

Al Campanie / Staff photographer

JOSEPH BARILLA SR. leaves Fenner Community Church after an Election Day dinner Tuesday at the 187-year-old church.

# Tradition Takes Root in Fenner

**DICK CASE**  
POST-STANDARD COLUMNIST



Floyd Bennett wonders if I know the expression "salt of the earth."

Well, "this is the place they mine it," he said.

Just then, Floyd and I and maybe 50 other diners were enjoying the annual Election Day dinner at Fenner Community Church, a 178-year-old landmark that sits on a high plateau of Madison County east of Cazenovia. The view is more than 180 degrees and spectacular; Oneida Lake looks to be just down the road.

We're chowing on roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans and some of the best homemade pie in North America.

This is the sort of a day when we warm ourselves on the cozy glow of tradition — traditions like voting and then walking across the road for a farmer's midday meal with all the fixin's.

Where they also say, as Floyd, a visitor from Cazenovia, called out to a pal as he drained his last cup of coffee: "Get enough to eat? If you didn't, it's your own fault."

Besides that salt mine, Fenner is a town of about 3,000 citizens where the majority remain in farming, like the settlers who came to the rural highland before 1800. The town has two hamlets: Fenner Four Corners, where the town hall and church sit, and Bingley, next to Chittenango Creek.

The namesake was George Fenner, a 19th-century governor of Rhode Island, who's said to have visited some former constituents who settled here.

Folks in Fenner vote 2-to-1 for the Republican Party, as they have for years. Tuesday, 540 of them showed up at the town building. That's better than half the registered voters and a fair off-year turnout, according to Jeanne Jones, chair of the town's election inspectors.

"We like to show the politicians we know how to vote in Fenner," Jeanne ex-

plained as she sat at a long table with the other inspectors, next to the water cooler in the room where town meetings are held. The helpers are Betty Putney, Margie Costello, Evelyn Carey, Pat Hanlon and Pearl Maxwell.

**Streaks of independence** thrive in this rolling upland. A big concern is being swallowed up by Fenner's more prosperous, and showy, neighbor to the west, Cazenovia.

Russ Cary is a town councilor who runs a small farm and an appliance-repair business. When he came in to vote, presenting the inspectors with a box of doughnut holes, he talked of preserving Fenner's strong agricultural tradition.

"We're still mostly farms, and we're doing our best to keep it that way," Russ said. "We like being independent."

Dick Emhoff described the town spirit this way: "We're an independent-minded bunch of folks out here, hardheaded, you might say."

Dick drove his aunt, Tessie Phillips, to

# Church building provides focus for rural community of Fenner

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exercise her democratic right for the 62nd straight year.

"I don't want to stay away," Tessie said when asked about the negative campaigning this season. "I want to get as many Republicans in as I can. I try to help."

She helped Fenner stay mostly Republican Tuesday, although Democrats Bill Magee and Nancy Lorraine Hoffmann, both with ties to the land, sneaked in.

Fenner's oldest voter made it in, too. Mary Marks is 92 and thinks she's been voting at least 50 years, maybe more.

**The inspectors know** most of their neighbors. It's a good time to catch up on who's moved, who's had his gallbladder out, who's had a baby or divorced since the last election, who's got a good recipe to swap. (Potato soup on Tuesday.)

"And when there's a snowstorm," Margie Costello says, "that's when you get to see your

*"We're proud of what we do here."*

— Bill June, church trustee

neighbors." Fenner took a few pellets Election Day.

The church is both a landmark — the oldest in Madison County, they say — and a place of focus for a rural community without a village, school, store or post office. The congregation formed as a Baptist church in 1801 and put up the building in 1820. Except for the original steeple, which fell in a lightning strike in 1923, the place is pretty much the same as it's been for generations.

The Baptists left in the 1940s but a congregation remained, a community church that has services with visiting preachers during the summer and a board of trustees to fix the roof and other necessities.

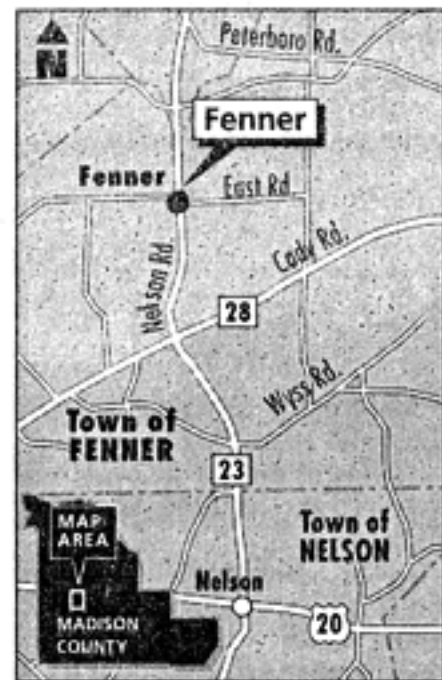
Bill June is the trustees' chairman and retired Fenner town judge. "We're proud of what we do here," he said.

The Election Day dinner, an occasional rummage sale and two chicken barbecues raise money to keep the doors open. Town workers pitch in, too. Bill tells me he's pleased that about 50 neighbors usually come up the hill for Sunday night services through the end of October.

Floyd Bennett says it's quite a sight, and sound, to approach the church on a summer night, with the windows open, and see the place lit and rising like a lighthouse, and hear the music of the choir drifting out across the cornfields.

Melinda Wilkinson and 15 other church members run the dinner, which "almost runs itself after all these years," according to the chairman, who got a round of applause after dishes were done and the cooks and servers got to eat. Pies and salads come from the congregation.

The Wilkinsons — Melinda and her husband, Ken — run a 545-acre dairy farm down the road. The only worry Melinda



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has about these dinners, and other Fenner traditions, is carrying them on.

"The young people aren't involved," she said. "I'm not sure what's going to happen in the future."

Dick Case writes about neighborhoods every Thursday. Reach him at 470-2254 or by e-mail, [citynews@syracuse.com](mailto:citynews@syracuse.com).