

## *Prologue*

### **Tackling the Tale of William H. Miner: Man and Myth**

The life of William H. Miner, who lived from 1862 to 1930, offers a classic case of the American mobility myth. That myth made the egalitarian ideal of our country still seem believable after the great divide between rich and poor left by the Gilded Age of the 1890s. William Miner's life, along with others, held the hope that at least a few could still make it from poverty to prosperity, and those few could keep alive the dwindling faith that success in the United States could still depend "not on who you were but on what you could do." His story has a message for our own era, when the gap between rich and poor has again widened. Once more, we hear appeals to mobility myths to convince us that our national ideal of self-made success still survives.

William Miner, the man, made a natural American hero at the beginning of what became the American century. He embodied the quintessential American beliefs of the early twentieth century, ideals that linger to our day but may be wearing away. Aldo Leopold, the early twentieth-century environmentalist, could have used William Miner as a model when he defined the unique characteristics of American culture:

[V]igorous individualism, combined with ability to organize, a certain intellectual curiosity bent to practical ends, a lack of subservience to stiff social forms, and an intolerance of drones.... These...are the indigenous part of our Americanism, the qualities that set it apart as a new rather than an imitative contribution to civilization.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Roderick Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought: 1917-1930*. Chicago, 1970, 85

2. See, for example, Jo-Ellen Matusik, "North Country Santa," *New York Alive*, November/December 1988, or Bruce Rowland, "Millionaire returns to his roots on Chazy Farm," *Press Republican*, May 18, 1982.

## Still Relevant Today

The life of William Miner speaks to us today because he, too, lived in trying times. It spanned two great trials of our country, beginning amid the Civil War and ending during the Great Depression. He also saw economic and social changes sweep away our country's certainties. Unfettered business transformed the national economy but created a disastrous depression. The gap between rich and poor widened into a chasm. Social mores shifted from Victorian values to the Jazz Age of "anything goes." William Miner applauded the laissez-faire economy but fought to preserve the traditional values that he believed had made the United States great. He witnessed the decline of rural life and the yeoman farmer of Anglo-Saxon stock that dominated our early history. He saw the rise of massive cities, teeming with new and strange immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and the Far East, living in dense tenements and working in dismal factories.

William Miner clung to Victorian values and tried to save the virtues of rural life by bringing the wonders of technology and management to Chazy, Clinton County, and the Champlain Valley, in the northeast corner of New York State, as a model for the country. He followed the course of all great conservatives, conserving what he could by changing what he must. He sought to make rural life both profitable and pleasing to save country values and its youth from the lure of city living. William Miner called for a United States that could be both American and inclusive of immigrants — a plea pertinent to us today.

His life also revealed the conflict inherent in the environmental movement between the demands for producing ever more energy and the desire to preserve the natural environment. He criticized our nation as the despoiler of its greatest natural resources, yet dammed rivers and streams to produce the power required for the technology to improve farming and rural life—without realizing the damage done to the ecosystem. He wanted a Champlain Valley not just lovely to look at for tourists but desirable to live in for residents. For him, combining hydropower and environmental preservation presented a challenge, not a choice. His life offers more than the glimpse into the lives of the citizens of a remote northeast corner of New York State in an age long gone. It affords a look at the dreams and fears of Americans that still seem strangely similar a century later.

Great businessmen and philanthropists lived and worked in William Miner's day—Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller, and others. But they lived on such a high plane and gave on such a grand scale that their lives tell us little about the dreams and fears of everyday Americans, especially in rural areas. They gave much more money than William Miner but spread their philanthropies across the entire country, even the world, while he maximized the impact of his smaller gifts by confining them largely to a single county in the Champlain Valley.

William Miner did great things, but his hands-on approach to work, philanthropy, and life gives us an up-close look at American culture at a time of change, as rural life, once supreme in our country, lost out to the lure of the city.

## Champlain Valley Giant but No Biography

Though the life of William Miner tells us much about our country as a whole, his figure towers over the early twentieth-century history of New York State's Champlain Valley. There nestles that wondrous land with Lake Champlain and the Adirondack Mountains, where everyone wants to visit and only a few are lucky enough to live. William Miner devoted much of his life to preserving his beloved Champlain Valley by making life there easier to live. His portraits still hang today in the halls of the organizations he created or planned: the Chazy Central Rural School, the CVPH Medical Center, the Alice T. Miner Museum, and the William H. Miner Agricultural Research Institute.

When I came to Plattsburgh State University in 1973, after looking at those portraits and learning something of William Miner's accomplishments, I rushed to the campus library for a biography of this man who meant so much to Chazy, Clinton County, and the Champlain Valley. To my astonishment, no biography existed, and I resolved to write one. As is common with such resolves, pressures of work and other projects pushed the biography back for over thirty years. But I kept in close contact with two Miner creations. I became a trustee of the William H. Miner Agricultural Research Institute, chair of its Board of Directors, and a trustee of the William H. Miner Foundation, which still provides funds to the Chazy School, the Medical Center, and the Miner Institute. Helping to prepare for the centennial opening of the Heritage Exhibit of Heart's Delight Farm at the Miner Institute in 2003 revived my interest in William Miner. In 2006, I began research for the Miner biography and soon discovered why one had never been written.

It takes courage to write a biography of William Miner. The first challenge is that his range of talents and interests is daunting. He was agriculturist, builder, businessman, engineer, entrepreneur, educator, environmentalist, inventor, and philanthropist. Miner's multiple roles seemed to require a polymath to understand — much less describe and assess — the life of this multitasking marvel.

Not just the breadth but also the intensity of his activities frightened a prospective biographer. Unlike other philanthropists of his day, William Miner was a hands-on giver. He not only funded his projects but also built, directed and often managed them throughout his life from afar as he traveled the country by rail, selling his railroad appliances.

The timing of this range of activities presented a second challenge to a prospective biographer. William Miner performed all of these endeavors

simultaneously and not sequentially at separate stages in his life. This conventional man did remarkable things in unconventional ways. He built a leading railroad appliance company, with its headquarters in Chicago, and simultaneously constructed and managed a fifteen-thousand-acre model farm, a famous consolidated rural school, a state-of-the-art hospital, and a network of hydroelectric dams in the rural northeast corner of New York State. He managed all of these activities while shuttling back and forth by rail, with side trips to sell his railroad gear in Boston, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Montreal, and Toronto, with less frequent trips to the West. Although he traveled constantly around the country on business, he somehow found the time to write the lead essay for the issues of *Our Inheritance*, the Chazy Central Rural School magazine, and to become the most congenial of hosts for visitors from around the country and the world who came to see the wonders of Heart's Delight Farm.

His biography had to recount the messy flow of his incessant movement among his many projects at various points in time. It must not simply recite in separate chapters the unconnected stories of the business, farm, school, hospital, foundation, power projects, and museums. Yet telling the story of the adult life of William Miner chronologically — showing the simultaneous developments in the business, farm, school, hospital, dams, and other projects — appeared nearly as daunting as doing them. Still, as my wife, Joan, warned, a biography must be chronological, and emphatically so with William Miner. The wonder of him, she said, is how he did all these things so well, all at the same time. A true biography must tell it as William Miner lived it. Telling all William Miner's activities simultaneously and chronologically added still another challenge to a prospective biographer and suggests yet another reason why none had been done.

## **Austere Portraits and the Miner Myth**

In the end, explaining William Miner, the man, presented the greatest challenge to his biographer. William Miner, the man, had morphed over time into a North Country myth. Time and tales had layered the man with legends. Of course, both man and myth are important, for many historians now concede that what we believe happened in the past may prove more influential in our lives than what actually occurred. Still, a biographer, while recognizing the power of myths, must also reveal the man.

As I returned to those places that William Miner founded or planned and again looked at those portraits, I sensed one source of the Miner myth. Those portraits, like the one on the cover of this book, presented the only image of William Miner that most living residents of Chazy, Clinton County, and the Champlain Valley had ever seen or certainly remembered. Those images not only appeared on the walls of the school, hospital, museum, and institute, they often filled their publications and websites,

and nearly every magazine or newspaper account of his creations used those same portraits.

Those powerful pictures of a glaring William Miner, done late in his life, continually fuel the Miner myth. They suggest that he was always aged and assured, even arrogant, and never young and uncertain — as though he was always “Mr. Miner” or “W. H. Miner” and never Willie or Will or even William. That stern, white-haired icon with turned-down mouth and piercing eyes dares you to disagree. His look seems to say, “I know what to do and have the knowledge, skill, and most of all the will to make it work.” They depict not so much a man as a myth in the making, forgetting that the formal portraits of the day favored gravity and frowned on smiles.

The newspaper and popular accounts of William Miner — then and now — contribute to this myth by saying little about his life outside of Chazy and Clinton County. They mention that — after his mother died when he was four and his father when he was ten — he came to live with his aunt and uncle on the modest homestead founded by his grandfather in 1820. When Willie left at eighteen, the story again grows vague about his study, work, and business struggles, until his triumphant and inevitable return with “millions” to remake the land of his youth. They talk of his transformation of that modest homestead into a fairyland farm and of the building of the nationally renowned Chazy Central Rural School and the state-of-the-art Physicians Hospital.<sup>2</sup>

The newspaper and popular accounts suggest that only the life in Chazy, Clinton County, and the Champlain Valley mattered, by saying little or nothing about the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of Miner’s learning his craft, developing his patents, or building a leading railroad-appliance business in a competitive world with the likes of the Westinghouse and Cardwell companies. In these accounts, the Miner business becomes important only for the untold “millions” made. These stories make his successes seem so easy, almost trivial, without struggle.

---

<sup>2</sup> Roderick Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought: 1917-1930*. Chicago, 1970, 85

2. See, for example, Jo-Ellen Matusik, “North Country Santa,” *New York Alive*, November/December 1988, or Bruce Rowland, “Millionaire returns to his roots on Chazy Farm,” *Press Republican*, May 18, 1982.

## Scarce Secondary Sources but New Manuscript Materials

Historical records are always a source of anxiety and appeared, at first, to present yet another challenge to a Miner biographer. Their number and depth are never enough. The absence of full-fledged histories of Heart's Delight Farm, Chazy Central Rural School, Physicians Hospital, and the Alice T. Miner Museum, as well as the Miner Foundation, Miner Institute, and Miner businesses posed serious problems. Each of these organizations deserves a full history because of its fascinating past as well as its continuing importance.

In contrast, the doctoral dissertation by Warren Slocum on the creation of the Chazy Central Rural School became invaluable. One only wished it had been expanded into a full history of that wonderful school. A History of the Town of Chazy by Nell Sullivan and David Martin also provides a wealth of information. Nell Sullivan gathered materials while serving as Curator of the Alice T. Miner Museum and later as Chazy Town Historian that suggests she may have thought of doing a biography of William Miner but never did. Particular incidents in Miner-related activities in Chazy and Clinton County do receive attention, especially from Christina Parker, who writes insightfully about a number of interesting episodes; and Lawrence Gooley provides a fascinating book on Flat Rock, where Miner built his "million-dollar dam." Finally, James Dawson, Judith Heintz, Clifford Friedrichs, and Lawrence West present a welcome account of Miner's many hydroelectric projects.

Happily, the common belief that few manuscript materials existed on William Miner's activities, philanthropies, and businesses represented another of the Miner myths. On first glance, the manuscript records did seem slim. As often happens, much more material later surfaced after digging. It turned out that the Miner Institute had a wealth of letters, documents, maps, photographs, and drawings that recount and show the building of Heart's Delight Farm, the hydro projects, land purchases, and local legal problems, which had never been used. Like gold, these papers and pictures demanded digging, for some lay largely unnoticed in vaults, lofts, and basements at the Miner Institute.

David Withall, the current President of Miner Enterprises, the successful successor to William Miner's company, retrieved a treasure of letters and documents from the archives of Sidley Austin, LLP, in Chicago, the successor of the law firm that represented Miner's appliance business and charitable foundation. That trove included critical papers and letters with new and revealing information on his railroad-appliance company, the Miner Foundation, Heart's Delight Farm, and the Chazy Central Rural School.

David Withall not only retrieved these papers and documents, he also searched the existing records of William Miner's companies to find relevant memoranda and letters. He has become a true historian of his

company, Miner Enterprises, finding documents and reissuing out-of-print publications of W. H. Miner Inc. But David did much more for me; he tried to tutor a biographer who knew nothing about the design and operation of railroad gears and appliances or the intricacies of that competitive and complex business.

Unlike the Institute, the archives of the Alice T. Miner Colonial Collection provided accessible documents, with guides to its contents, well cared for by its Director/Curator Amanda Palmer and the museum's docents. Yet no one, other than Neil Sullivan, had explored their contents. The museum archives hold a wealth of letters and documents on the Miner family and William Miner's early life, especially his correspondence with Jottie, his only sister, and with Alice, who became his wife. The museum also has considerable material on Miner's Chicago friends, who provided objects for its collection. In addition, the museum holds correspondence related to the creation and development of the Chazy Central Rural School. That school also has extensive archives that include a wealth of letters and documents on its early history.

## My Debt and My Thanks

This book, much more than most, owes a debt to all those who contributed to its completion. The staff at the Miner Institute provided assistance and encouragement, especially Rick Grant, its president; Kirk Beattie, its finance officer; and Amy Bedard, its librarian, and her predecessor, Linda Masters. Amy has gathered and is cataloging the huge collection of photographs related to Heart's Delight Farm, the Chazy Central School, and the Physicians Hospital. Special commendation must also go to Steve Fessette, the Institute's Director of Facilities. William Miner built magnificent buildings; and Steve has become the expert on the shape, size, and location of all the structures on Heart's Delight Farm, many of them now gone. A modern-day Merlin, Amanda Palmer, brought back to life the old photographs, which had lain dormant for decades.

Matt Burns, a graduate student, reviewed and made helpful suggestions on an early draft of this book. Dr. George Clark — who tended the health of the young and old of Chazy and Clinton County for over half a century and whose family had long and deep roots in the area — happily took on the task of reading the manuscript. His comments proved not only insightful but characteristically witty. David Martin, coauthor of *A History of the Town of Chazy*, also reviewed a draft of the biography and provided useful suggestions and encouraging comments. Bob Cheeseman, Chazy Town Historian, searched and found two critical photographs. My gratitude also goes to my editor, Marna Poole, who combined an eye for elusive errors with a love of the Miner story.

Special mention must go to several of my former mentors, each of them with close connections to the creations of William Miner. James A.

Fitzpatrick encouraged my involvement with the Miner Institute and pushed my appointment as a trustee of the Miner Foundation as his replacement; and two of its trustees, Middleton Miller and Larry Berning, stirred my interests in the history and work of that organization. My fascination with the Miner Institute also grew early on as President of Plattsburgh State University, fanned by the teachings and reminiscences of Rod Lundy, who directed the Miner Institute for so long and so well during trying times. A final former mentor, E. Glenn Giltz, unwittingly taught me the true lesson of William Miner before I ever studied his career: that life is not worth living without community service.

But for this biography, one person deserves much of the credit with none of the blame. Without the inspiration, insights, and encouragement of my wife, Joan Thompson Burke, this biography would never have been written. As the dedication declares, her contribution ranks first in this book, as it long has in my life.

Of course, none of the above is responsible for this book's shortcomings, and there are many. Despite thousands of letters, memos, documents, photographs, and drawings, reconstructing the life of a great and versatile person — no longer vividly remembered by the living — resembles recreating a gigantic and complex puzzle with most of the pieces missing. With William Miner, the layers of myths that cover and cloud his life complicate this task. I wish some worthy polymath had come forward to write his biography. Alas, none did; and the time had surely come to tackle the tale of William Miner — to liberate the man from the myth.

Joseph C. Burke  
Shadow Lawn

The William H. Miner Agricultural Research Institute, 2009