

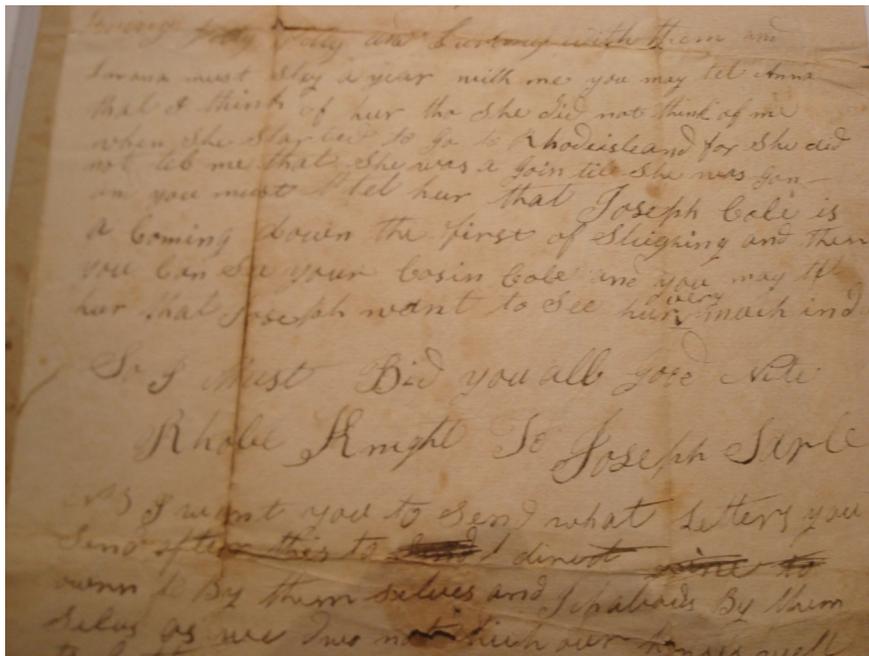
1816:
The Year with no Summer in De Kalb
By Bryan Thompson

Yearly recording of average temperatures in Europe dating from 1766 to the present show the summer of 1816 as the coldest ever recorded. The worldwide cold snap was the result of a series of volcanic eruptions in the Pacific rim of fire over 4 years that gradually increased the amount of dust in the atmosphere until it blocked much of the sun's heat. The biggest and last to blast was Mount Tambora in April 1815. Tambora's ash was added to that of Mayon in 1814, Suwanosejima in 1813 and Awu and La Soufriere in 1812.

The temperatures were cooler than usual, but people were used to cold winter temperatures. It was the worldwide famine they set off that claimed lives.

So what was the year like here in De Kalb? A series of letters written by two sisters and their families from De Kalb share some interesting insights. A dry fog was present throughout the spring and summer of 1816. Scientists have described this fog as caused by stratospheric sulfate aerosol. There was a frost almost every single night in May.

On May 12th, 1816, Rehobe Knight wrote to her father from De Kalb, "Grain is very scarce and dear here. Flour is ten dollars a barrel and pork is twenty four dollars a barrel. Corn is a dollar fifty a bushel and potatoes are a dollar a bushel." She went on to complain that the price of seeding grain was exorbitantly high. In today's dollars: the barrel of flour would cost \$197. The barrel of pork would cost \$474. The bushel of potatoes \$19.77. The bushel of corn \$29.66. Rehobe was trying to nurse a new born baby but could not afford to buy any additional food beyond what they had saved on the farm.



Sample of writing from one of the De Kalb letters written in 1816
from Rhobe Knight to her father Joseph Sarle.

On June 6th a heavy snow fell from Upper Canada as far south as Albany. In late June it froze for five nights in a row as far south as Cape May, New Jersey. July 14th, 1816, Anna Arnold wrote from De Kalb, “We have a very uncommon season, very cold and backward. There will be but very little hay cut in this place this year. But very little corn raised this season. People who have to buy their [food] source will suffer for the want of it for **they can’t buy it because it is not to be had.**”[Arnold’s emphasis]

With lack of hay for the winter, local farmers were forced to reduce the number of livestock they would keep through the winter. Certain vegetable crops such as turnips and brussels sprouts did well but many others failed due to lack of summer warmth. Oats provided only half their normal yield.

Joseph Sarle Jr. wrote from De Kalb October 4, 1816, to his parents in Rhode Island that on his trip north, “Corn is pretty much killed with frost all the way from Albany.” Reports from the time show the corn froze in the milk stage and never dried enough to harvest. Joseph noted the fall seeded winter grains looked good. He reported that the season in De Kalb was very cold and dry, so the local farmers had to contend with drought as well cold weather.

As winter set in, local residents were forced to live off what meager crops they had managed to grow as the whole world was suffering under the cold extremes. Some people resorted to boiling wild herbs and grasses. With no bread and other staples people subsisted on meat and turnips through the winter. Malnutrition and its effects began to appear.

Anna Arnold was lucky to escape that winter to her grandparents in Rhode Island. She returned to her log home in De Kalb in March 1817 to find her parents and sibling half starved. Her mother had been sick in bed for six weeks and her sister Nancy for two weeks. Neither had the strength to walk from the bed to the fire. “For about thirty nights, Father never had his clothes off. I suppose here was a very distressed family.” She reported that her Aunt Rehobe was also very sick.

The spring of 1817 was a very welcome sight for the residents of De Kalb and most of the rest of the Northern Hemisphere. In nearby De Peyster, Smith Stillwell had managed to save enough winter barley seed to plant two acres of the grain. According to legend neighbors gathered to the assess the growth of the crop on a regular basis. When the barley was barely ripe, the bread deprived neighbors gathered together to reap, dry and thresh the grain. A great celebration was had with the baking of the first bread.

The winter of 1816-1817 was the last recorded worldwide famine.

Sources:

Hough, Franklin (1853) History of St Lawrence and Franklin Counties New York Little and Company Albany, NY.

Sarle Family Papers Special Collections Clements Library, University of Michigan Ann Arbor