

Whatever happened to...Frank Sherman Peer

By Beth Hoad
Palmyra Historian

Who was Frank Sherman Peer, you ask. For starters, he was a great grandson of Humphrey Shearman, who was one of the founding pioneers of East Palmyra, NY. Peers grandfather, Samuel Sherman, who was born, raised and died in East Palmyra, lived most of his life on the farm known as Maple Lane Farm.

At this time, it is not clear if Peer was Samuel Sherman's grandson or his great nephew, because available genealogical information does not indicate that Sherman had any children although census data includes the term "grandson." However, further research on their relationship is pending. Suffice it to say, that according to Peer's own published writings, the first of which he self-published in 1882 while living in East Palmyra, he visited the farm as a youngster, and then around the age of 20, moved to the hamlet for a few years and worked it.

The pioneer home of Humphrey Shearman located at 4839 Tellier Rd. (formerly Whitbeck Rd.) was built as a tavern and is now the home of this historian. When Shearman first settled in the area, the original 1000 acres of land he bought from John Swift included everything from Whitbeck Rd. on the east to a line running directly west from Palmer Rd. to Port Gibson Rd on the south and then to Mud Creek, which was the northern property line. After his death, his will divided the land among his nine sons, including Samuel, with each receiving approximately 100-110 acres. Samuels portion lay west of what is now Whitbeck Rd., and which most people would recognize as the site of a control burn overseen by the East Palmyra Fire Department in June 2001.

Early in 2002, a copy of a publication dated 1881 and entitled, *CATALOGUE: Thoroughbred and Grade Jersey Cattle---Pure Bred Cotswold Sheep, Imported, bred and for Sale by F. S. Peer, Maple Lane Farm, East Palmyra, Wayne County, New York* was brought to my attention. Of course, this discovery was motivation for further research, which led to the eventual purchase of two copies of Peer's books from which much was learned about the man and his passion for farming.

His philosophy about the feeding system known as "soiling" was the main subject of his first two books. Summer soiling, as he described in his first book, *Soiling; Summer and Winter or Economy in Feeding Farm Stock*, is the process of feeding fresh green feed within the confines of the stable during the summer. This process is still used on some of the smaller farms, and is known as "greenchopping" by those who use it.

The ensiling process, or winter soiling, is the second half of the feeding program, and has become the major modern-day feeding program for most dairy and beef cattle in North America except for the range-fed cattle of the mid-and northwestern states. Today, large bunker silos can be found on dairy farms of all sizes. Today, the use of large white

grub-like “Ag Bags” and plastic-wrapped “baleage” are other developments that came from the soiling process.

Following are some selected excerpts from those books that indicate Peer’s outspoken and, at the time unpopular, ideas. These ideas have since been proven only to have been ahead of their time. The first quote gives us some insight into the reasons for his work while others indicate the steadfastness of his convictions and a glimpse into his philosophy of human behavior.

“DEDICATION To the farmers’ sons of America this book is dedicated, with the best wishes of the author, and with the hope that within its pages they may find encouragement to pursue agriculture as a business, instead of leaving the farm for some so-called higher pursuit”

“...I was subjected to much ridicule for my early endeavors to introduce soiling, which was called “book farming” and “fancy farming,” etc. And when, late in 1878, I built a silo, and came out strongly in favor of ensilage, it was thought by many to be the climax of folly, while others suggested that I “might have gone wrong in the upper story.” In these days (1875 to 1880) I went about the State visiting farmers’ clubs, and discussing soiling and ensilage. I was quite young at the time, just out of my teens, and my views – however reasonable they appeared while I was before my audience – lost much of their force, I fear, on account of my youthful appearance. ...

“Ensilage has since produced quite a revolution in farming, but that is only “winter soiling,” and has not accomplished half of what may be done by pursuing the method all the year round...”

“Why then,” it may be asked, “has ensilage preceded soiling?” Principally, I believe, because it was a new and startling discovery, and required an outlay of capital to begin with. Soon after ensilage made its appearance, manufacturers of feed cutters sent catalogues and circulars (advertising their machines) broadcast over the country, agents canvassed towns, exhibited their machines at fairs, and told exaggerated stories of the advantages to be gained by ensilaging corn fodder. ...

“Soiling, on the other hand, was a question that every farmer was familiar with. Few could be found but that had practiced it to the extent of cutting clover green, and feeding it to their workhorses in the barns, or had sown a patch of corn for their cows to be fed over the fence in the pasture field to help out the pasture in a dry season. ...Soiling costs absolutely nothing by way of new machinery or buildings, other than can be found on any well-equipped farm. ...

“I have lived long enough to discover that people will listen to good advice, and admit that it is good advice, but if they can obtain it for nothing, it is seldom appreciated and rarely made use of. I believe that if it required an investment of a thousand dollars in patent machinery, the soiling system would long ago have been adopted on thousands

of farms, where to-day it is not practiced at all, or only done by halves. People appreciate everything by what it costs.”

Apparently, Peer came from a family of entrepreneurs, dreamers, adventurers, risk-takers and outspoken speculators, beginning with his great-grandfathers’ great-grandfather, who emigrated from England in 1633, and which also included Roger Sherman, who signed the Declaration of Independence. His great-grandfather, Humphrey Shearman, left everything he had in Rhode Island to move into the unknown wilderness of western New York State in hopes of a better life, and spent the last 20 years of his life helping to build a settlement. (See *An East Palmyra Story*, 1999 by Beth Hoad)

There was also Peer’s great uncle, Durfee Sherman who risked his worldly possessions several times to start a new businesses one of which would eventually develop into Bloomer Brothers Co., Inc. in Newark. Later, Durfee’s son, Stephen F. convinced his father that he should invest his time and money in the entertainment business, and that endeavor resulted in the Sherman Opera House in Newark.

Ultimately, Peer wrote at least six publications – 1882, 1900 and 1902 on the subjects of soiling, ensilage and stable construction; 1904 – a United States Bureau of Animal Industry bulletin regarding milk goats; *Cross country with horse and hound* 1902 and *The hunting field with horse and hound in America, the British Isles and France* 1910.

In the introduction to his first book, he stated that he did not farm for pleasure, although he found a great deal of pleasure in farming. He claimed not to have been backed by any other business except farming, and in supporting his choice to publish his ideas in book form, said:

“I humbly acknowledge that it is not done at the earnest solicitation of numerous friends, but because I am intensely interested in farming as a business or profession, and would fain see more of our intelligent young men engage in this pursuit. ... And if the reader finds as much pleasure in perusing these pages as it has afforded me to write them, I shall feel that my labor has not been spent for naught, nor his attention engaged in vain.”