

about 20 years ago

A Legacy from Rufus

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Much can be learned about a workman from the tools he used and passed down to succeeding generations.

For many years I have had an interest in the tools of the trades and crafts. At times it almost seems that a small part of the original owners, though long gone, still survives through the worn implements they once used. It is as if they have never quite loosened their grip on that which was once theirs.

A most remarkable example of this recently occurred at 66 Cliff Street in Canajoharie. I was taken to this house by Maurice Laug, its owner. The dwelling was built for a man whose name had been familiar to me for well over 50 years. Since the house was built more than 100 years ago, it has been occupied by several families.

Would anyone expect that after all those years the original owner would still have a presence there? I am not a believer in ghosts or specters, but I do believe that we all, at times, feel a kinship with those who have gone before us. I know that I did in that house.

It seemed as if someone was saying, "I walked these streets, lived here, looked from these windows and climbed these attic stairs." The old man may have been saying "you are a collector just like I once was. Have you found that material link with my life that I left for you? Have you found it yet?"

He may well have said, "Do you remember me? I am Prof. Rufus Alexander Grider."

Mr. Laug and I roamed through the house. I asked if it was possible that in the cellar or the attic there still might remain something that had once belonged to Rufus Grider. We climbed the attic stairs and found the usual accumulation laid away for the day when they might be needed

again. All seemed to be of a recent vintage. Mr. Laug said, "I wonder if this could have belonged to Grider," as he pointed to a wooden object sitting in a dark corner.

I said that knowing Grider's avocation that he might have put his name on it. There it was in bold printing, R.A. Grider 1860. The object was a hand-made easel. There could not have been a more personal tool for Rufus Grider, since he was an artist. Yes, Rufus, we did find that which you left for us over 100 years ago.

My first meeting with Rufus Grider, so to speak, was in the mid-1930s, when I first saw some of his drawings at the Van Alstyne house in Canajoharie. I remember asking my Great Uncle George Shineman if he knew who Rufus Grider was. His reply was, "sure I know who he was, he was my art teacher." Uncle George had graduated from Canajoharie school in 1894.

Through the years I have had other brief touches with Rufus. He was a very prolific artist. Much of his work dealt with the history of the Mohawk Valley. In addition to more than 1,000 of his drawings, which are in the New York State Library, there are others at Van Alstyne house and others in collections, both public and private. Upon seeing a photo of one of the drawings at the state library it became apparent that I knew that location very well. The drawing was of a Silvernail House that he had re-created on paper even though it had been long gone. The house once stood in our pasture, and I had driven the cows past that depression many times and had wondered what once stood on that cellar.

Another brush with Grider came last summer when a friend here in Stone Arabia said she wanted to give me an historical paper since she did not know who else might like it. It turned out to be a typewritten essay on early transportation that Grider had done on March 1, 1897. I had

read the material in other sources, but imagine my surprise and delight when I found that sandwiched between its pages was an original Grider watercolor of a Durham boat on the Mohawk.

Possibly one of the most unusual touches I have had with Rufus Grider was a few years ago when I decided to purchase a cemetery lot.

It was my desire to have a common glacier boulder put on the lot. It did not seem to me that with all of man's cutting and polishing often done that he had improved on the stone that nature had made in the first place. I chose a lot shaded by large oaks in the far back of Canajoharie Falls Cemetery. I had been told that many cemeteries now would not allow a lot owner to place a common stone on their lot. I looked for others already there. It turned out that the huge boulder next to the place I had chosen was inscribed "Rufus Grider." Probably few local people know who Grider was, or where his last resting place is.

Rufus Grider was born at Lititz, PA, on April 13, 1817. He came to Canajoharie in 1883 and became a teacher of drawing and art from 1883 to 1889. Grider died in his 84th year on Feb. 7, 1900. One paragraph from his obituary in the Canajoharie Courier of February 13, 1900, is as follows: "But few children there are in our village who did not know and love Prof. Grider and delight in the attention he paid them. But few, if any, there are of the older ones who did not admire and esteem this fine old gentleman, one whose character was above reproach and disposition beyond censure."

Yes, Rufus, we do remember you. Your historical art survives you. One of the most important tools you owned has been brought to light from the resting place where you put it more than a century ago.