

DENNIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER
July 1981 Vol. 3 No. 7

BIRTHDAY PARTY - 188 YEARS OLD

Our celebration of the 188th anniversary of the incorporation of our town, held at the Colonial House Inn on the Green in Yarmouth, was a delightful day for all concerned. Jean and Bill Taylor have done it again! The meal was delicious. Door prizes were won by Harold Baines, Catherine Dempsey, Marion Lowe and Nancy Reid. Before the Bruncheon we took a stroll around the common and visited the Bangs Hallett and Winslow Crocker houses. After the meal Josh Crowell cut the first slice of a large Birthday cake, decorated with the town seal especially for us by Carol Reid. Thanks to the Taylors, Gail Hart, Mr. Perna of the Colonial House Inn, The Old Yarmouth Historical Society, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, and all of the fine members of the D.H.S. who provided the good company and made the day so pleasant.

CAPE COD REMEMBERED

Georgia Ferguson is an expert at recording oral history. This is a method, practiced by your Historical Society, of interviewing long-time residents of the area, and having them recall life as it was in their youth. Mrs. Ferguson will present the recollections of a remarkable woman, Patsy Kittredge, and will illustrate her stories about the Cape in by-gone years. I know you will all be delighted with this program, to be presented at V.I.C. Hall, Dennisport, July 14 at 7:30 p.m. "Patsy Kittredge Tells Stories of Cape Cod."

IT'S STRAW HAT THEATER TIME

Sometime in the early 1900's someone coined the phrase "Straw Hat" to denote that special kind of staging and atmosphere that we associate with summer theater. Good theater has been a part of the summer entertainment scene in Dennis for over 50 years. Our local "Straw Hat" theater is one of the best known in the country. It seems to have been the brain child of Mrs. Haydn Richardson, who convinced Raymond Moore to undertake the direction and Cleon Throckmorton (What a magnificent name!) the design of the building. The Cape Playhouse, which seats 442, incorporates within its building some of Dennis's most venerable history. A part of the framework is the Old Nobscusset Meeting House, circa 1717. Converting the old meeting house to such a worldly use must have caused our founding fathers spirits a few restless nights, but our Puritan ancestors have long since accepted their descendants antics. A benign spirit of antiquity adds a special charm to the Cape Playhouse on Old King's Highway in Dennis. The very first performance was on July 4, 1927. The first play performed was The Guardsman by Franz Molnar. The Playhouse opens its new season on July 3-4, 1981 with a play entitled I Ought to be in Pictures by Neil Simon. Today, "Straw Hat" theater on Cape Cod, and probably in all of New England, measures itself against the excellence of the Cape Playhouse in Dennis.

THE STREETS OF OUR TOWN

A short road in South Dennis leads from the south east corner of Tobey's Swamp on Main Street to the busy intersection of Route 134 and Upper County Road. In old deeds it is called "the road to the Duck Pond" or "the road passed John Baker's dwelling house." The road does not lead to the Duck Pond anymore. That pond is now the site of the Town of Dennis Sanitary Landfill - better known as the Dump. The woodlots encircling it, once so vital to the survival of the families who owned them, are now occupied by homes and businesses, by Route 134 itself and by the Mid-Cape Highway. This is, of course, necessary and in keeping with the change of lifestyle and the modern pace of life. However, although the road no longer leads to the Duck Pond, it does still go past John Baker's lovely Cape cottage, now the home of Bob and Pegge Fisher. South-facing, it sits serenely on its knoll, its back turned to the busy intersection. Built in 1770, it has seen days when the only traffic past its door was the woodcarts of neighbors, laying by their winter's supply of wood. Probably not many of us would want to return to those days of self-sufficient families, even if we could. Still it is good to have this survivor to remind us of gentler, less hurried days. John Baker's house has stood where it is today for 210 years, once all alone surrounded by footpaths, now at the center of one of the Mid-Cape's busiest corners. Let us hope it will remain on this spot for many years to come, on Duck Pond Road, one of the Streets of our Town.

CALENDAR

- July 14 7:30 V.I.C. Hall, Dennis Port. "Patsy Kittredge Tells Stories of Cape Cod" Illustrated talk by Georgia Ferguson.
July and August Jericho House open Wednesday, Friday & Saturday 2-5
Josiah Dennis Manse open Tuesday & Thursday 2-4
August 28-Sept. 7 Dennis Festival Days
Also of interest to our members
July 29 Bus tour to Newport, lunch at Lady Astor's "Beechwood" \$22.00
August 7 Tour of Chatham, Atwood House, Windmill, RR Station, etc.
August 20 Bus tour, Cape Cod Canal area. Call Paula Bacon at 394-5739 for details.

MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

If you do not regularly receive the D.H.S. Newsletter, but receive this issue, it may be because you have been suggested as a person who might enjoy being a member of the Society. During July and August we offer new members the chance to have 14 months membership for the usual annual rate of \$3 individual or \$5 family, which will pay your membership dues from today until the Annual Meeting in September 1982. If you would like to be a member and receive the newsletter every month, please send your dues, with a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Mrs. Elinor Slade, Box 607, South Dennis, MA 02660.

ANNUAL MEETING APPROACHING

According to our by-laws, our annual meeting and election of officers takes place on the second Monday of September, this year September 14. Anyone whose dues remain unpaid by the annual meeting will be billed. Will you help to make the job of the membership chairman easier by mailing your dues with a stamped, self-addressed envelope before that date? See the above article for rates and address. And we thank you!

WHAT IN THE WORLD DOES A STRAW HAT HAVE TO DO WITH SUMMER THEATER?

Some of you may be young enough to wonder what a straw hat has to do with summer theater. But others of you can surely remember the days (dare I say the Good Old Days?) when straw hats, worn in New England only from May to September, were a symbol of the more informal days of summer. I can tell you some interesting facts about straw hats. They became popular in the U.S. in the late 1700's when they were being imported at great expense from Tuscany and Dunstable. Miss Betsey Metcalfe of Providence is credited with introducing the native production, when, in 1798 at the tender age of 12 years, she courageously took apart an imported bonnet and duplicated it, using local oat straw, plaited in 7 strand braids. From this simple beginning grew an important New England industry, not only because of the money it generated, but because it was one of the first industries to employ women. In fact it is highly possible that the straw hat industry provided the first opportunity for our maternal ancestors to be paid in cash for the work of their hands. Right here, in 1847, the East Dennis Straw Works began producing straw hats in a building formerly the Red Top Church in Brewster, purchased for \$100 by Sears and Ledwitch & Co., and moved to Pleasant Street on Quivet Neck. Twenty-five males and one hundred women were employed by the Straw Works, probably using imported straw, for by 1830 the hat industry was able to import readily via the improved trans-Atlantic transportation service. The women learned the business at the "factory" and then were supplied with materials to work at home, while "fresh hands" were trained at the straw works. The building, which is now the home of the Rev. Mr. Lawrence Nyberg, was still referred to as the Straw Factory in the will of Prince S. Crowell in 1881, but by then the business was on the decline. The building was subsequently used as a cranberry storage house and as a guest house known as the Red Top Inn. The East Dennis Straw Works is but a memory, as are the straw hats made there, a symbol of an era now only recalled in the lazy days of summer.

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