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Family diary both reveals, inspires grit

"Searching For Ichabod: His Eighteenth-Century Diary Leads Me Home," by Julie Foster Van Camp (BookSurge Publishing, 2009, 205 pages, \$13.99 paperback)

A.C. HUTCHISON
Book Review

If you pick up this book and start reading, until you get a chapter or two into it you may still take for granted all the Good Things that surround you and help, unconsciously perhaps, define your days. Here are just a few examples: paved roads, indoor plumbing, multiple electrical appliances and lighting and, perhaps most important of all, choices of all kinds.

Julie Foster Van Camp had a choice, of course, when she decided to try to trace



PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIE FOSTER VAN CAMP

The farmhouse on the old Crown Point Road in Whiting that Ichabod Foster built in the 1790s still stands. He and his family lived there until 1811, when they left for western New York state.

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Diary

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in exquisite detail the life of an ancestor, Ichabod Foster. And Foster himself had a choice, we must suppose, when in the late 18th century he elected to move first from his native Rhode Island to Vermont and – after moving from place to place in Rutland and Addison counties – on to western New York state in the new century. There, in his early 70s, he would die in 1813 and be buried in an unknown grave.

But choices of the kind Foster faced were not to be taken for granted. They were carefully deliberated, their possible consequences analyzed, their execution fraught with chance and – at least at times – something akin to human misery.

It wasn't easy to get from Vermont to what are now the southern suburbs of Buffalo, since there were no roads (except for some irregular American Indian trails), no motels, no fast-food joints and, of course, no internal combustion engines to speed the journey. Nor, it might be noted, were there hospitals or anything like an emergency room should the need arise.

Read this book and you'll almost certainly come away with a heightened appreciation and respect for the courage and fortitude of those who helped settle North America, and most readers will wonder if, in similar circumstances, they'd have shown the same spirit. The author concentrates, naturally, on a single individual and his descendants, but Ichabod Foster surely was not unlike so many others who had the pioneer mentality and who would not be deterred by the difficulties they faced in carving out new lives for themselves and their families.

It is therefore only appropriate, perhaps, that Van Camp faced her own set of daunting obstacles when she left her home in far-away Washington state and came east to learn everything she could about her great-great-grandfather's life. She doesn't use the term "closure," but it's clear she was seeking just that in her quest to not only walk in his footsteps but, importantly, find his final resting place at the

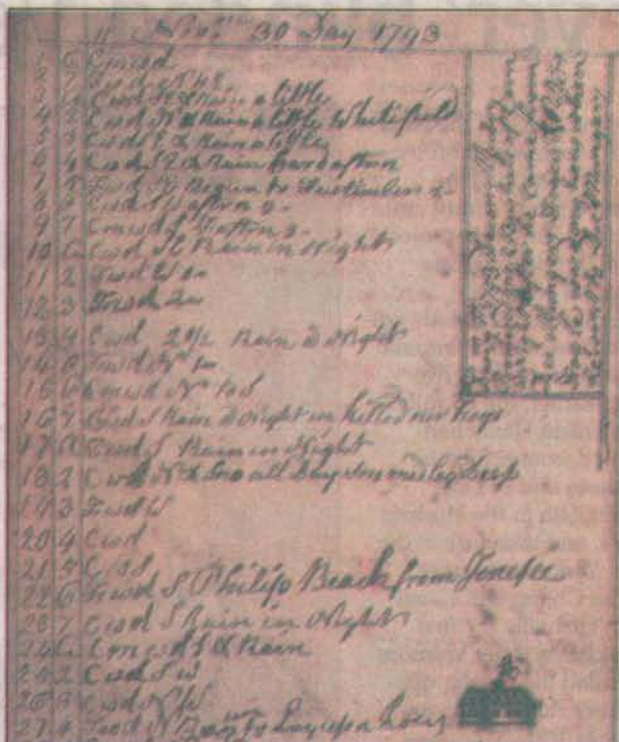


PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIE FOSTER VAN CAMP

A page from Ichabod Foster's diary from November 1793 includes a little sketch of a house.

■ THE SEARCH

For the latest news on Julie Van Camp's search for her ancestor's grave, follow the link from this review online: www.rutlandherald.com/sunmag www.timesargus.com/sunmag

end of her odyssey.

She wasn't exactly starting from scratch, however, because Ichabod Foster had kept a diary and providentially it had fallen into her hands. She needed help translating his terse scribbles, but the document proved invaluable as Van Camp sought out her ancestor's several homes and his route from Vermont to western New York.

He recorded weather, chores, births and deaths, and more:

"22 March 1790: We got safe to Whiting. I hear the first robin. Snow and wind from the SE, wind from the N. Blessed be God we got home."

"5 January 1798: I Put in a glas window in the East Roome."

"15 September 1803: Whitefield Foster (Ichabod's younger brother) Died and buried the 16"

Occasionally he was practically loquacious:

"a remarkable hot day so that bees came out of their hives and flew around as lively as in the summer time and the snow went off so as to leave the clear land bair. January 22 1802"

Van Camp also was regularly helped by local historians and by other aspiring genealogists she found in old town halls and museums along the way, and occasionally by jaw-dropping luck and coincidence.

Readers who enjoy local history or genealogy probably will find "Searching For Ichabod" exceptionally interesting, but the book's appeal is by no means limited to those who share the author's passions. What others may find just as intriguing are her descriptions of the hardships that Americans of the late 18th and early 19th centuries routinely faced (including, for some, being required to fight in the War of 1812, with or without adequate clothing or even suitable weapons).

One of the more striking aspects of this tale is the role played by the church in the days before March 4, 1791,

when Vermont became the 14th state in the Union.

As Van Camp tells it, the church elders functioned not just as a community's spiritual leaders but also as its arbiters of personal behavior. Those who were deemed to have violated the accepted standards of conduct were severely punished by their church, and there was no state law, or any other kind of law, to protect them from unfair prosecution or guarantee them anything resembling a fair trial.

This total absence of modern institutions is a serious reminder that in our own times we have grown remarkably dependent upon the inventions and advancements that have set the industrialized world apart from those nations – Afghanistan comes naturally to mind – that remain relatively primitive in so many important ways.

The author, who has degrees in journalism and criminal justice and has written two previous books (about the courts), brings a stubborn passion to her mission, and the reader can't help but admire her determination to complete her task. That it turns out to be a story that should be of interest to many who don't share her deep interest in one's ancestry is surely a bonus, one that every reader can share.

A.C. Hutchison retired as editor of *The Times Argus* in 1999.