



HOUSE DATING

In response to last month's newsletter containing an article about house dating, DHS will sponsor a HOW-TO-DO-IT class if there are enough interested persons. As a rule house dating is not difficult--just time intensive. If you are interested call Nancy Howes, 385-3528, and watch the newsletter for time and place.

SOCIAL HALLS OF YESTERYEAR--Part III

The story of St. Elmo's Hall in Dennis Port begins with the story of an interesting man. David R. Ginn was born in Maine in 1844. Early in his life he went to sea. In 1863, when he was 19, he enlisted in the Union Army and served in the Civil War with the Second Maine Cavalry. Later he was transferred to the Navy and served with Admiral Farragut in the decisive victory at Mobile Bay, where Farragut is said to have uttered those immortal words, "Damn the torpedoes, Full speed ahead!" Perhaps young David carried those words in his heart in his post-war years. Although a country boy of little education, he was accepted at a prestigious seminary, prepared for college and in the class of 1872 of Harvard College he received a medical degree. He seems to have settled first at Martha's Vineyard, but in the fall of 1873 he was establishing a practice in Dennis Port. Dr. Ginn was an important citizen of that village until his death in 1926. Sometimes controversial, sometimes benovolent, once in a while in bankruptcy, and occasionally so well-off as to provide a community party as an anniversary celebration. He practiced medicine there and kept a drugstore. An advertisement appearing in the Harwich Independent in 1878 states that he would keep for sale perfumes, soaps, and bay rum, and his services could be obtained as medical doctor, physician, surgeon, and druggist. The first building in which he conducted business was moved for him from Harwich Center to Dennis Port. In 1879 a disastrous fire destroyed his store and laboratory. In the fall of that same year he rebuilt his store, and on the second floor opened to the public a social hall which he called St. Elmo's, in honor of the patron saint of sailors. Perhaps he thought this name of a maritime saint might add to the attractiveness of his business enterprise in a village dominated by men of the sea. I judge that the building stood in what is now the Municipal Parking Lot on Main Street. It was smaller by far than its neighbor, Ocean Hall, now the Harwich Junior Theater, and so accommodated fewer Balls and public dinners, and more meetings of such groups as the Good Templars, the Sylvester Baxter Chapter of some unnamed lodge, a singing school, and performances by local dramatic clubs. In 1886, Dr. Ginn purchased the old Universalist Church building which had been built in South Dennis in about 1835. and had it moved to a spot beside his drugstore. There he remodeled it into three separate businesses, which he rented to his father-in-law, Darius Chase, to L. S. Burgess and Co, and to Dr. Kelley, Dentist. But in 1889 disaster struck once more, destroying the larger building, but fortunately leaving the drug store and hall unscathed. As soon as he could raise the capital, Dr. Ginn built and opened a new building, containing five businesses, and on the second floor, a large social hall which he named Lillian Hall, probably in honor of his wife, who, although named Annie, liked to call herself Lillian. The entire complex was known as Ginn's Bazaar, and DHS has in its collection some post cards which picture it. It covered the south side of Main Street where Davenport's Five and Ten Cent Store was located, and also a portion of the Municipal Parking Lot. Dennis port news for many years carried reports of the doings at both St. Elmo's Hall, which had an organ often played by Bessie Overton of South Dennis, and Lillian Hall, and on occasion an installation of other event which used both halls. St. Elmos's must have been especially adaptable for musical presentation and was frequently the site of a singing school, where singers were taught for a series of ten lessons, and gave a public performance at the end of school. St. Elmo's was a social center right up until the end of Dr. Ginn's life in 1926. But in 1929 came yet another fiery disaster, which destroyed the Ginn Block and left Dennis Port bereft of both Lillian and St. Elmo's Halls. Does it not seem ironic, or at the least a curious coincidence that a Hall whose name symbolized that mysterious light, St. Elmo's Fire, often seen on masts and spars when sailing the southern seas, should have a history in which fire plays so prominent a part? And so, like Doric Hall, St. Elmo's and Lillian Halls are now just memories. But there are still a few citizens of this town who remember the social events which once took place on the Main Street of Dennis Port.

CAPE PLAYHOUSE ARCHIVES

Margaret Adams and Jim Carr are working diligently towards completing their history of the Cape Playhouse in Dennis. The Playhouse Archives are missing four programs: 8 Aug 1927--Meet the Wife--Janet Gaynor, 7 Jul 1930--Constant Wife--Chrystal Herne, 18 Aug 1930--Devil's Deciple--Tom Powers, 4 Aug 1958--Holiday ForLovers--Don Ameche. They would also like to have duplicates of others up to 1942. Many of their old records were destroyed by fire sometime in the 1960's. Any help you can give would be appreciated. Call Jim at 385-6464 or write: Playhouse Archive Office, P. O. Box 2001, Dennis, MA 02638.

CALENDAR

Apr. 10 7:00 PM Board meets with Nancy Howes.
Apr. 28 2:30 PM Dennis Memory Days in the Nobscusset Room at Eagle Pond Nursing Home.
(See related article.)
Late May Lady Slipper Walk on the Indian Lands. Watch for announcement.

MORE DENNIS MEMORY DAYS...

We are repeating our popular Memory Days program on April 28, 2:30 PM at Eagle Pond Nursing Home. The main topics will be schools and cranberries, but you all know how people digress when they are reminiscing---we've had some great stories over the years, and can probably expect a few chuckles this time. Come and find out! Refreshments will be served.

CAN YOU HELP?

Volunteers are needed for the DHS school programs at the Manse and Jericho. The seven 3rd grades will be at the Manse on June 3-7 and 10-11, and the 4th grade will be at Jericho on May 30 and June 3-7. We tell them what life was like for boys and girls in the 1700's and 1800's. It's not at all difficult and you'll receive a lot of enjoyment from working with the children. Those of us who have been doing it look forward to it every year--and the kids love it! We will have a training session for all who would be willing to help with this worthwhile program. If you can help--even for just one day--call Nancy Howes at 385-3528. Thanks!!

A CAPE COD SENSE OF HUMOR

Do you remember a couple of years ago, when the Cape Cod Times ran a feature article which posed the question "What is a Real Cape Codder?" The writer asked readers to respond to several questions, like "What does a Real Cape Codder order when he goes out to dinner?" and "How often does a Real Cape Codder go over the bridge?" One of the questions asked was, "What makes a Real Cape Codder laugh?", and right away I knew that the person writing the article wasn't a Real Cape Codder. The Cape Cod Sense of Humor is real, all right but jokes and stories told by Real Cape Codders are not meant to evoke laughter. A grin, or at most a quiet chuckle is what is expected from one with a Real Cape Cod Sense of Humor. My brother, Ben--you all know him, he's my OLDER BROTHER,--has made it one of his missions in life to collect examples of this subtle sense of humor and he writes them all down and sometimes can be inveigled to tell them. If any of you know any authentic Cape Cod tales meant to tickle the Cape Cod Sense of Humor, please tell them to Ben. Here are some examples.

"Why, Rufus, what are you lookin' so glum about? You got a face on as long as a mule's ear."

Well, Ebenezer, don't it beat all! Just got my horse trained so she'd eat nuthin' but seaweed, and she up and died!"

Or have you heard---

Captain Zenas was kind of an oddball in town. He sailed through life for nigh onto 35 years without a mate. He was master of the fishing Schooner Bulldog, and top "High-liner" of the Dennis fleet. But the time came when Zenas succumbed to the charms of his sweet looking neighbor named Abigail Howes. And don't you know, Zenas took a whole lot of good natured ribbin' down to the Post Office about takin' on a permanent mate at long last.

"Well now, Zenas, now that you've got a bride, will you be changing the name of your vessel to Abigail?"

"Why, nosir, that thought never went across my mind. But I'll tell you this. If that woman turns out to be as steady and dependable and as easy to manage as my vessel, I just might change her name to Bulldog!"

Overheard at the morning mail---

"Mornin' 'Lisha. How's your brother Hiram doin' with his eel business?"

"Not so good, Nathan. So far, all's he's made was expenses, and they was nothin'." If you know any stories like this about Cape Codders, please send them to Ben Thacher, PO Box J, East Dennis, MA 02641. He will be grateful, and we may all have the fun of hearing him tell them at a DHS meeting in the future.

Dennis Historical Society
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