



Dennis Historical Society

Newsletter

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**The next Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, February 14th, 2:00 pm at the Dennis Memorial Library
1020 Old Bass River Road, Dennis Village
Members Welcome**

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

David Henry Sears

I love to save things, especially old magazines, so I was thrilled last autumn when Betsy Harrison loaned me a copy of the *Cape Cod Compass*. A search on line yielded little about the history of the magazine, except that it was published annually. The date for the first issue, 1947 was gleaned on EBay, when I saw that 1972 issue was Volume 25. Betsy's issue was 1951, loaned to me with the words, "You might find the article on D. H. Sears suitable for a newsletter." Ah, D. H. Sears, I recognized the name instantly! In the January 2019 Newsletter, there's a wonderful article written by Bo Durst entitled *Mildred Crowell's Girlhood* which included a picture of D. H. standing in front of his store in East Dennis. Here is another one of the store which Bo provided and this is what Bo had to say in her newsletter article –



Photo provided by Bo Durst

There was a store at the corner of School and South Street. It had a room on the west side called the D. H. Ice Cream Parlor. It also had a soda fountain there. The east side had food and a candy counter where we could buy licorice sticks, also a raft of other things. There was a big box full of unwrapped loaves of bread. You pawed around regardless of how dirty your hands were to find the loaf you wanted. Sometimes it was put in a bag, but more often, you took it as is. It burned down and another store was built on the corner of Center and School Streets called H.H.'s where they also sold dry goods, etc. . . .

And, here is the article reproduced in its entirety from the 1951 issue of the *Cape Cod Compass* - *IN THIS AGE OF SPECIALISTS AND STREAMLINED BUSINESS, it is a delightful experience to go to a country store that retains all of its original, old-time flavor, and*

yet has, somehow, become blended with modern developments. The establishment referred to is that of D. H. Sears, and who has ever visited Cape Cod and not at least heard of his famous ice cream?

Born at West Brewster in 1865 in the charming cottage that is now the PACKET antique shop, David Henry Sears' parents moved to East Dennis during his infancy, and that picturesque village has been his home ever since. His earliest recollections are of licking the dasher when his father made the Sunday ice cream from six eggs and a quart of cream; that, we can only guess, is the basis of his secret recipe which his grandsons now use, carrying on the family tradition.

Apparently it all started in 1880, when David Henry and his cousin, Will Sears, who "cruised around together" set up a little stand in a corner of what had been a tin shop, their equipment consisting of a gallon freezer and some cone shaped glasses which held the ice cream only on top, and were, perhaps, the forerunners of the sugar cone. The boys charged ten cents a glass—and got it! (A dime had purchasing power in those days, so the price was high.) The partnership was worked out so that each lad had every other night off to call on the girls!

Young David augmented his income in every possible way. His first job was the mail route; he was excused from school at 11:30, and delivered the morning mail before he returned for the afternoon session; after this he took around the evening mail, and for this each recipient paid him $\frac{3}{4}$ cent a piece, regardless of whether it was a postal or a catalogue. Incidentally, the last person to make these rounds in the early days of this century was Mrs. Sarah Anne Sears (no relation) who obliged her clients by reading their post cards to them before handing them in! She sang at the top of her lungs as she went from house to house, and on her evening delivery made a social call at each stop, even removing her hat for comfort, when she occasionally dozed in her chair before taking off for the next place.



Photo of D. H. Sears from the C.C. Compass

To return to David Sears' youth—he was paid \$25.00 to take care of the church, and after the vestry had been added his salary was raised to \$30.00 per year. Not satisfied with these enterprises, he bought an ox team, and carted seaweed, then used as land filler, for fifty cents a load. He was fortunate in that a nearby meadow was then being transformed into a cranberry swamp, and he had the contract to bring in the sand for that.

At 17 he found steady employment at Underwood's Store and Post Office in South Dennis where he stayed until he was 21, driving the order cart and hauling grain to South Yarmouth to be milled—the miller taking out his toll of so many pounds of the load for the grinding. Then when the East Dennis storekeeper, Ellery Smalley, died, a benefactor, Prince Crowell, bought the shop for D. H. Sears. An arrangement was agreed upon whereby young Sears leased the premises and paid off an annual amount besides, until he owned it. In those days everything came in bulk, and the cracker barrel was the prominent feature; all spices, mingling their fragrance, had to be weighed out. Meats were bought from Faneuil Hall Market. Chunks of the very finest corned beef retailed for nine cents a pound. In addition dry goods, jewelry, harmonicas and accordions were stocked—truly a general store. Mr. Sears was a meticulous bookkeeper, having a Day Book and Ledger, some of these are still extant to tell us that once one could buy five dozen eggs for 70c, 1 3/4 lbs of butter for 51c and a pound and a quarter of cheese cost 20c. Stock taking occurred the first of January and bills were sent out once a year; but Captain Daniel Hedges who owned the steamship line that plied between New York and Savannah paid his bill voluntarily every six months appreciating what it meant for the storekeeper who had to pay cash, quarterly, for his supplies. Cranberry pickers were then imported from the Cape Verde Islands, reaching New Bedford via whaling ships. These men came for the season and were housed in shacks near the bogs. A time keeper kept track of their hours, giving them a chit for each day's pay. This they would turn in at Sears' store, in lieu of money, to get their provisions. When the harvest was over the bog owners redeemed this scrip. Mr. Sears delightedly reports that "they sure bought a lot of stuff."

Married at 24, Sears paid \$40.00 a year rent for the east side of the Homer house (still standing). Mr. Wriston, the Methodist minister, father of Dr. Henry M. Wriston now president of Brown University, leased the opposite side for \$5.00 a month. Unfortunately Mrs. Sears died of a heart ailment in three years' time. Five years later he married again. It is this housewife to whom we must pay a tribute, for she first baked the delicious bread that brought the public flocking. David Henry tried it himself, and to this day gets up at three o'clock every summer morning to set his dough and provide the bread that equals his ice cream in popularity. The latter product still absorbed much of his attention—he peddled it by the glass in a cart drawn by a small jackass. He now could make ten gallons at one time, and saved himself much effort by rigging up a shaft, one end being fastened to the freezer, and his horse harnessed at the other, being driven around and around, until the cream was hard.

In a few years he bought himself a house, barn, ice house and grain store for \$500. He prospered until 1902, when his first store burned, and he salvaged less than \$90.00 because he had failed to increase his insurance when he added to his stock. But he found a nearby location and started up again, his wife helping pay the debts by taking in boarders and serving dinners. He had nine cows of his own and paid five cents a quart for all the milk he could buy in the neighborhood. This was all put through a separator, and to make everything count after the cream was removed, he made cheese, set some milk for clabber, and fed the residue to the calves.

Fire seemed to be his continual misfortune, his ice house was struck by lightning, but he promptly rebuilt, and in three years added another. When again he lost everything in a tragic conflagration, he began anew, nothing daunted, despite the fact that he was then well beyond middle age. Every debt was again paid, and in telling of this unhappy event he summed up his whole philosophy when he said "I'd rather sell the clothes off my back than to owe anyone money." By this time he spent his Sundays delivering buckets of ice cream packed in salt and ice. His largest customer was THE SIGN OF THE MOTOR CAR, reputedly the first tea room in the East, and one whose menus have never been surpassed. Transportation was afforded him in 1914 by a Model T runabout; subsequently, needing more space, he added a tailboard to a 1912 Cadillac for which he paid \$160.00.

For the past fifteen years he has baked his own beans for the traditional New England Saturday night supper He excels in these, as he does in his two other specialties—and orders pour in so heavily that it is often impossible to fill all the demands.

What is it about this tall, spare, elderly gentleman that has drawn so many people to him? Surely he has not achieved the great material success that has become the popular present day standard for claim to fame. All his customers become his friends, among whom he numbers such luminaries as the Vice-president of the Ice Cream Soda Club of

America, Miss Lillian Gish, who had a quart of Sears' ice cream sent to her dressing room every night of her engagement at the Dennis Playhouse; Miss Helen Hayes and Miss Lily Pons, besides a host of others, and one and all, famous or not, are accorded the same genial, smiling welcome. The answer may lie in the fact that here is a man whom Life could not down because he had courage, integrity, and independence that comes from self-respect, and, above all, he has a sense of humor. All these attributes are unconsciously felt, and he transmits to others what is so badly needed today—a faith in himself and in human nature. He has always supported himself and his family, and at the age of 85 continues to do so—spurning the concept of the Welfare State, and governmental handouts. He has passed on his spirit of helpfulness to his children and grandchildren—no effort is too great for any of them to help a neighbor.

Perhaps the secret of his success was summed up by a teen-ager whom I overheard tell him, "You know, the reason everybody likes to come here is because you are always so friendly and so glad to see us—not a bit like the other shops."

It is the indomitable spirit of such men as David Henry Sears that has helped to make America great, for they may be found in every state and every field of endeavor. If their descendants are imbued with the same ideals of wanting to pull their own weight in the world, then, despite the changing concepts, America has nothing to fear.

Thank you Cape Cod Compass and thank you Betsy!

Returning to Frontier Valley

It is so terrific when things unexpectedly come together! With our ongoing request/quest for first person recollections of Dennis in the 20th century, it was amazing to receive a sequel to last month's article about *Frontier Valley* from Carole Bell. You will all remember Carole as a lifelong resident of Dennis, recaller and raconteur of our rich local history and frequent newsletter contributor. Her sequel fills the bill on both counts!

I was 9 when Frontier Valley landed in Dennis. We would drive by it on our way to shop in Dennis Port. There was a stockade fence that kept anyone from seeing much.

How well I remember when my off-Cape cousins were visiting, I got to spend the day completely absorbed in everything cowboy. What a wonder it was! There were sharp shooters, stunt riding and gun fights which would erupt at any moment. Every hour on the hour, a bank robber was shot, tumbled off the roof and landed in the watering trough. During the stage coach robbery, I was entrusted with keeping the bag of gold dust safe.

One could board the miniature train that encircled the park perimeter as it sped past a silver mine. Gruff cowhands lounged around the bunk house cleaning & repairing tack. Dusty cowboy boots were propped up on the hitching post, and spurs jangled when the cowboys strolled around the dirt street. No one interacted with us. This wasn't like Plymouth Plantation. We were only there as spectators.

The barkeep in the saloon offered you a Sarsaparilla, but only if your mom allowed you to have soda in the first place. The barn and the corrals held the horses that pulled the stage coach, galloped after outlaws and provided pony and trail rides. Of course, I was expecting to see real cowboys like the Cisco Kid. I loved his pinto pony and his black outfit with all the silver do-dads. To my dismay, it was Rex Trailer, not the Cisco Kid! Rex had a kiddie show on local TV. To me, he wasn't even a real movie star. In fact, back then, I thought that his show was pretty lame. I can still remember the chorus, Boom, Boom, Boomtown: no boom, just boring, vanilla stuff...no outlaws, no shootouts and no cattle rustling. Some years later, I met Paul Sullivan who told me that he and his brother were once employed as cowboys. How I would have loved to have that job!*

I am not sure when Frontier Valley closed, but I expect that since it was a seasonal business, it had to compete with clam shacks, ice cream stands and the beaches. It must have had a huge operating budget. From experience, I know what it takes to feed, vet and shoe just ONE horse, let alone a whole barn full! With staff, upkeep of the buildings, payroll and publicity there were big bucks involved!

Long after Frontier Valley disappeared, some of the original buildings remained. They were stained dark red. The bunk house was still there when the town of Dennis purchased Mel Pet Farm. A portion of the original perimeter white fence can still be seen behind the Ace hardware store on Rt. 134. A bridle path led from Mel Pet Farm to Rick & Celeste Ulrich's barn at 183 Airline Road which is still there today.

** The Cisco Kid was a 1950–1956, half-hour, American Western, television series starring Duncan Renaldo in the title role and Leo Carrillo as the jovial sidekick, Pancho.*

Thank you Carole!

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2022
DHS Annual Appeal

There's still plenty of time. If you have not yet responded to the Society's 2022 Annual Appeal letter asking for support for *wish list* items for each of our three museums. Please do so now!

Please give generously! Your contribution will greatly assist our museum volunteers in fulfilling our Mission Statement:

**To Preserve, Protect & Promote the
the History of Dennis, Massachusetts**

*If you have already given
Thank you!*

Membership

It's a month away, but it's never too early to think about what your membership means to you, and what it means to your Society!

Next month is membership renewal month. When your renewal arrives, please respond quickly and mail a check in the enclosed envelope.

*Or, you can renew online using
PayPal*

<http://www.dennishistoricalsociety.org/>

Click on the tab Get Involved,
then click on Become member

Thank you!