

Van Auken Brothers, Levi and Henry in the Revolution

From Albany Hilltowns

HELLEBERG WOMEN SHARED PERILS OF TIME, SAYS GREG

"They Also Serve who Only Stand and Wait"—Tales of the Van Aukens
(Tenth Article on Local History by Arthur B. Gregg)

In the valley of the Bozenkill where the road begins its long and steep ascent to Settle's Hill, a farm spreads out on either side of the little stream. Now owned by Mr. Strange, (in 1933) it has been successively known as the Stilwell place, the Joseph Snyder place, the Dutcher farm on the maps of 1865, and in the early days, the Van Auken place.

Two Van Auken brothers, Henry and Levi, settled on this farm a short time before the Revolution. The first summer was spent in the erection of quite a large log cabin and a few outbuildings, and in the clearing of the woods. They cut down with aid of the neighbors nearly forty acres of heavy woods, most of which was very large hard maples. This was left as it fell until the next summer, when it was set on fire and burned for months.

The log house had several rooms on the ground floor, and above one large room which was called a "barrack." The first winter, wolves were so plentiful and on account of a deep snow so ravenous that one of the men had to sleep in the "barrack" which had a small window looking out on a sheep pen nearby, and, with his gun, protect the few sheep they had managed to procure.

At the outbreak of the Revolution both brothers became very decided "rebels" and when the local company of militia was organized, they both joined, Levi being appointed as lieutenant,

Naturally they were called from home with their company very frequently. In a previous article we have shown that the lieutenant was present at Schoharie in the Old Stone or Lower Fort in 1778, but recorded as Lt. Levi Van Acker. At such times they had to leave their wives and children at the mercy of the local Tories. When the weather permitted the woman and children slept in the woods, and the children seemed to sense the peril of their situation, for it was related afterward that once in the forest, never an outcry was heard from them.

When the men were absent on winter evenings, it was the custom of one of the women to always take an axe to bed with her for protection. But on a certain night when they were alone, the cabin was surrounded by a group of Tories dressed as Indians, who raised their war whoops, pounded their gun butts on a large flag stone in front of the door, fired their guns, and made a terrific din – all of which time the women were clutching each other in a frenzy of fear. After they had departed, the one asked the other, "What about the axe?" The other replied: "Oh, I forgot all about it."

Early one morning when they were again alone, one of the women was churning in the open cellar way, as it was then summer time and this was a cool place. While she churned away, some noise caused her to look up, and there was an exceedingly large Indian dressed and painted in all the panoply of war, with gun in hand and tomahawk at belt. He pointed to his mouth and made motions to indicate he was hungry and wanted something to eat. As she related it afterward, "I dropped my churning right there and hustled everything I could find in the house on the table for him to eat, but all he seemed to want was 'buttermilk pop,' and never before have I seen one person who could eat as much as that big Indian."

Lieut. Van Auken was the owner of a large coal black stallion, of which he was very proud, and both ride and horse were present in Schoharie valley at the time of the Johnson-Brant raid. Late in the afternoon of that day the commander of the Stone Fort where Van Auken and the company of the Normanskill militia were stationed, determined to send Van Auken on account of his fine horse to Albany for aid. Others had already been dispatched on the same errand. He started out and according to tradition, must have traveled the old Schoharie Road until just below West Township, where the road turned to the left and ran down into the Bozenkill valley past his home. Here he took time to rest for a moment. The woman folks sort of jested and made light of his excitement and haste. "Don't be so sure," he said, "the British and Indians are apt to be right HERE tonight."

He arrived in Albany with the news of Johnson's raid, a company of mounted troops was assembled, and at daybreak were as far back on the road to Schoharie as what is now the Bunker (Bancker) Hill bridge.

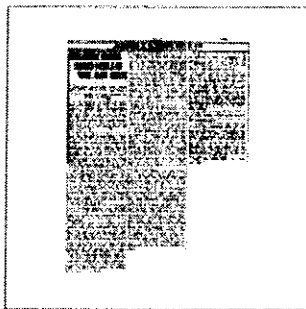
That cold October night, however, the family took some blankets and went up a distance along the "Bozie" to a deserted pig pen and there slept to avoid the "Raiders." As they trembled and huddled together for protection, their terror was increased by the awful glare in the sky of the burning crops and buildings that lay in the wake of Johnson and his bloodthirsty red allies, throughout the length and breadth of the Schoharie valley.

These are the tales of the wife of Levi Van Auken, as told to her grand-daughter and by her passed on to her grandchildren.

I wonder if we even partially appreciated the hardships that the women and children of those early days endured for the sake of freedom. All honor to those brave and loyal women of the Helleberg. And if some worthy marker should be placed at the mounds of Levi and Henry Van Auken in their little farm graveyard, we cannot help but think too of the women who lie beside them.

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Henry Van Auken was the father, and Levi Van Auken the uncle, of David Van Auken, who transferred Lot 065-K in Knox on March 8, 1836, to his son, David Van Auken, Jr. Both Davids lived in the house now known as 66 Beebe Road in Knox.



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