



DID YOU CATCH THE BUZZARDS ARRIVAL?

Of course you all figured out immediately that buzzards do not migrate into or out of Buzzards Bay. "April Fool!" And hats off to a holiday for which Hallmark has not yet designed a card. You can ignore it or have fun with it and never feel guilty either way. The celebration of this particular day is mentioned in Colonial records, somewhat ruefully, as it is seen by the most puritan of the Puritans as a waste of time, than which there was no greater sin. Since we're talking about almanacs this year, here's a rhyme from Poor Robin's Almanac of 1760:

"The first of April, some do say,
Is set apart for All Fool's Day;
But why the people call it so,
Nor I, nor they themselves do know."

Those who know about such things say that the custom began in France after the adoption of a new calendar in 1564. Before that year, the New Year began on March 25, and was celebrated by making calls on all of one's friends with much feasting from March 21, first day of spring, to April 1, on which day gifts were exchanged. The new calendar began with January, and New Year's Day thus fell in the dead of winter. Some folks continued to celebrate in the old way, and practiced the old habits of making visits, and exchanging gifts on April 1st. These conservatives who refused to conform to new ways were called fools, and thus, it is said, began the custom. Today in France the victims of April Fools pranks are called "April Fish". In Scotland, it is considered great fun to send a friend on a long mission to deliver a letter which instructs the recipient to send him along on another lap, until at last the poor "April gowk", as he is termed, catches on. Here on Cape Cod, those who have been tricked are called "April Buzzards!"

THE GOOD THAT WE RECEIVE AND DO NOT OURSELVES EFFECT

The history of the town will be published soon, and when that is accomplished I shall be very glad--and very tired! Over the years I have spent thousands of hours in research, sometimes only to discover that what I want to know can not as yet be found. But from time to time I feel very humble, in the face of all the work that others have done, which has already helped me along the way, and I'm sure will continue to do so. Regularly I receive assistance and encouragement from the members of the Dennis Historical Commission, a very wise and knowledgeable board, who often help me see the trees, when I have been looking too long at the forest, or the other way around. The board of D.H.S. has been equally helpful, listening regularly to my queries and coming up with simple solutions to design and publishing concerns. I am grateful to each and everyone of them, for their part in eventually reaching the goal of publishing the best history of the best Cape Cod town ever. But I am thinking today of other devoted Cape historians who have worked in years gone by. I frequently speak of Thomas Prince Howes. A compilation of his articles and tributes to departed comrades would be of interest to all friends of local history. Jacob Sears Howes, and his delightful, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, commentaries about his contemporaries which appeared in the Yarmouth Register in the mid-19th century are also priceless. It is not only to these wisemen of old that I have turned for help, however. The Founders of the Dennis Historical Society began the task of collecting and organizing the facts about the town, and accumulated many stories and legends, some on tape, some in writing. Esther W. Howes comes to mind, as does Jerry Burke, Dean Sears, and Daniel Chase, to name but a few I have learned from. Today I would like to mention especially two women from the earliest days of our society's efforts to preserve and teach local history in Dennis. They are Ernestine Cady Perry and Neva O'Neil. Ernestine (Mrs. Leon D. Perry) was a woman well-trained in organization and politics. Her delightful manuscript autobiography in our collection tells of many adventures both here and abroad. In addition to being a devoted wife and mother, she managed a career in days when women were not supposed to do that, and her experience included serving on the staff of Calvin Coolidge. When she and her husband retired to West Dennis, the home of his ancestors, Ernestine turned her immense energy to organizing the new historical society and helping to furnish and maintain the Jericho House Historic Center. She served at times as secretary, and as president and vice-president, but perhaps her most lasting endeavor was to assist and encourage Neva O'Neil in research and writing about the Master Mariners of this town. Neva, like Ernestine, was an adopted daughter of the Cape. Neva was the wife of Lester O'Neil, also of West Dennis, who for many years was the entire police department of the town. The O'Neils were of the family of Capt. Bernard O'Neil, whose huge "launching flag" adorns the walls at Wixon School, which we salute at town meetings in memory of that family, and of the many Master Mariners who hailed from this town. Mrs. O'Neil wrote the life stories of a good many of the Master Mariners at a time when their children were still alive, and could relate and recall many of their many adventures. In the years 1938 and 1939 most of these biographies were published in the Yarmouth Register newspaper. Then, in 1965, the two-year-old Dennis Historical Society published a collection of eight of the stories in a very professionally designed 48 page booklet, with appropriate drawings by Hope Smith. The publication would not have come about without the fine writing of Neva O'Neil and the direction and involvement of Ernestine Perry. Both women made many another contribution to this town--everything from batches of cookies to letter writing and soliciting gifts for Jericho. One of their most tangible gifts to us was this slender volume of tales of the past, Master Mariners of Dennis, still a delight after all these years, and the source of much inspiration to me. That's just one of the many examples of indebtedness to those who have gone on before.

CALENDAR

Apr. 1		All Fool's Day
Apr. 5		Daylight Savings Time begins, set your clocks ahead.
Apr. 8	7:30 P.M.	Board meets at the Manse.
Apr. 26	2:00 P.M.	Whales and Turtles of Cape Cod. Carleton Hall. (See below.)

WHALES AND TURTLES

Our program chairman, Gertrude Lailey, has a very interesting April meeting planned for us. Bob Prescott, Director of the Audubon Wellfleet Wildlife Sanctuary, will give a slide presentation on those wonderful leviathans of the deep--whales of Cape Cod, and also about turtles found on the Cape. This will be at Carleton Hall, Dennis Village, April 26 at 2:00 P.M. Bob has a wealth of knowledge in these fields and is an interesting speaker. Refreshments will be served. Come join us for a pleasant Sunday afternoon.

STREETS OF OUR TOWN

Many of you may recall, way back 13 or so years ago, when our newsletter was new and the editor didn't know a whole lot about the town's history, we did a series of articles about the origin of the names of a few of the streets of our town. Some of you have been kind enough to comment on this series and suggest that the articles be collected, (and I might add editorially, revised and improved), and published in a booklet. This is a possibility for the future. D.H.S. is jumping in with both feet up to the knees to get into the publishing business with a full-length, hard cover history of Dennis. After that, anything is possible.

One of the street names which I have never been able to explain to my own satisfaction is the Great Western Road. I'm sure it was a stage road, now interrupted but originally leading from Yarmouth Port to Orleans. Driving this still woodsy route, one can picture the coach and team racing along the fairly straight road, to Harwich Center and on as the present Route 39 goes, straight to Orleans. The stage carried freight, mail and passengers, and one of the stops along the way was at what is now Liberty Hall in South Dennis. The fact that the road crosses Bass River at High Bank dates it as after 1833. Before that time the only bridge to cross from Yarmouth to Dennis was near the present railroad bridge. Mail did not travel that old bridge, but was delivered to the villages along 6A or to the lower Cape by the Old Chatham Road, and volume was small enough to be handled by a rider on horseback. But in the early 1800's life was moving right along, approaching that fast lane we live in today. As the entire nation expanded and grew in population, better transportation methods began to receive attention. Turnpikes, canals, and bridges made it possible to get from there to here rapidly and easily, albeit not in perfect comfort. Steam was also harnessed and was beginning to threaten the wind-driven sailing vessels, which so many of our men commanded. One of the great engineering events of that century was the building of a giant steamboat which could carry enough fuel to cross the Atlantic without the aid of sails. She was built in England by Isambard Kingdom Brunel in 1838. Equipped with mast and sails for emergency use, she had huge side paddles which could propel her across the sea at a speed of nine knots. She was 236 feet long, 35 feet wide--and she was christened The Great Western. Her every trip between England and New York was carefully reported in all the newspapers, and created a great deal of interest. Although not a tremendous success financially, she was the trailblazer for a fleet of steam/sail vessels which made record passages in both directions. The name Great Western became synonymous with great adventures, and with other ambitious transportation developments. Soon there was a Great Western Trail to the Republic of Texas. Later a railroad westward would use the name. The name became almost an idiom for anything large and fast, including perhaps the stage route from Yarmouth to Orleans, which was in fact a veritable speedway, compared to so many of the Cape's highways, which had developed from ancient Indian trails. Though I know not who close the name nor exactly when it began to be used, the fame of the vessel The Great Western seems the most likely origin.

Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02660

Non-Profit
Organization
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 2
So. Dennis, MA
02660

