



DENNIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER
Volume 21 No. 8 August 1998
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HELLFIRE AND BRIMSTONE

I thought that would get your attention! Please don't be too disappointed. I am not going to reveal any gossip. I'm just going to tell you about a place that formerly stood on the Old King's Highway where activities occurred in the early part of this century which by today's standards were not really sinful or scandalous. However, at the time, some of the more pious or perhaps self-righteous members of the community, it would appear, believed otherwise.

On the north east corner of Nobscusett Road and Route 6A, there once stood a modest building which was called the Nobscusett Social Club, or sometimes the Dennis Social Club. It was the home of the Nobscusset Relief Association, and it became a place where the men of the village would gather for conviviality and whatever else. I guess it was the "whatever else" that raised objections. The first public notice I have found of the club was in 1900, when a lock was placed on the door, "... as it was found that it was being put to more liberal use than was intended when it was built. We hope soon to see it opened as a reading room and for social purposes." Apparently, this earnest hope was never realized. Instead, the clubhouse gained a reputation as a "den of iniquity" where pool was played and liquor was available.

The more conservative members of the community looked with disdain on those who frequented the premises and the location became known as "Brimstone corner." Some members tried over time to improve the image of the Social Club. In 1901, John Murphy, (who, by the way, was the builder of Scargo tower), led a move to spruce up the interior and the *Yarmouth Register* reported: "Under the artistic hand of Mr. Murphy the Nobscussett Club house has been decorated in terra cotta and frescoed." The Association also gave a Grand Ball that year, inviting the ladies to dance to Mr. Fish's orchestra, which consisted of three musicians. These efforts notwithstanding, however, the criticism continued and the club house was soon permanently closed. The site was still referred to as Brimstone Corner as late as the 1920's, even after the building had been moved to Horsefoot Path and the club had disbanded.

More recently, since about 1930, this corner has been the site of a garage, owned and operated by several different proprietors. To the passerby, the building now on Brimstone Corner appears quite ordinary, but there is one very extraordinary feature which few people know about. Like the old Social Club, there is beauty inside of this plain looking building, also provided by local talent. The walls of the rest room of this ordinary garage are decorated with murals by the noted Provincetown artist Peter Hunt. Even those among us who are not particularly well-versed in the doings of the art world probably know the name, for Peter Hunt was a popular artist who decorated his world with whimsical artistry. He was also, incidentally, a superior cook and if you like simple but gourmet recipes, borrow his Provincetown Cookbook from your village library.

Today, the former garage is once again involved in controversy, not so much about its past or present, but about its future use. There is a proposal to have a gas station and convenience store on Brimstone Corner. Neighbors feel that such a usage would increase the traffic problems at an already busy intersection. A Public Hearing is scheduled for August 24, so that both proponents and opponents can express their thoughts.

What ever happens to the building on Brimstone corner will affect that neighborhood of our town where the old Social Club once stood. And one has to wonder what will happen to the artistic work of Peter Hunt, in perhaps the only rest room on Cape Cod decorated with his art.

IN PRAISE OF SEAWEED

Our ancestors are probably looking down and chuckling over all the to-do about seaweed on the beaches this summer. Of course, it is messy and it is unsightly. But to Cape Codders of a previous generation, it was a valuable commodity. Most old Cape houses were built on a brick or stone foundation, but with only a very small, round brick cellar. This made for drafty rooms when the winds of winter roared off the Bay. Our ingenious ancestors found a way to diminish those drafts and all it cost was a day's work.

Each fall, some time before Thanksgiving, Old Dobbin would be hitched up to the truck wagon and driven to the shore, where Father and the boys would wield pitchforks and collect a wagon load of seaweed for "banking up." The humble seaweed was to serve as insulation from the wind. Packed against the brick foundation to a depth of two feet or so, it really did make a difference in the comfort within those humble homes. After the winter, the seaweed could be added to the compost heap, or even spread on the land and plowed under to aerate the soil. For a neat narrative on "banking up" in the days of yore, find Joseph Lincoln's collection Cape Cod Yesterdays. It's a great book to read at the beach (after you've cleaned up the seaweed!)

CALL TO THE ANNUAL MEETING

Members of the Dennis Historical Society are hereby notified the Annual Meeting and Election of Officers will be held on Sunday, September 20, 1998 at 2:30 P.M. at the West Dennis Community Building. Please plan to attend

CALENDAR

Aug. 12 7 P.M. Board meets at Jericho House
Aug. 15 to 23 DENNIS FESTIVAL DAYS
Aug. 15 1-4 P.M. Colonial Open House at the Manse
Aug. 16 11 A.M.- 2 P.M. Everyday Life During the 1800's at Jericho
Aug. 19 10:30 A.M. Walking Tour of Old South Dennis. Meet at the church
Aug. 20 7:30 P.M. "Yesterdays in Dennis" -- slides and lecture, Senior Center

Coming in September

Sept. 20 2:30 P.M. West Dennis Community Building

ANNUAL MEETING AND PROGRAM

"Captain Peter H. Crowell, Portrait of a Master Mariner, 1837-1923"

presented by his two great-granddaughters, Nancy Crotoia and Sylvia Homer

Don't Miss It!

NEWS FROM JERICHO

Jericho has received a complete tool box from one Jotham "Carpenter" Nickerson, a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Robert Anderson of South Dennis. We are most appreciative of their kindness. Carpenter Nickerson was the designer and builder of several homes in the South Dennis Historic District.

We invite all to stop by Jericho on August 16th during Dennis Festival Days to see everyday skills needed for life in the 1800's. Time is 11 A.M. to 2 P.M. The Country Store in the Jericho has 3 new (but old) chairs, purchased in South Dennis. Sit and visit for a while.

The portraits of Ezra Baker and Howes Baker have come home to Jericho. We are pleased and honored by their presence.

CM.

AND FROM THE MANSE

It's become a tradition to hold a Colonial Open House at the Manse during Dennis Festival Days. It's a time when we demonstrate colonial skills, play games and enjoy the Colonial Militia Encampment. This year's trip back in time will be on Saturday, Aug. 20, 1-4 P.M.

OTHER FESTIVAL DAYS ACTIVITIES

On Wednesday, August 19th, at 10:30 A.M., a walking tour of the South Dennis Historic District will begin at the South Dennis Congregational Meeting. Please park at the Parish House next door. We will begin with a tour of the church and burying ground, and a talk about the lower end of the district. Then we will proceed by car to the parking lot of the Town Office and continue with a stroll down Main Street, along what has been called the best preserved 19th century village street in Massachusetts. Every house has something to tell us about the history of the town. Please plan to join us.

A slide show and lecture based on old pictures of Dennis will be given at the Dennis Senior Center on Thursday evening at 7:30 P.M. Both newcomers and old-timers will be looking at scenes of Dennis in the late 19th and early 20th century. Bring your guests. There is no admission charge.

CRANBERRY MOMENT

By now the bees have done their job and the cranberry growers are concentrating on weed and insect control. This year, due to the excessive dampness, fungus control has been added to the summer chores. If you relish hard work, volunteer to clear ditches for your neighbor cranberry farmer. It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it, if proper irrigation and insect control are to be maintained.

Dennis Historical Society
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