# Eighteen-Hundred-And-Starve-to-Death

1816: The Year Without a Summer

by Joy Lewis

On April 5, 1815, on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, Mount Tambora blew its top. The powerful volcanic explosion spanned a period of ten days, spewing billions of tons of ash into the earth's atmosphere. The swirling dust particles blackened the sky interfering with the sun's ability to warm the earth. But it was months later, and half a world away, that the full force of the eruption gradually became known. From Europe to New England and from western New York to Delaware the effects of this far-away catastrophe came into full play.

Richmond (which at that time included present-day Canadice) was home in the spring of 1816 to about 230 households – more than 1,300 individuals. Even the oldest inhabitants could not remember a year when the weather was so contrary. Heavy frost covered the ground every day through April; half a foot of snow fell on June 6, and another three inches two weeks later.

A contemporary account of the bizarre weather in this corner of Ontario County is found in the diary entries of John P. Coons (of Naples): "In June…ice a half inch thick formed on the streams in Ontario county and snow to a depth of three inches were recorded. The crops were destroyed and people wore heavy clothing. In the home grates and the old iron stoves brightly burned the one, two and three feet cut oak and hickory logs to keep the cold out. There was much suffering. So severe was the frost that the efforts of farmers to raise crops were futile." Mr. Coons made note that the "left over" corn from the 1815 harvest brought $5 a bushel – more than four times its normal price. The "cold and icy" weather continued throughout the autumn and people "imagined that the heat of the sun had become exhausted."

More than sixty years after the event, William P. Boyd (in his *History of the Town of Conesus*) wrote, "In the year of 1816, on account of a severe frost, which took place on the 13th of July of that year, destroyed all of the crops, and caused great sufferings among the settlers. Wheat was worth fourteen shillings [$1.75] a bushel, and corn ten shillings [$1.25], and very hard to be obtained at those figures. Potatoes were worth one dollar per bushel, and was obtained from Livonia." A bushel of wheat had cost eighty cents a year earlier, and potatoes normally sold for about twenty-five cents a bushel.

Food prices doubled, as "most of the wheat was not fit to cut until September; the corn crop was almost entirely lost; but little summer crops of any kind were raised. From the 6th to the 12th of June, there was frost every night." Joseph Sibley of Rush remembered, "I sold pork that year for $10 per hundredweight, fresh; and beef for $6." William Paull of Bloomfield paid even higher prices. In a long letter to his brother Zebedee written on June 17, 1816, he mentioned: "I have enough for [my] family at

present. Corn is 75 cents a bushel, wheat a dollar and a half, and pork $22 a barrel. It is a cold and backward season." Under normal circumstances beef sold for $3.00 a hundredweight and a barrel of pork for about $11.00.

Orsamus Turner wrote in the *History of Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham Purchase* (1851): "The year 1816 is memorable for its 'cold summer.' June frosts almost entirely destroyed the summer crops; in the forepart of the month pools of water were covered with ice. Upon one occasion, especially, in a forenoon, after the sun had dissipated the frosts, the fields and gardens looked like prairies that have been scorched with fire. Summer crops, other than the hardier grains, were crisped and blackened; the hopes and dependence of the people were destroyed. The wheat harvest was mostly protracted until September, previous to which, in all the more recently settled towns and neighborhoods, there was much suffering for food…The Indians upon the Genesee River had a small surplus of corn of the crop of 1815, which the white inhabitants bought, paying as high as $2 per bushel. In the new settlements wheat and rye was shelled out while in the milk, boiled and eaten as substitute for bread; while in many instances, the occupants of log cabins in the wilderness, subsisted for months and weeks upon wild roots, herbs, and milk."

In Richmond, devastation to the crops was nearly total. Hiram Pitts, born in 1802, was one of the first children of English descent born in Richmond. The son of Gideon and Lorinda Pitts, Hiram was in his early teens when the disastrous weather struck. Years later, in his mid-eighties, he penned a letter to an acquaintance in Honeoye in which he recalled that year. He wrote of the spring when the Congregational Church was built, in May of 1815: "I left home for Clinton, Oneida County, soon after the raising [of the church]…and remained there till the fall of 1816 (known in the after years as the cold season.)"

An account written in the 1990s by Richmond's past historian Peggy Treble, sums up the experience of Richmond's farmers: "By the end of May, the corn had frozen and trees were bare. Crop growing was abandoned and June was the coldest on record…People awoke on the 4th of July to a frost as thick as a window pane. There were no strawberries, raspberries or huckleberries picked that year. One morning in August, ice was ½ inch thick on the streams. A cold northeast wind prevailed all summer. September ended with ice and snow and October broke all records for bitter coldness."

Two-thousand-sixteen marked the 200th anniversary of the disastrous "year without a summer." In our century of abundance, it is appropriate to remember and to appreciate the perseverance and dedication of our forebears as they strove to establish a homestead on the wilds of what was then the western frontier.