

## ANHN's Mask Project Shines a Light on the Generosity of Local Volunteers

By Cathy Redlich

If you have heard the whir of sewing machines on the Covid-quiet roads of Ancram these past weeks, it might well be the sound of Ancram's industrious volunteer mask makers whipping up another batch of protective face coverings for our community. The Mask Project, as it has come to be known, began with the individual efforts of Ancram resident Mary Ann Roche who started sewing masks as soon as she heard of the need. Roche estimates that she has made over 2000 masks personally.



"When Covid came along," Roche says, "I started to think about what I could do to help. My mother taught me to sew as a child, and I am now a quilter so have lots of fabric at home. I began making masks for family and friends, as well as the clients I care for in my home." Roche's home is certified to provide a supportive family environment for adults with developmental disabilities, and knowing that other family care and group homes would need masks for their staffs and clients, she began to distribute free masks to other providers as well. As her mask pile grew, Roche gave masks to the Ancram Fire Company and to Lutheran World Services, which was sending masks around the globe.

"I still had masks," Mary Ann laughs, "so I reached out to Jack Lindsey to ask if he had ideas for distribution." Lindsey is Co-Chair, along with Hila Richardson, of Ancram Neighbors Helping Neighbors (ANHN), and the organization leapt into action. Richardson asked Town Supervisor Art Bassin to spread the word on the Town email. "Right away," Richardson says, "I received a

flood of emails from people expressing interest in helping. I started an email list of those who had responded so that we could stay in contact as we figured out the best way to organize the project." Richardson emailed an instruction sheet and pattern to the sewers, and turned to Fire Chief David Boice to ask if the Fire Station could serve as a drop-off point for completed masks, as well as a pick-up point for donated fabric. "Many people had their own fabric, but others needed fabric or elastic tape," Richardson explains.

ANHN provided a \$1000 grant to Roche to partially offset materials costs as the project blossomed. The grant was put to good use immediately by Roche to purchase three pattern dies to cut fabric for masks of varying sizes. "For the first 1300 masks I sewed, it was taking me about a half hour per mask because I was hand-cutting the fabric." Local residents Laura Ponkos and Carol Fass were also helping Mary Ann cut patterns with scissors. "The dies permitted me to use

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## Town News Team

Cathy Redlich, *Editor*  
Bobbie Slonevsky  
Marie-Claude Stockl  
Madeleine Israel  
Suzan Flamm  
Brittany L. Morgan, *Layout*

***We welcome your comments and suggestions. Send to Cathy Redlich at [AncramTownNews@gmail.com](mailto:AncramTownNews@gmail.com)***

# Graduating from High School in the Time of the Pandemic

By Cathy Redlich



When members of the Class of 2020 began their senior year at Taconic Hills and Stissing Mountain High Schools, they shared the anticipation and excitement of seniors everywhere: the final days of classes with friends, prom, signing each other's yearbooks, walking across the stage to receive a diploma. The notion that a highly contagious virus would be sweeping the nation, closing schools, moving classes online, and putting an end to graduation traditions was unimaginable.

Cody Mayhew, one of four Ancram seniors graduating from Stissing Mountain High, is remaining upbeat. "It would definitely be better if I could be in the classroom, but I don't feel like I have lost a lot of opportunities with my education since it has been only a couple of months since classes ended," Cody says. Now that school is virtual, Cody explains that each of his teachers goes about instruction a bit differently. He generally will get an email from a teacher directing him to Google Classroom or RightPath, two online instructional tools that permit teachers to assign, distribute, and collect assignments remotely.

"In English class, for example, we might be given a poem to read with questions following for us to answer." The sites allow students to submit their work online and get teacher feedback. If the class requires seeing and hearing the

teacher explain difficult subject matter, the class will do an online call together so that discussion can take place. Cody notes that last week his economics class convened remotely "to learn about building credit, and how loans work, and how to set up a bank account to save for college."

Speaking of college, Cody hopes to attend Columbia-Green to study criminal justice after taking a gap year to work and earn money. He has his sights set on getting a job at Herrington's as a driver, but "I expect I would have to start in the yard loading trucks." Ultimately Cody would like to go into law enforcement and perhaps become a State Trooper. One of his favorite subjects is science, and Cody is taking a forensics class now. Maybe a "CSI Ancram" is in our future?

In the meantime, Cody is optimistic that his high school will figure out a way to safely gather families for some sort of in-person graduation ceremony. A big disappointment, though, is the cancellation of the senior trip. "This year we were going to Boston. The plans included seeing a baseball game at Fenway Park and going on a cruise in Boston Harbor." Cody, showing the maturity of a soon-to-be graduate, is philosophical about missing out on senior traditions and not having a chance to be with his friends for the final days of senior year. "I got to attend prom last year, so I am not that

**Congratulations and best wishes to all of our Ancram graduates!**

## ***Taconic Hills High School***

- Skyy Handschuh
- Logan Kirby
- Daniel Wittlinger

## ***Stissing Mountain High School***

- Kane Kozlowski
- Emily Mason
- Cody Mayhew
- Patience Tindall

upset about missing it this year. It is definitely sad not being with friends for the last days of school, especially since some will be going off to college in other places," he remarks, "but it's not unbearable."

Three Ancram students will be graduating from Taconic Hills High School, where plans for graduation are still in flux, but with the hope that an in-person diploma ceremony can be arranged. Daniel Wittlinger, who admitted that he doesn't love going to school, said "Being home was great!" It gave him time to work outside, do odd jobs, and finish his senior year remotely.

Daniel is a member of the volunteer Ancram Fire Company, and describes his interests as "mechanics, carpentry and farming". He is considering going to vocational school to pursue a career in one of these trades in the coming years.

## MASK PROJECT

*(Continued from page 1)*

my hand-cranked fabric cutter to cut 8 patterns at once," Roche relates, "which cut my mask production time to 15 minutes per mask."

As Richardson notes admiringly, "Mary Ann is a mask-making machine!" Roche, in turn, credits Richardson with finding a better mask pattern to use, recruiting volunteers, and organizing the entire operation.

To date, the ANHN Mask Project volunteers have produced a whopping 1000+ masks, with 800 already contributed to local residents, families receiving services from ANHN, Copake Rapid Care, Columbia Memorial Hospital, Pine Haven Nursing & Rehabilitation Center, the Columbia County Community Health Care Consortium, and local businesses and farms for their employees.

Another 250-300 are ready to distribute to those needing them.

"This all began because I was bored out of my mind and going crazy trying to think of what to do," Mary Ann says wryly, "and it has turned into a wonderful project involving many people. I love how this community came together. People who don't even know me jumped in to help. One lady even bought a sewing machine. ANHN is truly a wonderful organization! I had the idea but they ran with it."

Richardson emphasized that the need for masks will be on the upswing as people return to work and are wearing masks more frequently outside the home.

If you would like a free mask, they are available through Ancram Neighbors Helping Neighbors. Contact either Hila Richardson (917-414-8270) or Jack Lindsey (518-329-7306) to request a mask.

## Ancram's "Mask Angels"

- Mary Ann Roche
- Anne Lindbergh
- Mary Rosell
- Laura Ponkos
- Angela Liquori
- Rosy Ngo
- Glenda Rose
- Lauren Goldberg
- Camilla Maltthein
- Carol Fass
- Stephanie Bernheim
- Cheri Anderson
- Tara and Frank Van Etten
- Kim (Schmidt) and Andre Wlodar



Ancramdale Neighbors Helping Neighbors Association

## Ancramdale Neighbors Helping Neighbors Association Announces The Adrienne Citrin Memorial Higher Education Grants

*By Michael Sturdivant*

For the seventh year, as a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) corporation serving the Town of Ancram, including Ancramdale and Boston Corner, ANHNA is pleased again to offer higher education grants to help full-time students who will enter an accredited college, community college, or vocational school this fall. Last July this grant was renamed the Adrienne Citrin Memorial Higher Education Grant to honor Adrienne Citrin, educator and former President of ANHNA. Citrin was the driving force behind the establishment of the local scholarships back in 2014. She passed away in February 2019, but her many volunteer efforts on the part of our community live on.

The Adrienne Citrin Memorial Higher Education Grant is intended to help students pay for food, clothing, books, or transportation during a school year. In the past, ANHNA has awarded grants of \$1000 to \$1,500 to qualified students. Preference will go to first-year students, but all continuing college, vocational, and graduate students may apply.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted school start dates and forced many to make changes in their educational plans. Be assured that ANHNA will work with eligible students to address any disruptions that impact the upcoming school year, so students are encouraged to submit applications now.

To apply for a grant a student needs to be a resident of the Town of Ancram and should already be accepted into an academic or vocational program that begins, or was scheduled to begin, in 2020. Students should submit an application with a letter describing their educational plans and the need for additional financial support, as well as documentation of college acceptance.

Interested students or parents should contact Mike Sturdivant at 518-329-6106 or Laura Ponkos at 518-329-2031, or email [ANHNAinfo@gmail.com](mailto:ANHNAinfo@gmail.com), for more information and for help in the application process. All communications will be kept strictly confidential.

**The application deadline is July 1, 2020.**



# Ancram's Biggest (and Most Historic) Employer Is Back to Work

By Marie-Claude Stockl

Following a two-month furlough to comply with NY State Covid-19 guidelines, all 70 employees of Schweitzer-Mauduit's Ancram Mill returned to work on May 20<sup>th</sup>. During the furlough, only 10 percent of employees were on site to provide security services and regulatory wastewater treatment.

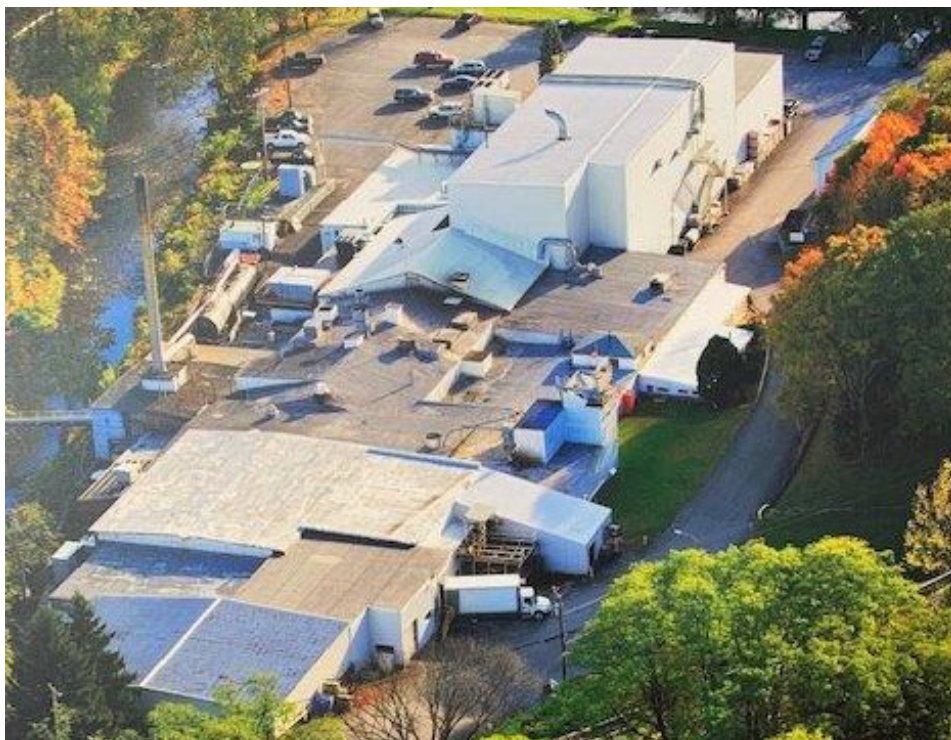
"Everyone was excited to come back to work," says Dwayne Hotaling, Plant Manager. "NY State has issued a series of very good guidelines, and everyone was fully trained before returning to work," he adds. New procedures include taking temperatures daily, asking about exposure to the virus, and drastically increased sanitation. To minimize employees clustering in large groups, the plant has also implemented staggered start times and lunch breaks.

Hotaling, who has been with the company for 33 years and in Ancram for 27 years, is quick to point out the added benefit of operating in a very expansive building which is open 24-hours a day, seven days a week. At most, only 35 people will be in the plant simultaneously. Given the size of the facility, this translates into 4,000 square feet per employee. Plenty of social distancing there!

## The Mill Now and Then

Although most area residents are familiar with the large paper mill complex situated off Route 82 on the way into Ancram's town center, not everyone is completely clear on what goes on inside. The Ancram Mill manufactures binders for cigars and reconstituted tobacco wrappers made from a pulp of mashed tobacco stems and other parts of the tobacco leaf that would otherwise go to waste.

The innovative processes still in use today were first introduced in the mid-1950s, earning the mill the reputation of being able to make any unique type of paper used in a smoking article.



*A view of the mill today, its varied roof lines a telltale sign of change over the years.*

The history of the Ancram Mill is a fascinating and rich one, dating back to pre-Revolutionary times when a member of the Livingston family founded an iron works on the banks of the Roeliff Jansen Kill in 1743. It was the first and only one of its kind in the New York Colony and thus lent prominence to the village. Four forges were built over a period of years, as well as a blast furnace and refinery forge that, at full operation, employed up to a 100 men in, according to one early account, the jobs of "colliers, teamsters, founders, and blacksmiths". The Ancram Iron Works produced carriage wheels, stoves, grates, bolts, wagon tires, pots, and kettles. Three iron mines and a local lead mine supported the iron works.

During the Revolutionary War, the iron works became a source of munitions for the Continental Army, producing cannon balls for artillery and, famously, the iron links for the great 75-ton chain that George Washington had stretched

across the Hudson River near West Point to prevent the British fleet from sailing up the Hudson River.

In 1854, after the iron works had changed hands several times, the furnace was demolished and a paper mill erected. An account written in 1878 by Captain Franklin Ellis in his book *History of Columbia County, New York*, provides a detailed description of the paper mill in the nineteenth century when it was owned by George Peaslee.

Ellis, noting that the mill consisted of a large main building flanked by a bleach room and machine room, writes: "The buildings are built of heavy cut stone and covered with slate roofs. They cost about \$50,000. The machines...are set upon iron beams, supported by iron columns, and turn out an aggregate of from twenty to twenty-five tons of wrapping-paper each week. The materials used are about thirty tons of straw, five or six tons of lime, and twenty tons of coal each week, and



employment is afforded for forty-five or fifty hands....In the bleach-room are eight boiling-tubs or vats, each having a capacity of four tons of straw, and the straw, after bleaching and washing is ground to pulp in six engines, the roll-bars of which are thirty-six inches in length. The real estate connected with the mill consists of about fifty acres, exclusive of the dam and water-privilege, and Mr. Peaslee owns about a dozen dwelling-houses, occupied mostly by his employees."

### A Bright Future Predicted

Hotaling remains optimistic about the future of the Ancram Mill. And why not? It has proved its resiliency and endurance over the centuries, and is the longest continually operating paper mill in the state. Hotaling notes that the cigar industry is having another resurgence worldwide. While half of the paper production in Ancram is destined for U.S. markets, the other half goes to cigar aficionados around the world. As its history reflects, the Ancram Mill has re-invented itself on more than one occasion over the last 275 years to suit the needs of the times, so Hotaling's optimism is well-grounded.

Anyone interested in the history of Ancram will enjoy reading *The Mill on the Roeliff Jansen Kill*, published in 1993 on the occasion of the mill's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and the source for much of this article.

For information or copies, write to the Roeliff Jansen Historical Society, Box 172, Copake Falls, NY 12517.

## Pivot, then Pivot Again; Local Food Suppliers in the Time of Covid-19

By Suzan Flamm

**T**here is no playbook for handling a once-in-a-century pandemic, at least not for food enterprises in and around Ancram. Fortunately, survival is possible – at least for those who see opportunities, react quickly, and adjust to change. After all, pandemic or no pandemic, people eat.

### The Pond

For Paige and Rob Castellano, new owners of the Pond Restaurant in Ancramdale, adapting to the Corona virus meant never opening as a full service, sit-down restaurant after sprucing up the interior. They married last year, then bought the Pond in early March, just a few weeks before New York State's lock-down order. While many restaurants shuttered, they decided to stay open, but reduced their menu options and prepared meals for takeout, with curbside delivery. To keep customers coming back, they made sure there were new choices every week. Rob handled all the cooking and dishwashing on

his own, while Paige managed the front. That included answering phones, scheduling customer arrivals at least five minutes apart to maintain social distancing and changing gloves for every delivery. "It's stressful," Paige admits, "but I'm very organized."

The Castellanos turned to social media to get the word out, and quickly accepted Supervisor Art Basin's offer to distribute their weekly menu to the town's email list. Business has been busy and now they have two on staff to help. "We are grateful for the town's support," Rob says. Even their neighbors pitched in, he said, fixing the potholes in the driveway to smooth the way for curbside pick-up, and filling their planters with flowers.

The Castellanos, in turn, found a way to support the town. Neighbors Helping Neighbors is a local organization that manages Ancram's weekly

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*New owners Rob and Paige Castellano are working hard to keep The Pond in operation with curbside pick-ups and a changing menu.*



## FOOD SUPPLIERS

(Continued from page 5)

food pantry for Township residents. “They called me and asked how they could help,” explains Jack Lindsay, a co-chair of NHN. “I let them know what we were having trouble finding – one week it was spaghetti, the next ground beef – and they included those items on their vendor orders then donated them to us. For Memorial Day weekend they sent us supplies for all our families to make barbeques. They’ve been great.”

With businesses starting to reopen, the Castellanos are thinking about what comes next. But, even when the state allows it, they will not be seating patrons inside or on their porch, at least for now. They anticipate that their customers, many elderly, will not want to be in a restaurant. Unfortunately, the only way to the porch is through the building. They also have their own concerns. “It’s scary. We don’t want to be the place that causes another outbreak,” Rob says. And, their seven-year-old son has asthma. Since they live on the premises, that has to be a factor in their decisions. “So,” Paige says cheerfully, “it’s the to-go model for the foreseeable future.”

### Copake General Store

For Seung Suh, a resident of Ancramdale and the owner of the Copake General Store since 2017, recent events unexpectedly prompted a return to her original business vision. She planned on a market when she opened the General Store but found that her customers wanted more in the way of prepared foods. So, she operated a café at the back with made-to-order sandwiches and a ready-to-go selection. Then the pandemic hit.

There was an initial “freak-out,” Seung notes, but her prior life as a news producer made her “battle ready.” And, if this was a battle, Seung “never felt she had to retreat.” She asked herself: “What do I have to do to keep the business and community alive?” The answer was to grow the market and downsize the café –



*Seung Suh and husband Bob Caccamise are keeping the community supplied with produce and prepared foods during the pandemic.*

and to avoid committing to one way of doing anything. She tries hard to stock the shelves with the things people need in a quarantine, thinking about what she needs, because if she needs it probably others do too. “My customers rely on me and I am grateful that I can provide. They have been incredibly supportive.”

The offerings at the café are now limited to pre-made sandwiches and a few “grab and go” items, things that do not keep customers in the store for long, so that exposure to others is reduced. Safety concerns were also behind other changes, like cutting back on hours to limit interactions.

Seung feels lucky to be in the Hudson Valley where there is a direct source to locally grown food, adding that “the farms will be our life-line for the summer.” Business has been more than steady, Seung notes, with a robust March and April, which are “usually dead.” She recently re-opened on Sundays to accommodate demand, although does not expect to allow seating in the store

for the next few months. Now Seung is sensing that she may have to evolve one more time. “My customers have been doing their own cooking for months. They want prepared foods again.”

### The Farmer’s Wife

The Farmer’s Wife, a café and catering business in Ancramdale, has been in operation since 2002. Emilie Sommerhoff, whose mother started the business, directs operations there while her husband, Job Yacubian, leads the kitchen.

The pandemic brought the catering side of their business to a halt, and with it a large revenue loss. “All the weddings have been rescheduled to 2021. Foundations that had events planned cancelled.” Whether and how catering comes back is a “big mystery” Emilie admits. Some on her staff are concerned about working parties. Besides, “how do you serve fifty plus people and maintain social distancing?”

Thankfully, she said, the Farmer's Wife was already handling take-out orders, and was equipped to do more. They doubled down on their prepared foods and spread the word that they were open for curbside pick-up and were even making home deliveries of large orders on Fridays. A new menu goes up on their website every week and Art Bassin distributes it on the town's email list. Emilie has also increased their Instagram activity. All that, in combination with the usual word-of-mouth, reaches the regulars, as well as the new arrivals from New York City escaping the virus. The take-out business has been brisk.

"Major anxiety" is how Emilie describes her feelings about the future, but, at the same time, she and Job are preparing to adjust if catering is slow to come back, or if patrons are not comfortable sitting inside, no matter what the state allows. Thinking about the many customers who arrive by bike, they are fixing up their backyard space with a new lawn so they can add to their outdoor seating. And, without the demands of catering, Job has time to think about new offerings, such as a pig roast, or *Asado style dishes*.

In the meantime, Emilie is energized by the gratitude conveyed by her customers, all thankful that they have a place to go for prepared meals.

"Job and I feel pretty lucky to be open at all right now," Emilie acknowledges. They are expressing it by donating ten percent of their profits from sales on June 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> to Neighbors Helping Neighbors. They plan to do the same with the Northeast Community Center, a program provider based in Millerton.

### Herondale Farm

The challenge for Jerry Peele, a one-time investment banker who owns and operated Herondale Farm in Ancramdale, was not a loss of business, but an increase. Peele runs a store at the farm where he sells grass-fed beef and lamb, and pasture-raised chicken and pork, all raised on the farm. Demand went up for his products as soon as the lock-down began. There were more people in the area – the recent arrivals from New York City – and they had no choice but to cook at home more than usual. He initially kept the store open, on Saturdays, but was not comfortable with having

people inside the building. So, he put his entire inventory online, required pre-payment on the website, and set up a large refrigerator in front of the store for pick-up. That allowed buyers to stop by for purchases at their convenience, seven days a week, with no need to enter the store.

While the pandemic drove home chefs to the farm's website, it had the opposite effect on his restaurant customers. That business "totally collapsed," Peele says, "when many restaurants closed". Fortunately, this loss was more than made up by the additional retail sales.

His local customers have been grateful and encouraging. "The role of the community is very important," Peele notes. "I wanted the products to be available and affordable to the people who live here, not just to visitors from the city." For that reason, many of the wholesale-size products he had sold to restaurants are now available to consumers, at the restaurant price.

The new online model is working so well that, looking forward, Peele plans on making it a permanent feature of his business. As to his new customers, many from Brooklyn, he will be happy to transition them to CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) subscriptions when they return home. He already makes deliveries to two locations in the borough to serve his current city-based CSA members.

### The Stissing House

The eighteenth-century dining room at Stissing House in Pine Plains, with its dark tones, wood paneling and period furnishings, once beckoned diners to take a seat, order a glass of wine and enjoy the French cuisine. Not anymore. "Now it looks like a storeroom," laughs Patricia Jean, who has owned the restaurant and catering business with her husband Michel for the last fifteen years. "We've got to-go containers and pizza boxes everywhere."



*Emily Somerhoff and husband Job Yacubian are adding a grassy outdoor space for diners to relax in safely while enjoying their meal.*

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## LOCAL FOOD SUPPLIERS

*(Continued from page 7)*

Like others, rather than shutting their doors when the state disallowed indoor restaurant seating, the Jeans, residents of Ancramdale, pivoted to take-out. While they had filled the occasional to-go order in the past, the increase brought challenges. For one thing, locating eco-friendly, non-leaking, take-out containers was not easy.

Another stressor was finding specific items at the local grocery store when Michel, the chef, ran out of something in the kitchen. They could no longer count

on it being in stock. And, everyone seemed to want orders filled at the same time, 6 P.M. That was not possible, but their customers have all been accommodating. With Michel doing most of the cooking, and two on staff to help fill orders, they are managing an active take-out business, and have even opened one additional night, Wednesdays, to handle demand.

The community, Patricia says, has been very supportive, with some buying gift cards if they are not comfortable ordering food prepared outside their home.

A Pine Plains resident organized a drive to raise funds for local restaurant workers and included owners when she distributed the proceeds. The Jeans “gave it

back” by cooking for a local food pantry, Willow Roots-Sacred Ways in Pine Plains.

They also give healthcare workers and emergency service providers a twenty percent discount on their orders.

Patricia deals with the uncertainties of the future by not thinking about it too much. “Twenty-five to fifty percent occupancy in our restaurant won’t make it,” she says candidly. “We need a full weekend.”

She also worries that the virus may change the feel of restaurant dining for months to come. “People may not want to come back,” she says. “Take-out is working, but it doesn’t feel like the restaurant business. I miss human contact.” Don’t we all!



*Heather Thyberg and Tracie Herrmann, server and bartender at Stissing House, bring their skills outdoors to serve patrons in the new outdoor seating area.*



# Who's Who in Town Hall

## Part II

Last year the Town News inaugurated this feature to profile the people who make Ancram run. In Part I (Winter 2019) we highlighted Animal Control, the Town Clerk, and the Building Department. Here are three more.

### Highway Department Superintendent: Jim Miller

*By Bobbie Slonevsky*

Would you have guessed that compact little Ancram has 55 miles of town road? And each and every one of those miles is Jim Miller's responsibility.

He and his crew have to keep the road-side trees trimmed and the grass mowed, fix the potholes and heaves, repave when indicated, de-ice in freezing temperatures and plow when the snow flies (under a special contract, he is also charged with plowing County Routes 8 and 8A). For the 15–16 miles of dirt roads, there's periodic regrading and adding gravel. And then there are the special problems: high winds that blow trees onto the road and heavy rainstorms that wash debris into pipes and drainage ditches. All his to remedy.

Of course, the help of his crew is invaluable. Jim oversees four MEOs (mechanical equipment operators) and a part-timer who mows and maintains the lawn at Town Hall and the ballfield. No doubt you've seen (and, hopefully, appreciated) Barry Hay, Avery Heath, Brian Ingles, Thomas Miller and José Ayala as they move about the area doing their jobs.

Jim has been at the highway helm since 2016. He was definitely prepared for the post, he says, even in one way that surprised him.

"I spent several years on the Town Board. Also, I've lived here all my life." The resultant benefit is an important one; as he sardonically describes: "I just know stuff." Indeed, one of the things he knows is dealing with weather. "I was a



*Highway Department Superintendent Jim Miller and Crew keep Ancram's roads operational no matter what Mother Nature throws their way.*

farmer at Millerhurst for 60 years. When I left, fighting with Mother Nature was something I thought I had escaped." No such luck. Unexpectedly, weather is still Jim's constant nemesis. But a lifetime of reacting to nature's agenda has served him (and us) well at the Highway Department.

Another similarity to farming—the job can be 24/7. Jim explains that he can hardly take a drive around town without casting a professional eye as he goes. In fact, at least once a week, he inspects every single one of the town's 57 roads, including 17 dead-ends. And then there are the calls in the middle of the night for a downed tree, or the early morning inspections in winter to make sure the roads are safe for the school buses.

Still, Jim confides, he finds the work satisfying. He likes interacting with the public (although it sometimes requires a thick skin). He's very serious about making sure the department's money is spent wisely, and he likes trying to make things better. Two years ago, he

points out, the Town decided to invest in radar signs to help control driving speeds. The signs were designed to be stationary. But, he decided, that limited their utility. His idea was to put them on trailers so they were portable—and consequently they shame us into safe speeds when and where we least expect it.

In the end, highway maintenance is largely about safety. Jim keeps our roads in good condition, and it's up to us to do *our* part. "Drive carefully and be courteous," he counsels. Good advice from our highway pro.

### Town Historian: Robin Massa Assistant Town Historian: Clara Van Tassel

*By Cathy Redlich*

Robin Massa, Ancram's Town Historian, is quick to point out that, without her predecessor and good friend Clara Van Tassel agreeing to stay on as

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## WHO'S WHO PART II

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Assistant Historian, the job would be a daunting one. “Clara was Ancram’s historian for more than 25 years, and her knowledge of our community is invaluable to me,” Massa said as the two sat on Clara’s breezy front porch. Van Tassel, in turn, praised her own long-term predecessor, Ethel Miller, who persuaded Clara to succeed her. “I think Ethel asked me to take on the position of historian because of my deep Ancram roots. I was born here, grew up here, briefly left to attend nursing school, then married a Hillsdale boy”—Van Tassel pauses in mock horror-- “and we raised our family here. My husband Ron worked for Kimberly-Clark, which then owned the Ancram paper mill, for 37 years.” Van Tassel’s roots extend even deeper, to her mother (a Vosburgh) and her father (a Boice), who were born in Ancram in the 1800s.



*Town Historian Robin Massa works to ensure that Ancram's history is preserved into the future*

Massa also grew up in Ancram and attended the two-room schoolhouse on Route 7 that was in operation from the 1840s to the 1960s. Massa recalls, as a very young child, her grandmother telling her stories about past generations and emphasizing how important it was to *remember* one's family history. "Unfortunately, her stories rolled off me like water on a duck's back," Massa says, laughing, "but when my own daughter



*Assistant Town Historian  
Clara Van Tassel*

had a family genealogy project at school, I became fascinated. Once you find out who your ancestors are, you then want to know exactly where they lived, and what they did for a living, and the everyday details of their lives. And suddenly you are immersed in history."

The position of Town Historian is one of preservation and stewardship, a responsibility that has been made easier by the department now having a designated office at Town Hall to store artifacts, which number in the hundreds. "We feel very grateful to have our own space rather than storing items in our homes as prior town historians had to do," Massa explains. "When people donate something of historical note, they want to know that it will be catalogued and safeguarded. We have a strict policy of not lending out any materials, but we are always happy to have people make an appointment to come in and go through items of interest to them." Those artifacts include photographs, old clippings, books, articles, marriage and birth certificates, genealogies, and other objects reflecting life in Ancram and its hamlets in past centuries.

One treasure trove of information was collected by a town resident and schoolteacher named Marjorie Miller who, during the 1950s and 60s, spent hours in the county courthouse and local libraries researching the births, marriages and deaths of Ancram, Copake and Hillsdale residents, then painstakingly recorded and cross-referenced the information on 5 x 7 index cards. Ms. Miller also

collected and studied maps of the area. She was not one to share the fruits of her meticulous research, but when she went into a nursing home, the county historical society was given access to her collection and invited Ancram's Town Historian to participate in reviewing the material, some of which was given to Ancram to be included in its collection.

Resources such as these are often the result of the particular-- or some might say peculiar-- passions of individual history buffs, but have proved invaluable when Robin or Clara field calls from people seeking to trace their own family roots. "We were very lucky to get a portion of Marjorie's materials," Massa says, "including her correspondence with people wanting information about their own families and her responses to them." Another early Ancram resident, Peter Silvernail, conducted research during the 1890s into Ancram families, and his work was transcribed and edited in the 1990s by genealogist Arthur C.M. Kelly, who published Silvernail's work under the title *Southern Columbia County, New York families: a genealogy*. This is just one of the books in Ancram's collection available to peruse.

When asked to describe a few of their favorite artifacts, the two friends pause to mentally review the items in their keeping. Of special significance to Massa are two “signature quilts”, one in red and one in blue. These are coverlets made up of embroidered squares, each square containing the names of local families or individuals and often including a decorative motif such as a flower or windmill. *(See photo below).*



*An embroidered square from a “signature quilt” preserved in the town’s archives*



Robin believes that these coverlets were created and raffled off to raise money for a local church or school. Robin notes that one of the quilts contains the carefully embroidered names of her grandfather and great-uncle, Edward and William Roche.

Van Tassel is fond of a school banner created by schoolchildren in one of Ancram's districts at the turn of the last century. In the 1800s and early 1900s, she explains, there were many one-room schoolhouses within Ancram so that children would be able to walk to school.

Although faded, the lettering on the banner, encircled by a wreath of roses and wildflowers, can still be plainly read: "Knowledge and Liberty Is Our Motto/ Ancram District No. 8". The District 8 schoolhouse still stands, now a private residence off of Route 82 between Ancramdale and Route 199.

"And then, of course," Van Tassel mentions casually, "we have the coat of Alonzo Cook." Is that a gleam in her eye?

Alonzo Cook? A Revolutionary War soldier perhaps?

"Oh no," responds Robin. "Poor Alonzo was murdered right here in Ancram by a man who claimed to be a travelling sea captain, except he wasn't really a sea captain." She pauses, "But that's a story for another day." Or another article in our next issue. Stay tuned!

### **Assessor: René DeLeeuw**

*By Bobbie Slonevsky*

"Why would anyone want to interview an assessor?" René wanted to know. "It's akin to interviewing the IRS."

Point taken. But, in the course of our conversation, he answered his own question. According to René, the biggest problem he faces as assessor is that people do not understand what he does and how he does it. So, let the explaining begin.

Obviously the town and county and fire district and school district need funds to provide all the services residents expect from them. A major source of revenue is taxes. Now, no one likes taxes. Still,



*René DeLeeuw, Town Assessor  
(and goat farmer)*

you'd like them a lot less if you thought they were arbitrary or unfair...if your neighbor with a house almost identical to yours paid less than you, or if the basis for your tax payment was a wildly inflated valuation of your home.

Enter René! It's his job not only to assess the value of property (both vacant land and land with structures on it), but to make sure that that assessment is scrupulously correct. Every four or five years, a complete reappraisal of the town is carried out. That means every single building and property is reviewed and photographed. The particulars are then sent to all owners for them to check. The verified details are applied against a mathematical model in order to calculate updated values.

Okay, but how would René know the model and updated values are correct? The yardstick, he explains, is "how close the assessment is to market value." And to make that determination, he would check the newly assessed values against actual sales data. If they were off, appropriate adjustments would be made, and that would be the end of his responsibility. From there, the county, town, fire district and school district

decide on the tax rate to be levied per \$1,000 of value.

It may sound complicated, but René is an old hand. Although he just assumed the part-time Ancram post in October 2019, replacing Ken Leggett, he has been the assessor for Gallatin for 26 years. The two communities are fairly similar, he notes. And so are the skills required for the two jobs. Clearly the assessor has to be good with numbers. Yet he can't be a numbers nerd. Part of the job, actually the part René likes best, is interacting with the public.

"Sometimes people come in angry... loaded for bear," René says. They claim the numbers on the building permit are not consistent with their new assessment. Or they think, erroneously, that they did the work on their renovation themselves and are therefore exempt from changes in valuation. That's when communication and consideration are key. "I like answering questions and helping people to understand."

What's more, he admits, the numbers crunching is not always black and white. There are gray areas and "if I can make the assessment more fair within the prescribed guidelines, I will." Bottom line: people usually leave the premises mollified.

One might speculate where René gets this talent for conciliation. At the end of the interview he let drop that his main line of work has always been, and still is, goat dairy farming. Could he have learned to deal with contentiousness courtesy of his animal friends? Or does empathy and a desire to make things fair just come naturally? In the end, it doesn't matter. The point is: Do you not understand your new valuation? Do you think the numbers are wrong? Don't stew about it and don't, René insists, wait until Grievance Day (the fourth Tuesday in May) to air your complaint. Look up his office hours on the Ancram website and go see him. You'll probably leave Town Hall satisfied.



Local  
Postal Customer

## A Note from the Editor

The Ancram Town News is now being delivered directly to every Ancram resident's mailbox!

We have heard from many residents that they were not even aware that Ancram had a Town News, which in the past was largely distributed online through the town email or left at drop-off points such as the Farmer's Wife. As a result, a portion of the community was not receiving it.

If you do not have an Ancram, Ancramdale, or Boston Corner address, or are not currently on the town email distribution list, you can still read the Town News online by contacting Town Supervisor Art Bassin at [abassin@townofancram.org](mailto:abassin@townofancram.org) and having your email added to the list.

If you missed past issues, they are all posted on the Ancram website at [www.ancramny.org/newsletters/](http://www.ancramny.org/newsletters/) and hard copies are in the vestibule of town hall.

The Town News is a completely volunteer effort, so if you enjoy writing or have an article idea that you would like our reporters to pursue, let us know at [AncramTownNews@gmail.com](mailto:AncramTownNews@gmail.com) or call Cathy Redlich at 518-329-4002.



*Customers can now safely pick up Herondale meats ordered online and stored in the "Big Silver Fridge" outside the store.*