



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 28 Number 5

May 2005

Calendar of Events

We plan to celebrate the opening of this year's Maritime Exhibit
Dennis Maritime Disasters of the 1800s
with a **Members-Only Reception** at the
Josiah Dennis Manse
Friday, May 20 at 5:30.
Hors d'oeuvres.

Maritime Disasters opens to the public
Saturday, May 21
1-4 P.M.
Refreshments
Josiah Dennis Manse
Nobscussett Road
Dennis
Exhibit tells of the great storms that wreaked havoc and death on our courageous mariners and their ships.

Saturday, June 4
10:00 A.M.
Annual Lady Slipper Walk
over the Indian Lands
Conservation Area to view
native American lady
slipper orchids.
Walk may be cancelled due to scarcity of lady slippers.
Call (508) 385-2232 for update after May 28.

June 25 Manse Opening
Reception
June 26 Jericho Opening Tea

The Other Side of the Street

Remembering When in Dennis Port—Part II

by *Phyllis Horton*

The September 2004 issue of the Newsletter told of the business emporiums along the south side of Main Street in Dennis Port in the 1920s, 30s, and early 40s. The Port was the shopping center for most of the town and parts of Harwich and Brewster from the early 1900s to about 1980.

Starting at the turn of the 20th century Dennis Port became a tourist mecca and has maintained that distinction to this day. Until the end of World War II most of the tourists and most of the locals walked 'uptown' if you lived down by the shore, or 'downtown' if you lived west or north of the business district. The tourists walked because they were 'out in the country' and most of the locals walked from necessity. If the locals had a car it was wherever the man of the house was working. Everyone walked to get the mail. That was a social event. You would always meet a few people you knew. Then it was just a few steps from David Wixon's Post Office (present day Brothers Pizza) to the stores where you could pick up the couple of items you needed. No one bought a lot on these daily trips because they were walking. Five pounds at the store felt like twenty-five by the time you reached lower Sea Street.

Going across Main Street from Dr. Sternberg's office (where we left off in Part I) was Diadama (Nickerson) Chapman's house. Built in 1819 it is the oldest structure in the business district. Dama's husband Fred was a cobbler who had a shop directly across the corner where he repaired shoes and sold hardware. Fred died in 1920 and Dama in 1937 and the house then became The Merry Window Gift Shop. A few years later it became Sara Beal's Hand Craft Shop. Today it is a health food store.



Sometime after Fred Chapman's death his store was moved diagonally across Telegraph Road to become a home and the property was purchased by E. W. Gould of Hyannis. He built a Tydol Gasoline Station there. It was a white clapboard, gambrel roofed building with black shutters. He also owned stations in Orleans, Centerville, Osterville and Barnstable Village. They all were identical and subsidiaries of Cape Cod Oil. Eddie Dunford managed the Dennis Port station. Window boxes and stone planters were always attractively planted in summer.

Until the early 1920s the next lot was Tom Taylor's blacksmith and wheelwright shop and homestead. That was purchased in the late '20s by Louis and Esther Dean. Louis moved his radio repair and sales business to Main Street and was a fixture there for fifteen years. The Dean girls added to the excitement on Main Street when they were old enough to work in the store selling records, sheet music, etc. Louis rigged up a loudspeaker on the front of the store and the girls played the latest records

that could be heard anywhere in the vicinity. That certainly helped sales and all the teens in the village knew the lyrics to a new song within a day or so. The highlight of every teen's life was when they received a portable record player for their birthday or Christmas. Those were the days of the Dorsey Brothers, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, and Ella Fitzgerald— when Frank Sinatra was as skinny as a pencil and had girls swooning in the aisles. Some of the songs were *Take the A Train*, *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*, *String of Pearls*, *Accentuate the Positive*, and on and on. Now those are some good remembering! The Deans moved to Hyannis during World War II. They also owned a radio and music store there and the commute became difficult due to gas rationing. The store was later occupied for a short time by Robert West who repaired and sold radios.



Next door, going east, was a house built in 1856 for Heman Snow. In 1910 it was Philip Cotell's homestead and fish market. It later became the Rambling Rose Inn and about 1930 it became home to Charles and Gladys Finley. Charlie was an electrician and ran his business from his barn. Gladys was a beautician. She worked out of their home and then Charlie built her a beauty shop in the southwest corner of the front yard. She ran that for a number of years. It later became Myra Sears' Dress Shop.

Next to Finleys was the new Mayflower Restaurant built in the '30s for the Grammaticus family of Hyannis. That is now BZ's Restaurant and from the outside looks just as the Mayflower did. Right after the Mayflower was Charlie Smith's Hardware. The store was packed full of stuff. He had just about everything you could want but he had to find it for you because it was very often buried under something else. George Snow remembers buying a \$9.00 wood plane from him for \$1.00 down and \$1.00 a week until it was paid for. That was the back side of the Great Depression and although the country was getting back on its feet, the Cape had yet to feel too many benefits. We went to Smith's Hardware to get celluloid pea shooters that we used to shoot dried peas at each other. They were fairly harmless in the hands of most kids but could be pretty lethal when used by some older ones. Charlie always carried a fine supply of Barlow knives that had every young boy coming in often to check out the one he wanted to buy when he had saved up enough money, just to make sure no one else had purchased it.



After the hardware store was Russell Chase's Barber Shop and pool room. If you didn't get your hair cut at home just about everyone of the younger crowd got clipped by Russ. He had a booster seat for young kids to bring them up higher. The counter under the big mirrors was lined with bottles of bay rum or other nice smelling pomades, talcum powder and a collection of shaving mugs that belonged to certain men who were regular customers. A row of chairs lined the east wall that was usually full of men who just stopped in for a few minutes to catch up on the local news, unless they were also waiting for a shave or haircut. The Boston papers and Worcester Telegram were available for perusal to check and see how things were at the track. Dog racing had a number of fans among some of the locals and summer folks. Russ was a cigar smoker and could shave, cut hair and talk without needing to remove the cigar. It seemed that he was always dressed in a shirt, tie, sweater, plus-fours and argyle socks. If some guys came along looking for a foursome Russ grabbed his golf bag from behind the door, turned over the Closed sign and was out the door in no time. In his early years Russ had worked in Boston and also became a very good pool player in his spare time. He had a pool table in the back of his shop and it was in use quite often.

Mabel's Mixing Bowl, another restaurant, was next. Mabel was in business before the Mayflower was built and she continued to do a good business after they were established. Mabel's was such a fixture in Dennis Port in that era that it will need a separate article to tell the story.

After Mabel's was a small store that served various and sundry purposes. The original use of the building is not now known. It was known as the A & E Wixon Building. After the disastrous Ginn Block fire on October 12, 1931 Frank Howard (the fire had started in a waste basket in his ship) moved his barber shop into this building across the street. Frank was the barber who tended to the tonsorial needs of the 'older generation'. The building next became Dick Murphy's meat market, George Woodward's barber shop and Homer Levesque's barber shop. It was also vacant on several occasions. In the early 1940s it was purchased by Edward and Madelyn Dunford and moved to 23 Center Street where it was converted to a house.

The last building in the row was a pie-shaped building that just fit into the point where Main Street and

Upper County Road meet. It was called the "flatiron building" by everyone because of its shape. The entire wall that faced Main Street was large plate glass windows and the door. It had oiled floors and a stamped tin ceiling and was probably built or moved there in the 1920s. No one now seems to know the original use of the building. Sometime in the early '30s Mr. Earl Jacobs who lived on Chase Avenue ran a men's haberdashery store there. It seems not to have been a huge success because most people patronized Murray's Men's and Boy's Clothing Store across the street, which before the Ginn Block fire had been Snow and Murray. Old time Dennis Porters were fiercely faithful to long time merchants. Then in 1936 the building was campaign headquarters for the Landon/Knox ticket.

Richard Murphy became Post Master in 1937. He purchased the post office boxes from outgoing Postmaster Norwell Nixon and moved them into this building. This was an ongoing ritual with changing Dennis Port Post Masters. The location might change, but everyone kept the same post office box with the same combination. When Mr. Murphy saved enough money he bought a piece of land on Telegraph Road and applied for a loan to build a new post office. It officially opened on January 4, 1940.

The flatiron building stayed empty for a while, but after World War II started and rationing became a way of life, so, too, did "Saving for the War Effort". Mrs. Ellen M. B. Shaw of Dennis Port took charge of running the volunteer group. Housewives saved their tin cans, newspapers, pots and pans that developed a leak and many other items that could be recycled. On Saturdays the local kids would go from door to door collecting what had been saved and delivered it to the flatiron building to be bagged and tagged during the week for trucks that came from away. Anything too large for the kids was picked up in Mrs. Shaw's 1929 Ford sedan unofficially named "Kitty Black", or by someone with a truck who would volunteer to help out. Cigarette packages and sticks of chewing gum were wrapped in tinfoil-backed paper and everyone meticulously peeled the foil from the paper to save for the war effort. You started with the wadded up foil from one stick of gum and added to it with each piece of foil that came your way. By the time it was about four inches across it weighed five pounds and you felt pretty proud turning it in. All the little red wagons in the village got quite a workout in those days.

Dennis Port has certainly changed in 60 years but old timers with a discerning eye can still find vestiges of the old downtown. Just look around and remember.

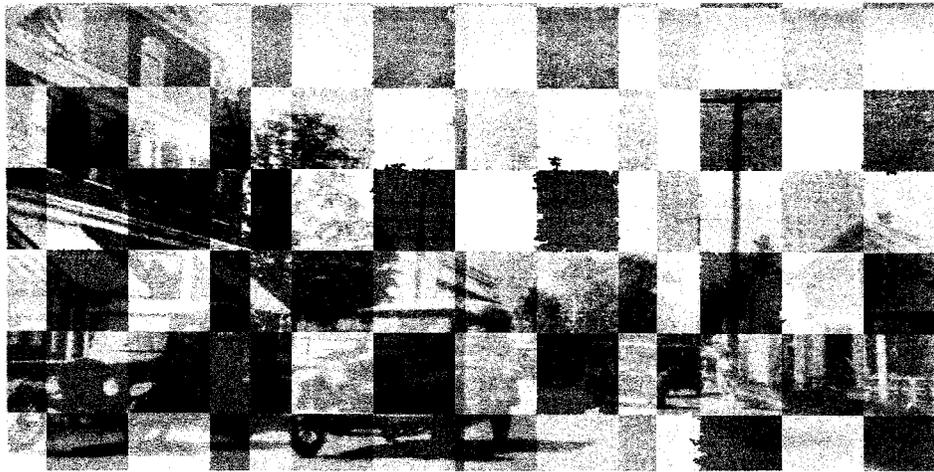


Photo copied from an old newspaper thanks to Burt Derick.

Just a note:

On May 21 the Josiah Dennis Manse will open an exhibit entitled "Dennis Maritime Disasters of the 1800s". The fall of 1888 saw two notable and very damaging storms. The first of these, while causing much damage throughout the region, had a special local impact on Dennis. *Barnstable Patriot 10/22/88 Dennis: One of the worst accidents on account of the storm was that of Edgar Merchant, who works for C.E. Lewis on the Tobey Farm. While Merchant was engaged in splitting wood, an outhouse was blown over, inflicting a wound on his head of a very severe character. Thank goodness he was not inside! One can only think of the scatological comments that would have been made by his "friends". Pete Howes*

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The Way We Were

Now where have you seen **this old clock before?** **Would** some of you recognize it as belonging in Carleton Hall? This old building, constructed around 1830 by the Reformed Methodists and later used as a private academy, has been a town meeting place ever since **Captain Carleton Howes** organized a group of citizens in 1865 to purchase the hall and outfit it for community use. (See *Dennis, Cape Cod* p. 423) *The hall was owned in shares by many residents of the village until 1955 when it was presented to the town.*

This year the town has been refurbishing the hall once again to update the kitchen and install handicapped-accessible bathrooms. The clock was taken down during painting and it came to Richard Howes' attention that it was no longer working. Dick approached the DHS Board with a request to repair the clock to be returned to Carleton Hall when the work was completed. He took the clock to the Village Peddler for repairs. At one time this beautiful rosewood/gilt clock had a pendulum works, but they must have been removed when there was no one to rewind it every week. Electric works had been installed and now didn't work at all. Although we won't see the pendulum restored, at least we can thank Richard for seeing to it that we have preserved this fine old clock to keep time for the many programs still to come.

