



IT WAS A LOVELY PARTY

The Josiah Dennis Manse was aglow inside and out on December 9th for our Christmas Open House. Susan Kelley, Isabelle Flynn, Nancy Howes, Sarah Kruger, Mig Maher, Esther McCarthy, and Phyllis Horton worked their decorating magic on our old house with lovely results. About 300 friends came to enjoy the delicious refreshments, music by Dennis Girl Scouts and Stephen Russell, and the charm of Rev. Dennis' candlelit home.

LIBERTY HALL REDEDICATED

"Having completed a nice and commodious Hall above my store, it will be let for concerts, fairs, balls, panoramas, lectures, etc."

Thus did Andrew Wheldon, in an ad inserted in the Yarmouth Register beginning in November, 1865, invite the public to use his new and commodious social gathering place. Now, on February 1, 1991 Liberty Hall will be rededicated, following an extensive restoration of the part of the building in which Mr. Wheldon kept store--the first floor. It gives me a chance to write about some of the social halls which once were community centers for each of our 5 villages. before the days of radio, television, and VCR's made couch potatoes of us all. Worden Hall was built one year after the South Dennis Hall was opened for business. Named for one of the earliest families to live in this town, the Hall was built by private funds, and one of the first events held there was a community Christmas party, complete with Santa Claus, in 1866. It was also at one time the East Dennis Library, and it has seen all of the folksy entertainments which our ancestors enjoyed throughout its long life. It is now the dwelling, studio, and gallery of our good friend Don Davita and his family. Dennis village has Carleton Hall, now owned by the town, and still a very busy and active place, with everything from exercise classes to the Dennis Association for Youth meeting within its ancient walls. It was built as a church for the Methodists in 1820, and was used for a time as a private school, and was originally called Academy Hall. It also began its use as solely a social hall in 1865, when a group of village citizens purchased it. I am told that Capt. Carleton Howes was the leader of the drive to buy the old academy, and so it was named for him. West Dennis also had a hall that was once a school. The West Dennis Academy was built on Pond Street, across from the burying ground on land purchased from Richard Crowell, by the Proprietors of the school house in 1839 and served as a school until after the Civil War. Then it became Union Hall and in 1875 it was moved up Pond Street to the spot that is presently the William Wood Memorial Playground, at the rear of the West Dennis Community Building. There it was rechristened Doric Hall, and was the location of plays, graduations, and the events of a society which intrigues me no end, "The Fat and Lean Society". Can anyone enlighten me on that club? The social life at Dennis Port was brightened by the facilities of Ocean Hall, the home of the Mount Horeb Lodge of Masons, which is now the Harwich Junior Theater, being on that town's side of Division Street. There was also in olden days a hall called St. Elmo's. Like Andrew Wheldon's hall, it was above stairs, over the apothecary of Dr. David Ginn, which he built in 1880. In 1889 Dr. Ginn added to his holdings by building a block of 5 stores, known as Ginn's Bazaar, and above them were his social hall, pool parlor, and offices. The entire block was destroyed by fire in October 1931. It stood on the Main Street, where Hazelton's Gift Shop is today. Later, the Village Improvement Club, originally the Community Club, raised the funds and with much labor volunteered, built the V.I.C. Hall, also now owned by the town, on the site of the Dennis Port Grammar School, which burned in 1929. All of these venerable buildings have seen not only great social occasions, but educational activities as well. Several villages had Lyceums which met regularly, and lecture series were popular. They were also used by Temperance Societies and for political rallies. I will tell you more about some of the entertaining events held in our old Social Halls another time.

THE 14TH ANNUAL MID-WINTER FESTIVITY

Our annual February get-together will be held at Christine's Restaurant in West Dennis on February 16th with Social Hour at 12 noon, luncheon at 1:00. See reservation form below for details. The guest speaker will be our own Nancy Thacher Reid "Looking Back". The very first luncheon in 1978 was suggested by Mary Hood Hagler as a remedy for the mid-winter doldrums, held at the Hereford House in Dennis Port, and the speaker was Pauline Derick. 14 years later it's still a great remedy against the mid-winter doldrums!

FEBRUARY LUNCHEON RESERVATIONS

FEBRUARY 16

CHRISTINE'S--WEST DENNIS

Please make reservations for _____ people. I enclose a check for \$_____ (\$11.00 per person)
Choice of entree: _____ Baked Stuffed Cranberry Chicken _____ Baked Scrod w/ Lemon Butter
Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope and send to:

Mr. Joshua Crowell
Box 963
Dennis, MA 02638

CALENDAR

Jan. 9, 7:00 P.M. Board meets with Henry and Susan Kelley
Feb. 14 Happy Valentine's Day!!
Feb. 16 12 noon Mid-Winter Festivity, Christine's, Nancy Reid--"Looking Back"

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

I always thought that if I were a teacher of history I would try to make the subject come alive a little by relating events that have been recorded in our history books to people who lived in the student's home town. In my school days, that would have also meant relating history to the ancestors of the student, since almost everyone in my class at the Dennis Consolidated School was a native of this town. Now that I have become a serious student of history, I am even more convinced that the great events, the trends and changes, the ups and downs of the economy, inventions--all of these become more interesting, easier to remember and better understood when seen through the eyes of people who lived in this town over the generations. For example, let me introduce you to Franklin Sears. He was born in East Dennis in 1826, the oldest son of Elisha Sears and Mehitable, (known to her neighbors as Hitty) Wing. Elisha died in 1838, leaving Hitty with three young children. When Franklin was 16, he was apprenticed to Isaac N. Keith in Sandwich. Keith was in business in that town. He had a shop where he built carriages and wagons, a business which he would later expand into the Keith Car Works, manufacturing railroad cars. But in 1842 it was a small place where Franklin learned woodwork and blacksmithing skills. Apprenticeships customarily lasted for 7 years, and Franklin's time of indenture ended at a most fortuitous time in history. Gold had been discovered in California! What excitement swept the eastern seaboard! The English had been searching since the continent of North America was discovered. Many of the colonial charters included the provision that, if gold should be found within the bounds allowed to the colony by the king, a portion of it would belong to the crown. Now gold had at last been found, and the king could have none of it! Every adventurer worth his salt was off to Californ-i-a with a banjo on his knee. So Young Sears found himself a wife, Susan Chadwick of Sandwich he found himself a job in construction in San Francisco and he bought himself a pick and shovel, and perhaps a banjo, and was off to seek his fortune, leaving Susan safely at home. There were three ways to get to the West Coast in those days. You could join a wagon train and cross the continent over land. You could take passage on a sailing vessel and round the Horn. Or you could combine the two, taking passage on a vessel to the Atlantic side of the Isthmus of Panama, walk, or ride a mule across the muddy terrain to the Pacific side, and take another vessel to San Francisco. Franklin went by water. He took passage with other construction workers on the Bark Orion, Captain Bunker, master. They were 180 days getting from Boston to San Francisco, so it seems that they had the usual fierce weather and tumultuous seas to battle as they rounded Cape Horn. In San Francisco, Franklin worked with the crew that built the first wharf in that port, then began his adventures as a prospector. Finding the Bay area unfruitful, he tried Oregon, then sailed to the coast of Peru, but, the family record states sadly, "he did not accumulate much gold". We have to wonder if in his travels, he received any news about what was happening at home. Perhaps he did not even know that he was the father of a son, whom his wife had named Charles Franklin, or that his mother's health was failing. However, in 1853 he gave up his search for glitter and returned to the Cape, this time travelling across Panama. Certainly he came home with many tales to tell, not only of his prospecting adventures, but of the hazards of travel, in both directions. Franklin stayed at home for a time. In 1855 another son blessed his home, and in the following year his mother joined her husband in death. As head of the family, Franklin now decided to leave the Cape, taking with him his wife and sons, his brother Elisha Harvey Sears, and young sister, Mercy Wing Sears. No family record tells if their original destination was California, but we know that they travelled over land, by wagon and eventually settled in Ohio, where further adventures awaited them all. Now doesn't that make the whole period of the Gold Rush to California more interesting than facts, figures, and statistics? Maybe I should have been a history teacher after all.

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