches, trains of Conestoga wagons bound westward with pioneer families, and the brightly painted carts of peddlers piled high with almost any item the farm wife could desire. Circuit riding judges and preachers, gypsies, tinkers, wandering Indians and bands of immigrants, all added to the colorful pageantry.

Almost as quickly as it grew the turnpike declined; first the canal and next the railroad took away much of its patronage leaving the road almost grass grown. Prior to the middle 1800's there was a brief resurgence of the turnpikes and the Great Western along with others made a last and futile attempt to regain its former position of importance.

In 1849 its name was changed to the Great Western Plank Road and one lane covered with heavy two inch planks laid across the route from its starting point to the hamlet of Guilderland. Tolls were collected on the road until 1905 though it had fallen into a state of disrepair and the planking was more of an annoyance than a benefit to the traveller.

Through these years the McKown family enjoyed prosperity and great respect in and about the town. James and William McKown served as members of the Assehbly in the New York Legislature in 1822. William was Supervisor in the Town of Guilderland for the yars 1825-1830. Others of the family name enjoyed splendid reputations and records in business, law, medicine, government, and the Federal army during the Civil War.

The tavern was ever popular with travellers of the turnpike, especially the drivers of cattle and poultry by reason of the extensive pens grouped about the building along with slaughter houses and barns. For as lon gas the stage lines operated McKown's was listed among the stopping places, and it was a favored spot with hay-riding and sleighing parties as well.

In 1839 the state militia and military companies encamped about the tavern grounds on their march to the Anti-Rent Wars of the Helderbergs.

Later the inn served McKownville and the surrounding countryside as a postoffice.

The Methodist Church, erected in 1866, was granted one acre of land by John McKown for that purpose.

The old inn continued as a family concern until 1884 when William H. Witbeck, an employee of the McKown's, leased the tavern. In time he was joined by his son, Benjamin, and later Arthur, who aided in the successful operation and eventual purchase of the establishment, which became generally known as Witbeck's Hotel until the middle of the 1920's when it was destroyed by fire.

Turning from the tavern, William McKown, a descendant of the first landlord, opened McKown's Grove in 1896 for the use of picnic and clambake parties. The Grove, still in operation, has continued under the name if not the operation of the founder.

A few years ago the last members of the McKown family disposed of the old home and land on McKown Road and severed the last ties of the family to the hamlet by taking up residence in the City of Albany.

McKOWN TAVERN (or Witbeck's Hotel) erected in 1793, as it appeared about the time of the First World War. Located on the south side of the Western Turnpike at the intersection of Fuller Road, now the site of King's Shell Service Station.