



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

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BATTY DOCENTS

It was a long summer as a docent at the West Dennis Graded School. Most Wednesdays, Phyllis and I had little to do except to talk with one another – very few visitors stopped on their way to or from the West Dennis Beach. But, as in flying airplanes, hours of sheer boredom can often be interspersed with short periods of great activity.

In mid-August, our colleagues at Jericho sent a wonderful Jewish family over to view our museum. A very youngish mother, with five grown teens (one about to begin teaching school), were enthralled at what they saw at the school house. They read all the signs, engaged us in conversation, and asked many questions about what they saw.

At a point where I was discussing whaling in the maritime room, most of them were in the school room. Suddenly there was a raising of voices with shouts of "there's a bat!!!" I went to the connecting door, and, sure enough, doing circles in the room was a Small Brown Bat, some 6-7 inches in wingspan. I closed the door to contain the critter in that room, and tried to call the Police to get the Animal Control Officer. Thanks to the Iphone-savvy lady visitor, she pulled up the number for me, I called, and was assured someone was on the way. The concern is this – bats DO carry rabies, and why is a bat flying in the mid-afternoon if there's nothing wrong?

We continued our visit in the Maritime Room, until suddenly, there's the bat doing circles around that room! (The doors don't fit very close to the floor, and the bat had crawled under the door between rooms!) At that point our visitors left!

Phyllis and I watched the critter fly around a few turns, then it landed on the floor. It crawled along the floor for a small time, then became airborne and flew down the rear stairwell. "Great!", I said, "We'll have fun getting him out of there, particularly if he goes to the basement level!"

About this time, the Animal Control Officer came up the front stairs to the museum. I explained that the bat went down the other stairwell. With a caution that seemed to imply he was after a creature from the movie "Aliens", our intrepid hero pussy-footed down the stairs, staring into every nook and cranny for the elusive bat. (The walls are white, and the bat would have stood out like a sore thumb!) Phyl and I clomped down the stairs with our usual elderly gait!

Sure enough, on the main floor, the bat is doing LARGE circles in the meeting room, but he has a friend. After a few minutes we realized the friend was a house sparrow that had come in through the open door – relief that we did not have 2 bats! With we three at one end of the room, the bat used discretion to remain at the other end of the room. Phyl suggested that if we could open the far door to the room, perhaps the bat would take the easy way out. Animal Control took her key, sneaked out the nearer door, and unlocked the far door. Within seconds, it seemed, the bat was gone out the door – certainly relieved that those stupid people wouldn't bother him any more!

Now to the sparrow. You recall that one end of the meeting room has a stage, some 18-inches high. I climbed up on the stage, reached across to the window, and grabbed the sparrow loosely in my hand. Success! When I stepped down, I misjudged the distance, twisted my ankle, and crashed to the floor in a terrible heap. When 285 pounds hits the floor it does create some excitement! (Thankfully, I did not crush the poor sparrow – he escaped!). Phyl pleaded "Are you alright???" Animal Control said "Do I call Rescue?"

I groaned and asked for time to determine if I'd broken something – wiggled my foot (which hurt like H), and after several minutes found there was nothing broken but only tendons badly torn.

Animal Control caught the sparrow in his hat – and let him go, not much the worse for wear. I limped around getting the building secured, and Phyl helped get the windows closed and everything locked up.

The family whose visit was interrupted kept involved. They called Roger Sullivan (former chair of the WDGS, whose number was still on the website) – "What bat?" They left a message on the Josiah Dennis Manse phone. And they called our President, Pete Howes. In each call their message was "Is everyone OK?" People are great, and although we don't know your names, we hope you will return to us someday, so we can say thanks eye-to-eye!

I have been limping ever since, but nothing is broken. The doctor said that some tendons were torn and will heal in time. We did make the decision before the last week of August that we had done all we could do at the School House Museum for the season, and did not open the last day.

Who says being a docent is a quiet, unassuming, benign activity!

Burt Derick

Moving Towards 400 Years of Thanksgivings

Since Colonial times November has been the big food month of the year. By that time our forefathers were getting the last of the year's crops harvested, dried and stored away to keep them fed until the next year. In their second fall here, 1621, they celebrated the first Thanksgiving inviting their Native American friends to join them. The Pilgrims would not have survived the first two years without the aid and instructions of the Wampanoags. The celebration lasted a week and King Massasoit, with ninety warriors, dropped in to celebrate with them. Every one loves a party! Think on that as you are setting out the china for your Thanksgiving dinner.

In the 17 and 1800s country folks still worked diligently to store enough to keep themselves fed through the winter and spring but city folks were relying on merchants to provide them with sustenance—for a price, of course.

In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed November 26 to be Thanksgiving Day—a national holiday and with few exceptions it has been a day to celebrate food and family.

After the Civil War Dennis housewives were taking advantage of the canning jar process to preserve the vegetables and fruits from their gardens and feed their family through the winter. The Barnstable County Fair, held every September, helped these women become experts with their jams, jellies and other produce. Every year they tried to do better than the year before—always with an eye to a blue ribbon.

By this time the women relied on the butcher wagon to come around with his cuts of beef, pork and lamb. Almost everyone kept a few chickens in the back yard for eggs and meat. For fish she would send one of the boys, with a few coins tied up in a handkerchief, down to the harbor to buy one from a boat just coming in or if her husband was a fisherman, as most Dennis men were, he brought it home .

The local economy had improved. Some men were selling baked goods, even going door to door, and every neighborhood had a farmer with a cow or two. Mother would send one of the kids with a few cents and a ½ gallon can to bring home milk probably 30 minutes out of the cow.

In 1883 the largest volcano ever recorded blew up Krakatoa Island in Java. The explosion killed thousands of people, was heard 3,000 miles away and created a 50 mile high ash plume that surrounded the world. Falling ash turned the rain and snow gray and my great-grandmother, Phebe Chase Murray, called it "the year of no summer", which no doubt made a lean Thanksgiving. The temperature did not return to normal until 1888. Surely there were a couple of years without a full table but "grateful to be alive" must have been included when grace was said.

During the Victorian Era, with the exception of the above, women went to extremes in providing a Thanksgiving dinner, often with help from nearby relatives. This meal was weeks in planning and preparing. There was always a turkey plus roasts of beef, lamb and pork with a fish dish as another course. Every vegetable she could get her hands on was on the dining table or sideboard(s). Gravies, jellies, pickles and other condiments were in abundance, along with a variety of breads and rolls. Then it was time for dessert. Cakes, puddings, cookies, a dozen pies, tarts, candied peels, fruit cake, truffles, and more all washed down with ciders,

wines, nogs, etc. Granted, a lot of people showed up to take part in the feast, but the housewife didn't feel she had done her best until anyone could barely rise from their chair.

At the turn of the 19/20th century neighborhood grocery stores sprouted up all over Dennis. There were 21 in 1895 and 20 in 1901, none which sold meat or fish. Some carried butter and cheese but milk still came from a neighbor and many homes still raised chickens. In the 1920s/30s an A & P and an Economy chain grocery store opened on Main Street, Dennis Port., which by now was the shopping mecca for most of the town plus people from Harwich, Brewster and South Yarmouth. By WWII many of the small stores were gone.

My first memory of Thanksgiving was at my grandparent's home on Depot Street but as they grew older the venue changed to our farmhouse on Main Street. As my siblings and I grew older, we married, had children and Mom's dining room table was stretched to its limits for the number of chairs and the amount of food it was holding. Eventually another table was added to the big one. As in every family there was a kids table. Every year the food grew in choices and scope. Mom's record was a 25 pound turkey whose breast bone just cleared the top of the oven in her Glenwood range.

Every family has memories of Thanksgiving. I hope yours are as good as mine.

Phyllis Horton

THE STREETS OF OUR TOWN

It's that time of the year when we're thinking about gathering the family together for a turkey dinner, so what better time to salute little Cranberry Lane in Dennisport as our street of the month? For what is a turkey dinner without cranberry sauce and what would the history of Dennis be were it not for cranberries? Our town has the distinction of being the birthplace of the cranberry industry. For years cranberries had been harvested from their natural habitats and used as the Indians had used them, to add flavor to meats and stews, and raw, as a prevention for scurvy.

Then one day, around 1812, Henry Hall of Nobscusset, growing anxious for his winter's supply of wood, cleared land which separated the beach dunes from the cranberry swamp where his family regularly gathered their berries. When the wind blew a layer of sand over a part of the swamp, Henry thought that he would have to send his children scouting for another supply. Imagine his wonderment when he observed that the part of the swamp which had been sprinkled with sand was producing more berries than the unsanded part! Now, Henry wondered, if he could improve the crop with such a cheap commodity as sand, couldn't he try to turn his family's berry crop into a commercial venture? And this he did, as did many of his neighbors.

I have often wondered what masterly bit of merchandising could have convinced enough people to try these pungent, dry, berries. Sugar was dear, and roast turkey not a common meal. Nevertheless, cranberries were established as an important crop and sea captains, tired of following the Blue Water route to economic security, bought up cranberry swamps and experimented with sanding, ditching, feeding, and even insect control. Elsie Gray Howes told me that she could remember when her grandfather kept an old cast iron trypot beside his bog. He filled it with tobacco leaves which he steeped in water and then spread the liquid on his bogs.

Today, nicotine spray is still used as an insecticide on bogs. Economically the cranberry has been an important crop in all of Eastern Mass. since 1854, when the Rev. Benj. Eastman of Dennis published the first book on Cranberry culture. By 1889 3,000 acres of land were under cranberry cultivation. When it was picking time, schools were dismissed and the entire family would hand pick or scoop the cranberries from the vines.

To my knowledge, Ansel Preston Howes was the fastest picker in Dennis. In 1877 he picked 330 qts. in 9 hours. Now the bogs are machine picked and few of our native population find seasonal employment. In view of the importance of the industry, it seems strange that this modest street is the cranberry's sole monument in Dennis. Nevertheless, at this holiday time, we cheerfully salute little Cranberry Lane, one of the Streets of our Town.

Nancy Thacher Reid, November 1981

Kap'n Kezzie's Komments:

If you don't read the newspaper you are uninformed, if you do read the newspaper you are misinformed. --**Mark Twain**

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Bits ‘n Pieces – November 1963 - Due to the nature of the November 22, 1963 tragedy, the usual “Bits ‘n Pieces” are superseded by this article in the November 29, 1963 issue of The Dennis-Yarmouth Register:

Hearth, Home & Help! By Louise Robsham

“An Epitaph But they didn’t live happily ever after ...

Once upon a time there was a brave, handsome young prince who won the hand of the most beautiful princess in the land. And they were wealthy and happy and wise and the people rejoiced. After a while, the prince took his princess to live in a wonderful white castle with their two beautiful little children. The old king and queen smiled and were happy. The rest of the royal family was happy too – all the other brothers and sisters of the brave prince, for they loved one another greatly.

The people of the land and even those who lived in far away places watched and wondered and smiled as the handsome couple brought new life and gaiety and wisdom to all.

But some hated and envied the beautiful ones. So one day, a wicked person killed the brave young prince. The princess wept – the people wept – and even the skies wept because the fairy tale didn’t come true. You see, they didn’t live happily ever after ...

Is this the reason why the whole world mourned this week for our President? Can it be that he personified the prince in the fairy tales of our youth? Was he our personal Saint George destined to slay the dragon? Was he our Daniel in the lion’s den? Was he a voice of reason in a world of madness only to be slain by a madman?

These are questions that only you alone can answer. To each of you, John Fitzgerald Kennedy meant something different. To all, his assassination brought terrible emotions of sorrow, dismay and horror.

It has been noted that a reporter’s job is not only to report the facts but to report the attitudes of the people as well. The people I saw were stunned by disbelief, weeping in bewilderment and joining together to pray.

People on the Cape claimed John Kennedy for their own even though many did not agree with his political beliefs, and some, with his religion. In his death, all differences were forsaken in a common grief.

Those of us who had become quite used to seeing him here never failed to wonder at his personal magnetism for he was a legend in his own time.

Only history can tell what effects his tragic death will bring to bear on the world. Right now though, all we can hear is the terrible unceasing beat of muffled drums – the tolling of a bell – the lonely plaint of a bugle – the sobs of the people.

No, they didn’t live happily ever after ...”

by June Howes