



Dennis Historical Society

Newsletter

April 2021

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The next Board Meeting will be conducted by email on Tuesday, May 11th

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

The Whooping Cough Epidemic of 1934

It wasn't the horrific influenza pandemic of 1918 – 1919, nor was it the devastating coronavirus pandemic we are still in the midst of in 2021, but in the memory of our own historian, Phyllis Horton, it had a significant impact on the life of a young girl growing up in Dennis Port.

Recently, practicing covid-19 safety protocol, Director of the Jericho Historical Center, Dawn Dellner, sat down with Phyllis in her kitchen and learned about the whooping cough epidemic of 1934. Here is Dawn's transcription of an interesting and quite scary piece of local history.

I'm not sure if they closed the Dennis Consolidated School or the Yarmouth High School because of the whooping cough, or if life went on as usual. I could not find much information in the Dennis town records; however, this is how I recall it.

My best memory at age 7 is that of Esther Dean, of Dean's Radio and Record Shop on Main Street, Dennis Port and the mother of three close in age girls, giving a party for all the Dennis Port kids who had whooping cough. Every kid in the village was there except, Louise Higgins because she never caught it. Looking back, she may have had a natural immunity to it as she was exposed to as much of it as the rest of us. At any rate every other kid in Dennis Port was at the Deans' house having a great time with ice cream, bowls of chipped ice because the ice soothed the pain of coughing when it became too intense, and playing with the Deans' pet monkey. Those kids had all sorts of exotic toys! Poor Louise stood across the street crying big sobbing tears because she was left out.

I was in first grade when I caught it. I passed it on to my 3-month-old brother, Alton Robbins, and he nearly died. Our mother, Edith Murray Robbins, sat with him in her arms for three days and nights watching to see if he stopped breathing. If so, she pulled the phlegm out of his mouth and throat and breathed into his mouth and nose putting air into his lungs to start him breathing again. Our grandmother, Nora Snow Murray arrived, took Alton out of Mom's arms and said, "Edith, go to bed". She did and by the time she awoke there was a list of women and men from Dennis Port to West Harwich who signed up to help take care of him. My mother reminded me years later that children who caught it and were nursed back to health were very fortunate as there were many who were not so lucky.

In 1934 the Dennis town report does not mention it nor in the school report or any other report. I remember being told that people died from the whooping cough. Headstones have chiseled on them, "died from whooping cough". Not to find it in any town records, school reports, or public records was an eye opener.

I have been told that the hospital in Hyannis had limited facilities to care for that number of people. Modern medical science has saved most of us from old time epidemics. This seems to have been the dividing line between home healing and hospital care.

The following summer, when our neighbor and missionary, Ruth Dickey, came home on summer leave from teaching at a girl's school in the Belgian Congo in Africa, she told us whooping cough was rampant in Central Africa, and it was a world-wide epidemic. I was not at an age that "worldly goings on" mattered, but this event made a big impression on me. Fortunately, today young children are inoculated at an early age against whooping cough and other childhood diseases.

We should all be eternally grateful.

By Phyllis R. Horton

When done recounting her story to Dawn, Phyllis handed her a note asking if it could be passed on to the membership. At the top of her note, Phyllis had written *For the Newsletter*. It is with great pleasure that this is done!

To All My DHS Friends,

Thank you so very much for the kindness you extended to me on the 40th anniversary with the DHS Board. It has been a labor of love.

When I think back over those years and the dear friends, some now gone, and the ones still with us, I have been truly blessed.

Sincerely,

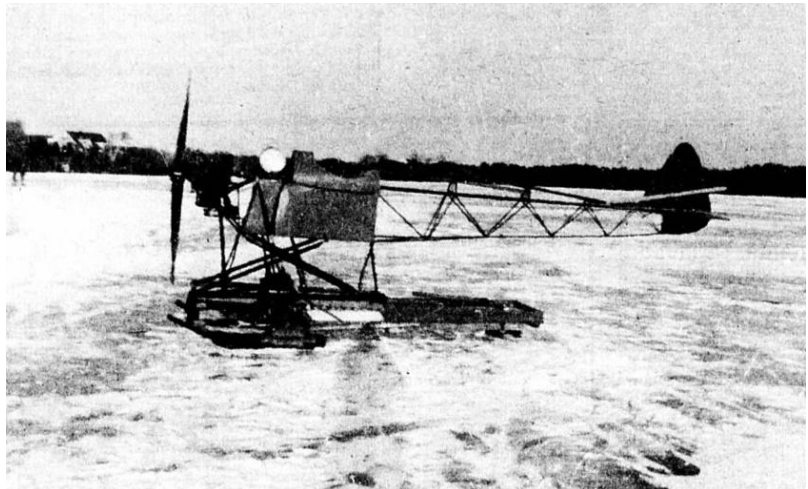


Phyllis R. Horton

“Ingenuity on the ice at Scargo Lake”

“Walkers’ fearful contraption’ may have been fastest iceboat, but....”

Early last winter, lifelong Dennis resident and keeper of local history, Carole Bell, sent me an article which originally appeared in the *Register* on January 26, 1984. Written by reporter Hugh Dellios, the article concerns the escapades of the Walker brothers. Joe was Carole’s uncle and Dan her father. The article appears here in its entirety, and it is illustrated with images by photographer Michael Fein.



“The Walker brothers’ fearful contraption, circa 1940”

Iceboating has certainly gotten expensive these days. One hundred mph hulls cost more than \$2000, for example. But it was not always difficult and expensive. Often it was far more ingenious than today. The Dutch created the first iceboat by placing three runners beneath a conventional blunt-nosed sloop. The first American iceboat was built in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1790.

Lester Edwards of Dennis Port remembers iceboating across Scargo Lake as a seven-year-old in 1902. Edwards and his cousins built their iceboat with a plank and two pair of old skates they found in a junk pile. Edwards' aunt supplied an old torn sheet for a sail. "Money was tight then," he recalls. "We never had a dime. There wasn't anything we didn't use."

The home-made iceboat ruled in the old days. Factory produced kits like modern Williwaw did not exist and were not needed. Making an iceboat required ingenuity then, not a thick billfold and a tube of waterproof Resorcinol. "A bunch of guys would get together and throw a boat together," recalls Joe Walker of Dennis. "You'd bum a sail from somebody and make a platform. You could throw one together in a day"

Though the ice of Scargo Lake has been criss-crossed by home-made iceboats of all shapes and sizes, the ultimate iceboat was unveiled in 1939 by Walker and his brother Dan, also of Dennis. That year, the Walker brothers got hold of an old World War I seaplane from a military surplus warehouse. The plane was soon to become a boat. The plane came in a crate and required assembly. Leaving the wings off, the Walkers mounted the plane fuselage onto a platform and three runners. Their iceboat would need no wind and no torn sheet for a sail; it would be propeller powered. "It

had an old Excelsior engine," said Dan Walker. "We got it running in my mother's basement. It scared her to death." The brothers initially tried to steer their new iceboat using the plane's original tail rudder. It didn't work as well on the ice as in the air, however. "In theory it was okay," said Dan Walker, "but there is some distance between theory and practice. The runners would dig into the ice, so when we went to turn, we went right in the woods." Subsequently, the Walkers converted the rear runner into a rudder. One of them would lay on the platform below and steer while the other sat in the cockpit and kept the engine running. The iceboat "could sail faster than the wind," claimed Dan Walker. The boat was fast enough and strong enough to pull a person on skates along by a rope. Once the Walkers could steer the boat, they played crack the whip and sent the trailing skater reeling "a couple hundred yards across the ice." The Walkers' boat might have been the fastest on the ice but they never got the chance to prove it. Dan Walker cites heavy snow and constant engine problems as reasons they didn't race against the wind-powered iceboats. He did finally admit, however, that "nobody had the guts to open it up," for they lost control as it went faster. "It was a fearful contraption," he added. One day the Walkers and some friends were out on the ice with the iceboat and a car. They had just come in from a spin on the ice and had left the iceboat idling while they warmed themselves around a fire. Hearing a tremendous whine, the Walkers looked up and watched the boat's wooden propeller suddenly break in two, with half sailing out over the ice and half flying right through the door of their car. Though the Walkers did get a new car door at a junkyard, the incident spelled the beginning of the end for their iceboat. Neither had the desire to spend money on a new propeller. As a last effort, Dan Walker sent the broken prop back to the surplus warehouse, claimed it had dry rot, and demanded another, free of charge. The company refused. The Walkers only used their plane/iceboat for one winter and eventually gave it to a private flight and mechanic school in the area. They continued to make iceboats, however, until very recently. "For all the effort put into it, the sail iceboats were more fun," said Dan Walker. "There were no maintenance problems. You just get in and go. You could say the plane was a challenge though."

With appreciation to Carole Bell for sending the article, and apologies to the *Register*, for using the article without securing permission.

2020 Annual Appeal Update

Last November, DHS launched its 2020 Annual Appeal. We were seeking funding for three projects. At the 1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum, the request was for funding to have all the windows professionally cleaned, purchase UV protecting shades for the windows and acquire two tents for outside events. Our 1801 Jericho Historical Center was seeking funding to implement the plan for the gardens which is being developed by Christie Higginbottom, retired head of horticulture at Old Sturbridge Village. And, contributions were requested for the Curator's Discretionary Fund so DHS can act quickly if an item appropriate for our collection comes to our attention.

Good news! \$8,718 was raised in the Appeal and we were able to fully fund the three projects above. The Board of Directors wants to express its gratitude and appreciation to all who supported the Appeal. We look forward to giving you a report on the projects above as they are completed. ***Thank you!***

February's Old House Scavenger Hunt

As some of our readers were quick to report, although the *March Newsletter* announced the winners of the contest in February's issue, it didn't list the location of the properties which were pictured and comprised the hunt. This omission was an editorial oversight requiring a mea culpa!

Here are the locations of the fifteen houses

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| #1 72 Luscombe Lane, Dennis | #6 29 J. H. Sears Road, East Dennis | #11 167 Bridge Street, East Dennis |
| #2 36 Old Town Lane, East Dennis | #7 67 Sea Street, corner of Pleasant Street, East Dennis | #12 23 Hall Street, Dennis |
| #3 44 New Boston Road, corner of Beach Street, Dennis | #8 41 Seaside Ave | #13 282 Sesuit Neck Road, East Dennis |
| #4 66 Scarsdale Road, Dennis | #9 27 North Street, East Dennis | #14 60 South Street, East Dennis |
| #5 38 Whig Street, Dennis | #10 138 Corporation Road, Dennis | #15 107 Beach Street, Dennis |

#4

Among the numerous entries, only one asked a question...a very interesting one which I am posing to the membership. Scott Walker, a frequent newsletter contributor, as recently as last month, wrote:

#4 is a house I was told was constructed from recycled timbers from the Nobscusset Hotel, built by I. Grafton Howes. It is said that he built 3-4 such Nobscusset-timbered homes in the area, each a little bigger with this one being the final project. Did anyone else report this? I am not certain on the location of the others but would like to refresh my memory if someone might know. If you can add any information to this discussion, please email it to:

info@dennishistoricalsociety.org.....thank you!

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Coming in May!

We can all look forward to another article by our Publicity Director

Kevin Keegan.

Perhaps there is no one more qualified to tell this story!

A MATTER OF STRIFE AND DEATH

How Catherine "Kate" Homer, born and raised on the Old Kings Highway in East Dennis, unwittingly became part of a major medical controversy in Boston



It's Membership Renewal Time!

Don't just renew your membership; give a membership to a family member, or friend. What a great gift!

Not only will that membership be appreciated, it will help us grow! Please include a note with the name and mailing address of the gift recipient along with your payment.

You can do so online using **PayPal** at <http://www.dennishistoricalsociety.org/GetInvolved/Membership>

After making your payment, email us at **info@dennishistoricalsociety.org** to send the name and mailing address of the lucky recipient.

Thank you!