

### CHRISTMAS OPEN HOUSE

The old house was certainly not decorated like this for its first Christmas. When Rev. Josiah Dennis was pastor of the East Parish of Yarmouth, Christmas was a holy day, not a holiday. But the beauty of the 1734 Manse, enhanced with greens and soft lights, the pristine loveliness of Georgie Bagge's voice, and the fellowship of good company, gave to our afternoon open house an aura, perhaps not of holiness, but certainly of Good Will to all who attended. Our thanks to those who made this such a pleasant afternoon.

### GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST

All of us look back on Christmas past with a nostalgia for the old-fashioned kind of Christmas, like that recreated at the Manse on Dec. 7. One of the favorite fantasies about Christmas past regards the weather, a White Christmas being the idealization many of us cherish. I don't keep records of such things, but I expect we would be surprised at how few times in recent memory snow has covered the streets of our town on Christmas. Still we hear about old-fashioned winters when snow reached to the rooftops and No'theasters cooled and froze the water of Bass River. Surely such rugged seasons did exist. But some of the recollections may be colored by nostalgia as is our own recollection of snow for Christmas. All winters of yesteryears were not of this rugged old-fashioned variety. I read an item recently in the Yarmouth Register of March, 1862. The reporter begins by quoting a report from a Boston paper, stating that sleighing had been good for sixteen weeks and might continue for at least another month. Our local reporter comments, perhaps wistfully, "We have an altogether different story to relate as regards Cape Cod. Here we have had no really good sleighing for the season ... Can meteorologists and weather philosophers explain the cause of this great difference in the two localities?" Which brings to mind a thought-provoking comment, learned from a local philosopher - "Things just aren't the same as they used to be - but then, I guess they never were."

### STREETS OF OUR TOWN

Near the border of Yarmouth in North Dennis is a short street called Thoreau Drive. Henry David Thoreau, the great striver after simplicity, was indeed a visitor to Dennis, passing through the town on each of his visits to the Cape in 1849, 1850, and 1855. A great deal of his time on the Cape was spent walking the beach on the Backside, through Eastham, Wellfleet and Truro. The account of his trips is contained in a book entitled Cape Cod, and it is delightful reading - philosophical, descriptive and, in spots, humorous. Now, folks, far be it for me to make a criticism about so highly acclaimed and regarded a man as Henry David, but he includes some comments about our town in his book, and his description of Dennis is less than complimentary! Granted, he viewed the honored villages of Dennis and East Dennis through the stage coach windows, on a rainy October day. Nevertheless, he speaks rather unkindly of our fair town, as being "Exceedingly barren and desolate country, of a character which I can find no name for; such a surface, perhaps, as the bottom of the sea, made dry land yesterday." He goes on with such comments as "covered with poverty grass, hardly a tree in sight" ... "here and there a weatherstained, one storied house...standing bleak and cheerless, where the comfort must have been all inside." Can this be our beloved Historic District? Other disparaging comments follow, as well as a description of Cape Cod women which I will not honor by repeating. ("Preserved as dried up specimens, indeed!") In spite of Mr. Thoreau's fame and talents, I cannot help but wonder who, of the loyal citizens of Dennis, was of such gracious and unforgiving character as to give the author's name to Thoreau Drive, one of the Streets of our Town.

### EXECUTIVE BOARD TO MEET

In many of the monthly calendars you will note that the Executive Board is meeting and may wonder what they do. A regular task is to plan the time, place and program for our monthly meetings. The Board also plans for the annual field trips for school children, Bike tours, luncheons, and manages the finances and business matters. We are looking ahead to the day when a comprehensive history of our town will be written, and make every effort to collect and preserve every bit of historical information we can find. This month the Board will be reviewing the slide presentation which is shown to school children before their visits to the Historic Centers, with an eye towards improving their quality. Any member of the Society is most welcome to attend board meetings. As they are generally held at someone's home, please inform the hostess if you plan to attend.

### MID WINTER LUNCHEON

This will be the fourth year that we have met over the noontime meal in February and learned something more about the history of our town. This year's February Fertility will be held on the 14th at the Cape Half House in West Harwich, with a social period beginning at 1 P.M. and a Buffet luncheon at 2. The buffet consists of hot and cold dishes, sliced meats, salads, rolls and dessert and costs \$5.95, tax and tip included. Reservations must be made with Mr. Joshua Crowell and paid in advance. Seats are limited so send today.

MID WINTER FESTIVITY

February 14, 1981

CAPE HALF HOUSE, WEST HARWICH

Please reserve \_\_\_\_\_ Luncheon Tickets @ \$5.95 for \_\_\_\_\_

Please enclose a self-addressed envelope and mail to:

Mr. Joshua Crowell, Box 963, Dennis, MA 02638

## CALENDAR

January 14 7:30 Carleton Hall "Decoys as Art" Ted and Judy Harmon, Slides, talk, exhibit.  
January 21 7:30 Home of President Hart - Executive Board  
February 14 1 P.M. Cape Half House, Mid Winter Luncheon, Social Hour 1, Luncheon 2.

### WHAT DO YOU DO IN THE WINTERTIME.....

...after all the tourists are gone? My favorite answer to this oft-heard question is, "Well, first we fumigate!" It is true that life on Cape Cod is quieter in the wintertime, but certainly full of worthwhile activity. Life was quieter on Cape Cod in the wintertime even before the annual tourist invasions began. But, like today, the quiet winter months were busy and productive. The fishing vessels returned and were bedded down for the winter. Crops had been gathered and stored. The young people had made several trips to the shore, to gather seaweed to bank around the foundation of the house for insulation and to spread upon the family garden for fertilizer. Wood lots had yielded the winter's supply of fuel, now safely stored in the wood shed. The children could return to school, while the adults attended to aspects of survival other than food gathering. Mothers and daughters busily spun, wove, knitted and sewed. Fathers and sons made farming equipment, mended fishnets, and sharpened tools. Most men had a craft which they had learned from their father, or as apprentices, such as barrel making, blacksmithing or leather tanning, and they bartered their wares with their neighbors, so that all had shoes, barrels, and farm tools. The Industrial Revolution took away from the family the responsibility of clothes production and the jackknife industries - but it did not release the Puritan conscience from the Work Ethic. "Idle hands are the instrument of the devil." So homespun industries became productive crafts, not for survival but for improving the quality of life. Spinning and weaving gave way to embroidery and quilting and carving of necessities to decorative works of art. Our program for January shows a useful jackknife industry, developed for necessity which has evolved into an art form. Ted and Judy Harmon of Decoys Unlimited of Barnstable will talk about and display their collection of decoys, from 1860 to the present. They are well-known collectors and experts in the field, and their displays will be exhibited at the Peabody Museum in Salem soon. Come and hear the history of Decoy making on January 14, 7:30 P.M. at Carleton Hall.

### ABOUT HISTORIC DISTRICTING

(Please note that this is an editorial, and does not reflect an official position adopted by the D.H.S. Board or membership.)

The recent turmoil created in Brewster concerning the restrictions imposed by the Old King's Highway Historic District Commission seems to have sent shock waves through the neighboring towns, creating an opportunity to study the whole subject of Historic Districts. We all should have been deeply saddened to hear our village of Dennisport held up as an example of the horrible fate which awaits the northside villages, if the Historic District is abandoned. Yet, sad as it is, the fact remains that the villages along the south shore have lost their character, and have become plasticized and stuccoed, just like any other tourist area. Certainly no one on either side of the argument would want this to happen on Sesuit or Quivett Neck, or along Whig Street or Corporation Road. However, if Historic Districting is defeated there is little doubt that commercialization will creep in, until little is left to remind us of the character of these villages. We feel that it is essential that D.H.S. members take this matter of Old King's Highway as seriously as they did a decade ago, when the South Dennis District was being established. At that time, D.H.S. members catalogued historic assets, and carefully examined what must be done to preserve them, recommending that the Commissions's control be limited to essential decisions. The result has been an Historic District that works, as the King's Highway District can and must work. Those interested in preservation must be willing to preserve as much of the historic individual freedom of the property owner as is consistent with the purpose of preserving the character of the neighborhood. The D.H.S. should be a leader in education, discussion and decision-making to maintain our historic heritage of individuality while also making certain that the visual reminders of our town's heritage are not destroyed.

Dennis Historical Society  
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South Dennis, MA 02660

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

