

# This Week in Saratoga County History

## The Jonesville Methodist Church Clambakes

Submitted by John L. Scherer September 3, 2020

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*Jonesville Methodist Church Annual Labor Day Clambake, September 4, 1922*

*(part of a larger panoramic view)*

Clambakes were very popular during the early years of the twentieth century. Family and community bakes attracted large gatherings. A huge clambake sponsored by the Jonesville Methodist Church was a Labor Day tradition in that historic hamlet for over 65 years. Church members and others from the community pitched in to serve as many as 600 people. The Jonesville bakes were famous and anticipated every year.

The first clambake occurred in 1896. The church was in need of funds, and it was decided that a clambake would be a good fund raiser.

The following year, "Stone Bakes" were started, and they were henceforth held in the church yard. A hole was dug for the bake. It was at first square, 8 by 8 feet, but to facilitate caring for the fire and handling the food, it was later dug 6 by 13 feet. The pit was lined with two to three loads of hard new stones, creating an oven for the bakes. After the stones have been used they

lose their ability to hold the heat, so each year the stones had to be taken away after the bake and the new ones found for the next year.

Preparations for the clambake began in June, and in July officers were elected to be in charge of the event. By the middle of August two cords of hard wood had been purchased and drawn to the Church lawn where the hole was dug for the bake. On Saturday before Labor Day the tables were erected, tents put up, chicken cut, wrapped in cheese cloth and pre-cooked, cooled and put in refrigerators. Canners, wash boilers and large kettles to hold the coffee were collected from the neighborhood.

Monday morning at 5 A.M., the bakers started the fire in the pit. The Jonesville fire truck was parked close by. The fire leapt high and made the stones hot. By 9 A.M. the tables were set and ready for the foods to be placed. The clams were all inspected and washed and the corn was husked. The wire baskets which were cleaned the week before were now filled. First the baskets of clams, next white and sweet potatoes, then the sausage, next the chicken wrapped in cheese-cloth, then the lobster, and last the corn.

The baskets were then placed in the pit, covered with white muslin over which was spread a clean canvas. Green corn stalks covered this. Then all was sealed in with 6 inches of sand, and the oven was closed for a 2 hour baking. At 2 P.M. everyone crowded around the pit for the opening, and the bakes were brought to the tables. These clambakes could raise as much as \$1100 for the church.

Rain affected the clambakes on at least three occasions. One year the tables were moved into the Sunday school room and church carriage sheds. Another time, after the sheds were torn down, the Bake was served in the I.O.O.F. Hall and in the Fire Hall. In 1949, guests sat under the trees with the water running into their plates and down their necks!

For several years two bakes were served, one at 12 noon, and the other at 2 P.M. However, this meant that the dishes had to be washed and the tables reset. One year 600 were served. Over the years there were a few near disasters. Once the chicken soured, and once the clams had to be replaced because they were too long in transit. One year it rained Saturday and Sunday, and the wood was too wet to burn right, and nothing finished cooking.

Because these clambakes were so labor intensive and time consuming, the last one was held about 1965. However, many fond memories exist among the older residents of Jonesville: those who served the tables, made the biscuits, the cabbage, the ice cream (which was made by the women of the church and stored in the cellar of the parsonage overnight), dressed the chicken, or built the fire. At one time the food was all bought individually and each person brought their donation to the church kitchen. One person recalled when bake tickets were only one dollar.

The days of the Jonesville clambake are preserved in photographs, including a panoramic view taken in 1922. Fortunately there are also early movies of the clambake taken by the late Ken

Noyes of Jonesville. Ken (who arrived in Jonesville in 1914 at age 10), and his wife Lydia, assisted with many of the clambakes, and have shared many of their memories - of a time when a whole community came together to sponsor the famous Jonesville Clambake.