



AN ASSORTMENT OF RUMRUNNERS

On the way to Nantucket recently on a foggy day it seemed relatively easy to imagine a rumrunning boat of the 1920's-30's appearing like a ghost out of the mist and then disappearing. They used the fog as a cover and coastwise savvy pilots to get the cargo to the chosen site. Dennis was as likely a port of entry for those boats as any other town on the Cape. On Nantucket Sound we have most notably Bass River, Swan River, and--right next door to Dennis Port--Herring River in West Harwich. On the north side Quivet and Sesuet Creeks and Corporation Harbor were good landing places--as well as any other place accessible to a truck, automobile, or horse and wagon. Dennis mariners have always been available to make a living on the water whenever the opportunity presented itself--and Prohibition was just another opportunity. Hundreds or thousands of bottles and cans landed in Dennis to be distributed elsewhere, but a certain percentage found its way into Dennis cellars, barns, and closets.

That was a time of high excitement as the ever-present Coast Guard was a force to be reckoned with. Many times they would come upon a boat running with no lights on, start a high-speed pursuit, and after 20 minutes or so the pursued boat would heave to for boarding--having just jettisoned their entire cargo. Uncle Sam's watchdogs would board a "clean" vessel where they could do nothing, knowing well that the crew was guilty, but with no evidence. Word of these goings on always seemed to be common knowledge in town the next morning and local fishermen would be out dragging the Sound or the Bay hoping to dredge up a cash crop. One of these astute fishermen was Than Wixon of Dennis Port. His daughters, Pauline Derick and Adelia West said they still have the boom Than used to drag the Sound retrieving cases that had been thrown overboard. They remember well being wakened one night by the State Police pounding on the door. They were trying to locate a crew that had been surprised unloading a cargo, abandoned the boat, and taken refuge--somewhere. Than allowed that he really couldn't put his hands on them. Of course not!--he was in the house and that crew was hiding in the cellar of his barn. The next morning his wife, known to us as Miss Marion, scurried out to the barn with some hot coffee and baking powder biscuits, scared that someone would see her. It seemed the crew was a bunch of young boys from Plymouth, one or two who lived next door to her uncle, a Plymouth policeman. He had given them Than's address as a safe haven in case something went wrong. Than later drove the boys back to Plymouth--hopefully a little wiser for their experience. Than stored his "catch" in one of his summer rental cottages or in his barn cellar until he found a buyer who, quite often, was Dr. John P. Nickerson of West Harwich (where the Friendly's Restaurant on Rte. 28 is now). Earl Nickerson of Dennis Port fished quite often with Than and would sometimes take part of his pay in liquid form. Going home (which was just around the corner) with his "pay" in a wooden box he spied Constable Benjamin Kendrick coming down Depot Street. Earl put the box down, sat on it, and whistled nonchalantly while Ben drove by. That sounds like more of a suspicious act than if he had kept on walking!

The aforementioned Dr. Nickerson had a number of patients who relied on him for their supply when their usual sources closed down. One of them was a lovely old lady who most people that had just failed from old age. Not so! She was just half mulled all the time. Capt. John made a daily pilgrimage to Dr. Nickerson's for another pint of her "medication". When their house was moved there were heaps of empty bottles under the floor.

In the woods between my house and the beach in those years was a wooden shack used to store cases and/or five gallon cans of illicit liquor while it awaited transportation to Boston or other points west. My husband's grandfather, Anthony W. Gage, had given him a new hatchet for his birthday. In kid fashion he went through the woods chopping at occasional trees. When he came to the shack he went inside and used his hatchet on a lot of the cans. In later years he said he didn't realize the implications of his act at the time, and was very glad that whoever owned it didn't come looking for him. I'm sure the bootleggers must have thought the Dennis version of Carrie Nation had paid them a visit.

There are a few more 'Tales from the Twenties' that will have to wait until next month. If any of you readers can add to this little chapter of Dennis history drop me a note at Box 607, South Dennis, MA 02660 or call me at 394-0017.

REPORT OF THE PUBLISHING COMMITTEE

In the interest of keeping you all up to date on the book we are including the report given at the Annual Meeting from the Publishing Committee;

First I must clarify the unfortunate misquotation from the article in the September 3rd issue of the Cape Cod Times. It was stated that the History would be ready for Christmas which, of course, is what we all hoped.

The correct statement should be: The Layout of the History will be ready by Christmas. We are now told the printing and binding--without any problems--will take an additional eight weeks.

The reasons for the continuing delay are many. Suffice it to say your Committee's inexperience in publishing a book of this scope and size has resulted in the optimistic reports of an anticipated release date. The smallest details must be considered and decisions made, and literally hundreds have come up unexpectedly. Please contact Jim Carr, 385-6464 if you have any questions.

Respectfully submitted: Jim Carr for the Publishing Committee

CALENDAR

Oct. 12 7:30 P.M. Board meets with Sarah Kruger at the Hannah Paddock House.
Oct. 30 2:00 P.M. Monomoy: A Voice from the Wilderness. Illustrated talk by
North Cairn. See article below. Carleton Hall.

DHS HAS SOME NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The Dennis Historical Society Annual Meeting convened at Jacob Sears Memorial Library on September 18th and elected your officers for the coming year. Lu Crowell, Brendon Joyce, Gertrude Lailey, Richard Howes, Joshua Crowell, Nancy Howes, and Jim Carr were reelected to the same offices they held last year. Seth Crowell and James J. Coogan, Jr. were elected to the 3-year Board of Director terms vacated by Henry Kelley and Isabelle Flynn. Nancy and Josh gave their yearly reports. The by-law change mentioned in last month's newsletter was passed unanimously, and true to her word President Lu ran a brief business meeting.

We then enjoyed a very entertaining presentation by Jim Coogan—"Inventors, Entrepreneurs, and Opportunists". It's true—old time Cape Codders were a pretty clever lot. If there was a possible way for them to make some extra money on an idea they didn't hesitate to put a patent on it. The Board presented their ever-popular refreshment table loaded down with tempting morsels too good to resist. Thanks Seth and Jim. Now we'll all settle in for a busy year for DHS.

HOW ABOUT A MONTH ON MONOMOY?

Do we have any takers? I think it might be a bit strenuous for many of our members, even if secretly we'd like to try it. Thanks to Cape Cod Times nature writer North Cairn we can do it the easy way. Last autumn North spent a month alone at the primitive lighthouse keeper's cottage on South Monomoy, an island wilderness off Chatham. There she lived for four weeks in solitude, studying and writing about the natural history of the wildlife refuge, now in its 50th year. Her sojourn marked the first time in 30 years that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had allowed anyone an extended stay there.

Through slides and a talk, Ms. Cairn will focus on the natural history of Monomoy, its significance for migrating birds and wildlife refuge, and the personal experience of solitude in the wilderness. You are all invited to bring a friend (or several!) to what I understand is a great program. 2:00 P.M. at Carleton Hall in Dennis Village. Refreshments will be served.

TEN SHUN!!!

We have a request from Jim Carr to get this notice into the newsletter:

It's not too late to get the name of your ancestor, spouse, son, daughter, father, mother, aunt, uncle, or any other Dennis veteran—including yourself, in the list being prepared by Jim Carr for posterity which will be published in our History of the Town of Dennis.

We want to be sure to include every person who served our country in the armed forces from 1639 to 1993. This, of course, included the Merchant Marines, Overseas Red Cross duty and those currently in uniform.

Please call Jim at 385-6464 with the name, branch and dates of service.

Jim has worked diligently to research the names of people who entered the service from the Town of Dennis. Every time he thinks he has a pretty complete list he finds out about someone else. He envisions our History being on the book store shelves and many disgruntled veterans calling him saying, "My name should be on that list". If you know of anyone who should be included please call Jim. He may already have the name—but then he may not. If you reach his answer machine leave the name of the veteran, your name and telephone number in case he needs to reach you for further information.

Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02660

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