

# ISCHUA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## A SALUTE TO PIONEER RESOURCEFULNESS -- BLACK SALTS

When a pioneer farmer in the early 1800s arrived at his recently acquired property, the first thing that he saw was trees. He would cut the trees to build a cabin, a barn, storage building and fences. However, there were still countless trees left. Then he would start to clear land for meadows. He needed open fields to plant crops and raise his livestock. So he continued cutting down trees and burning them to ashes.

Many of the early pioneers who settled in Cattaraugus County originally came from New England where hardwood ashes were turned into lye. Judge Alfred Spring, a native of Franklinville, spoke at a celebration over a hundred years ago and described the process of turning ashes into lye and finally into black salts.

He said: "As the hardwood timber was cut down, ashes were collected in barrels or boxes and water was poured upon them, and lye was made. This was boiled down in kettles until crystallized. The carbonaceous matter retained in the mass gave it a black tinge, hence the name. The black mass was drawn to Buffalo and sold to the ashery men."

The early Cattaraugus County farmers made black salts by putting cool hardwood ashes into a small barrel. The barrel had many small holes drilled into it and was placed into a tin pan. Water was slowly poured into the barrel over the ashes. The water collected in the pan and was called lye water or caustic soda. This water was poured into a "five pail" bucket or cauldron. The iron kettle was placed over a fire. The mixture was boiled until the water evaporated. The dry, blackish alkaline mass was broken up into small chunks with an axe. The black salts or potash were packed into wooden boxes or barrels and transported by wagons to Buffalo.

Later, in the 1840s the locally made black salts were sent to one of two asheries in Franklinville. Lorentus Salisbury, a prominent merchant, owned a building or "ashery" where the black salts were reheated again to produce pearlash. This material was shipped to factories where it was used in the production of soap, leather, pottery, alum, saltpeter, glass, gunpowder and paper.

Farmers could sell a hundred pounds of black salts for \$2.00 when a pound of butter cost 28 cents. Black salts became a very profitable means for a farmer to earn ready cash and to clear his land for planting crops. In years of poor crop growth the black salts would always sell and provide a means of paying the mortgage and buying essential goods.

Submitted by: Bruce D. Fredrickson, Town of Franklinville Historian and President of the Ischua Valley Historical Society