



Bley House News

Dorset Historical Society

Winter 2014

A Seasonal Newsletter

The Songs of Christmas

OFFICERS

Carol Cone, President
John Cave, Vice-President
Albert Eckhardt,
Treasurer
John McInerney,
Secretary

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Chip Ams
Malcolm Cooper
Steven Davenport
Peter Davis
Art Gilbert
Judy Harwood
Barbara Melhado
Herman Raspe
Heidi Stokes

ADVISORY COUNCIL

Kathie Wall Evans
Dick Freeman
Rob Gaiotti
Kaye Manly
Susanne Rappaport
Sydney N. Stokes, Jr.
Susanne Washburn

DIRECTORS EMERITI

Richard Hittle
Hank Westphalen

MUSEUM CURATOR

Jon Mathewson

OFFICE MANAGER

Betsy Olson

MUSEUM HOURS

Wed– Fri 10-4
Sat. 10 AM to 2 PM
& by appointment

802-867-0331

info@dorsetvthistory.org
www.dorsetvthistory.org

Every December, the Bley House museum comes alive with an exhibit featuring an aspect of Christmases past. Recently, we have featured teddy bears, winter sports, model railroads, and the evolution of the Christmas trees (Ligno vitae decorator). This year, the multi-room, multi-media exhibit will feature the stories of the songs of Christmas.

Every song, of course, has a story, and the study of the history of Christmas songs opens doors to the place, time, and context of words that live on 150 years after they were written.



Other popular songs can be revealing of the mood of a culture at a specific time (the story behind the Civil War song “Tenting on the Old Campground Tonight”(1863), for instance, adds great depth to the understandings of the war by its participants). The living memory, and therefore perceived importance, of popular songs dies as the generation they appealed to dies. Christmas songs, which are sung intergenerationally, live on in popular culture, and can be used as history-teaching tools. Yes, this even applies to songs like “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.”



Also, by looking at Christmas songs, we learn more deeply about how Christmas was observed in different eras. The way Christmas has been celebrated over the past two hundred years has changed often, and radically. In brief, boisterous songs of revelry and demands for food, drink, and figgy pudding were written when Christmas was celebrated by unruly mobs roaming the streets of wealthy neighborhoods, similar to the modern form of trick or treating on Halloween. When this form of revelry met with the displeasure of the rising middle class, Christmas was consciously changed to a more sedate, stay-at-home,

family-friendly affair. During this period, the quieter songs appeared, like “Silent Night” and “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.”

After the holiday had become more widely observed, and had even become a federal holiday in 1870, more celebratory songs were written, like “Jingle Bells” (originally meant as a Thanksgiving song), and “Deck the Halls” (an old Welsh melody with modern English lyrics), but for only a little while. The turn of the 20th century saw only a few new Christmas carols, and those were primarily translations. The rebirth of new songs came in the 1930s, with dozens of secular songs, beginning with “Here Comes Santa Claus” (1932), and moving on with songs from multitudes of holiday movies and television specials. That is, of course, just a sketch of the complicated unfolding of Christmas songs over the centuries. Stop by to learn more about those songs you may remember from other days.



Holiday Exhibit Opening Saturday Dec. 6th 1-3 pm

What Do We Do With Oversize Donations?

What you see at Bley House may be only a small part of our entire collection. Presenting new exhibits several times a year enables us to show our visitors some of the artifacts that may be housed in the basement or storage bins for lack of display space. In addition, there are artifacts that are too large ever to come through the doors of the museum, but nevertheless are an important part of the past life of our community and deserve their share of the stage.

Among our oversize items are several large pieces of equipment that have been moved from storage in Manchester to a nearby Dorset barn. Art Gilbert, Malcolm Cooper, John Cave, and Terry Tyler assisted our curator, Jon Mathewson with the moving, following construction of a wooden platform above the barn's dirt



Terry Tyler with the Fanning Mill

floor so the articles could be moved in. The barn itself required a new sliding door and additional foundation work by Steve Fisher to prevent entry by local rodents and other small animals. Bryan Bowen was responsible for necessary painting and gutter-cleaning. The result, as described by Terry Tyler, is “the Mercedes Benz of storage.”

The items presently housed in the barn are one Albany cutter sleigh, three Portland cutter sleighs, one pung (sleigh used for carrying cargo), one large carriage, one scraper for a marble quarry, two large historic culverts, and a fanning mill. The scraper was used to remove the moss and dirt from marble before cutting; the fanning mill was used to separate wheat from chaff, and was a device owned by nearly every farmer in the East. The most recent addition to the display was a donation in October from Roger and Heidi Harwood of Rupert. It is the sleigh used by Dr. Charles Harwood (1833-1902) to make house calls to his patients in winter weather.



Steve Fisher and assistant, Justin Lourie, prepare to jack up the barn and repair sills and beams



Albany Cutter Sleigh



Dr. Harwood's Winter Sleigh

The collection is now being cleaned and a public viewing is definitely “down the road,” says Mathewson. First it is necessary to remove the accumulated soot and dirt from the wood, metal and fabric. Cleaning is being done with a vacuum using a Hepa filter, which does not have much pull, and will clean the paint and fabric without damage. Dry sponges treated with chemicals, similar to makeup sponges, are also being used on the upholstery and trim.

We are deeply grateful to William and Wenke Sterns of Dorset for providing a home for this unusual collection. Watch for an announcement of the public viewing in late

Former and Current Dorset Historical Society Curators Win Awards

Susanne Rappaport of Pawlet and Jon Mathewson of Middletown Springs both received awards from the Vermont League of Local Historical Societies and Museums for their dedication to local history and their significant contributions to the communities of southern Vermont that they have served.

Susanne Rappaport received a Lifetime Achievement Award for her contributions as director of the Bennington College Dance Project 1991-1995, founding executive director of the Slate Valley Museum in Granville, NY, director of education at Hildene, and curator of the Dorset Historical Society's Bley House Museum (2008-2011). She has also been a Board Member and Curator of the



Jon Mathewson receives award for Exhibition and Public Programming

Pawlet Historical Society since 2000, and has worked on several projects as a Collections Consultant from 2002 to the present. These projects included collaboration on the Katherine McCabe Art Collection in Londonderry, VT, and the Ekwanok Country Club's history in Manchester.

Jon Mathewson received his Exhibition and Public Programming Award for the completion of a twelve-year project for the Middletown Springs Historical Society: a timeline of the history of the town from 1761 to 1971 in 20-year segments. Jon has also served as the Curator for the Dorset Historical Society since 2011.



Susanne Rappaport receives Lifetime Achievement Award from Mark Hudson

Dorset Historical Society Elects New Board Members

At its Annual Meeting on October 29, the Dorset Historical Society elected two new members to its Board of Directors. The new directors are Steven Davenport and Charles (Chip) Ams. They will replace Suzanne Hittle and Terry Tyler, whose terms have been completed. The Society is most grateful to Suzanne and Terry for all they have contributed to its activities and progress.

Steve and Anne Davenport have been Dorset residents since 2007, having been regular visitors for years. They are also residents of Chatham, NJ where their sons attend school and Steve serves as Captain of the emergency squad and a coordinator in the office of emergency management. Steve and Anne had careers in financial services primarily in New York but with assignments in Australia and Japan. Much

of their Dorset time is spent happily in the woods on Mother Myrick. Their affection for the Dorset Historical Society springs from the enthusiasm of sons Jack (11), Henry (9), and Will (7) to explore the remnants of all the commercial quarries of Dorset's past.

Charles M. Ams (Chip) joined the insurance agency Finn & Stone in Manchester Center in 1984 after relocating to Vermont from Fairfield County, CT. In 1986, he became a Managing Partner. Today, Ams is president and principal owner of Finn & Stone, and feels very fortunate to have his son and daughter, who both grew up in Dorset, return to Vermont and now work with him. Over the years he has been on the Dorset School Board, the Dorset Field Club Board of Governors, and is currently on the Dorset Library Board, the Dorset Conservation Board, and the Vermont Insurance Agents Association Board.

Curator's Notebook

Finding Exhibit Ideas

Every year, the exhibits at Bley House change, or are updated. Five stay more or less the same: the Marble, Jessica Bond, Fenton Pottery, Dorset Artists, and the Hunt Gilbert photograph exhibits have all been here for several years, some with major annual changes (like the Gilbert photographs and Dorset Artists), and the others updated every couple of years. That leaves the rest of the Bley House to be filled with new exhibits that do not repeat past shows.

Ideas come from different places. Two of the exhibits for 2015 come from the good research conducted by two museum volunteers: Ruth Stewart and her research on the various schoolhouses in Dorset, and Dave Parsons and his continuing research on postcards of Dorset.

Another exhibit comes from recent donations: in the past two years, we have received several gifts of old printer's engraving blocks. Some of these are original art, some were used for advertisements for the Dorset Inn and the Caravan Players. I see this as a good time to show these new and old acquisitions in the context of how and why they were used.

In researching Dorset artists over the years, I continually stumble across references to the Art Students League of New York. One exhibit for 2015 will feature the 16 or so students of the people who studied at Art Students

League and who settled in Dorset during the 20th century, exploring what drew them to Dorset, the interactions between the artists

themselves, and how they fit into the local community.

The 2014 Cabinet of Curiosities exhibit was developed to showcase objects that might not otherwise be exhibited. This because I had so much fun mounting a much larger Cabinet exhibit at another institution, and received cues on better interpretation from the Vermont History Center's Cabinet exhibit in Barre.

Ideas for the annual holiday exhibit come from Board members and volunteers. Specifically, the idea for the 2014 holiday exhibit, featuring songs of Christmas, came from Judy Harwood. Another volunteer suggested an exhibit on the architecture of

various Dorset houses. This led down the winding path to the 2014 exhibit highlighting the Kent Neighborhood Historic District.

The development of exhibits from initial idea to final completion is very much a creative process, gathering ideas from wherever they may come, perhaps even from you. If you have a suggestion, share it with us.



Lunchtime Lectures

Our successful Third Thursday Lunch Lecture Series continues for its fourth year. Come and explore many subjects and individuals from local and state history. You are invited to bring a brown-bag lunch. Dessert and refreshments will be served after the lecture. All lectures take place at Bley House at noon and are free and open to the public. We hope to see you there.

December 18: "Thomas Jefferson in Vermont and His Role in Vermont Statehood" by Sydney N. Stokes, Jr.

January 15: Shawn Harrington will discuss "Digitizing History"

February 19 : Gary Du Four presents "The Atomic Veterans"

March 19: Walter Klinger presents "European Settlements in Southwestern Vermont Prior to 1761"

April 16: Randy Schmidt will speak on "Birds and Birding"

Lacunae

In addition to office supplies and tools, we are always realizing there are things that have not yet entered our collections, which we ought to have. This time, we would like a donation of the book by Simeon Pease Cheney, *Wood Notes Wild: Notations of Bird Music*, published posthumously in 1892. For a 2015 exhibit, we seek a donation or year-long loan of a painting by Dorset artist Sigrun Taylor. Can you help?

OUR WISH LIST

The Dorset Historical Society collections include a number of documents, journals, letters, and ledgers in a wide variety of sizes. Many of them, because of their age, are quite fragile and therefore not accessible to the general public. In order to share them with visitors and researchers, we need a state-of-the-art flatbed digital scanner with contemporary software capable of scanning document as large as 11" x 17". The approximate cost of such a scanner is \$1500. Any donations toward its purchase will be welcome. Please call Jon Mathewson, Curator at the Dorset Historical Society, (802)867-0331 if you wish to contribute.