



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 39, No 11

Send letters & stories to Dennis Historical Society, Box 607, S. Dennis 02660 or to pjhowes@verizon.net

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The next Board Meeting is Wednesday, December 13, Jacob Sears Library, 26 Center St., East Dennis

From Your Editor—

Dear Readers:

This December issue is the *one-hundredth* Newsletter that I have had the pleasure of preparing. I hope that you have enjoyed these tidbits of Dennis history, current events and other ephemera. Volunteering on a temporary basis following the late Lu Crowell's illness back in 2007, what I thought was temporary became rather permanent. Over these years we have received and published many remembrances and articles from our readers, and I can only encourage their continued submission. These personal experiences are and will remain those very valuable windows into lifestyles long gone.

However, the time has come for me to step aside from this activity and for a new Editor to take my place, one with perhaps new ideas and a different approach. Of course, I will provide full support during the transition. This note is thus a call, entreaty, plea and note of encouragement for one of you, our members, to take on the position of Editor. It is a rewarding task.

Please send an e-mail or call if you have even a glimmer of interest, and I will be very pleased to discuss the how's and wherefore's of the newsletter process.

Sincerely, Pete Howes

New DHS Officers & Directors



Center – Diane Rochelle, President.

Left – Pricilla Hutchinson, Director at Large

Right - Bob Poskitt, Treasurer

Missing – Jan Ward, Director

Christmas Yesterday

Christmas used to be a very simple festival with its interest centered around the Church. Gift-giving and home decorating were strictly of the homemade and family-circle sort, and if there was any flurry of preparation for the holiday, it took

the form of flying knitting needles, busy scroll saws, and tempting odors from the kitchen. In this household when my father was a little boy, one of the traditional observances of the season was the making of popcorn balls and taffy. An evening shortly before Christmas was given over to this pleasant occupation, and the big kitchen hummed with activity. While the corn was popping in the wire baskets that shuffled back and forth over the hot stove lids, the molasses syrup was bubbling away in a big kettle. When, at length, a huge yellow bowl was heaped with fluffy kernels, the rich brown syrup was dribbled over it. My father and his brothers, with hands scrubbed and generously buttered, waited impatiently for a chance to grab up a handful and mold it into a ball. Great was the merriment and many were the yelps of pain when the still-hot syrup stuck to fingers and palms. Then, while the mound of glazed brown balls hardened to delicious crispness, the rest of the syrup was ready to be pulled and twisted into ropes and intricate designs. The boys used to vie with each other in making up original patterns.

In those days it required no organized effort

to see that the lonely and poorly-provided were cheered and sustained by offerings of pies and doughnuts, apples, and winter vegetables, given in thoughtful neighborliness and gratefully received, in spite of a tendency toward stiff-necked pride under ordinary conditions, in the spirit of the season.

My father has often said that, while children always hung up their stockings on Christmas Eve, he never remembers seeing a Christmas tree in any home. The tree was at the Church and was eagerly anticipated and hugely enjoyed by old and young alike. Upon the oldest boys in the Sunday School fell the duty of going to the woods to cut a towering cedar, of bringing it back and setting it up in the front of the Church. Their help was welcomed, too, when it came to mounting a tall stepladder and setting in place the topmost silver star and the upper ornaments. The Ladies Aid Society always supervised the trimming of the tree with strings of snowy popcorn and ruby cranberries, dangling rosy apples and golden oranges, and myriad muslin bags of hard candy — pink bags for the girls and white for the boys.

My father loved to tell of one particular Christmas entertainment at the Church that never failed to bring a laugh when he recalled it. His oldest brother had been one of those chosen to help with the tree that year and when he came home for supper the night of the entertainment, his whispered conversation with the two younger boys had left them doubled up with mirth. It seems that the older boys had taken advantage of their presence in the Church during the afternoon to play a trick on one of the masterful matrons of the congregation. Aunt Mercy Snow was large and of commanding mien while her husband was small and timid. Their pew was equipped with only one small cushion, and it was Aunt Mercy's invariable custom to pull it down so that she could sit on it while Uncle Abijah had to occupy the hard wooden bench. The boys had decided that it was high time Uncle Abijah had the comfort of a soft seat for once, so they nailed the cushion firmly down at HIS end of the pew. That night the boys hurried down to the Church early and established themselves in the pew just behind the one that belonged to the Snows, and, stifling their giggles, the awaited the fun.

At long last Aunt Mercy came sailing up the aisle, majestic in her best black taffeta and jet-

trimmed bonnet, and behind her trotted a thin, grey-haired man nervously turning his well-worn beaver in his hands. Aunt Mercy swept into the pew and seated herself with decision and then looked down sharply for the explanation of the unexpected hardness of the bench. Seeing the position of the cushion, she reached over and gave it a tug toward her. It did not budge. Exasperated, she gave it a harder pull. It remained in its place. With a little snort of anger she leaned over and gave it a good strong yank. Still it did not move. Suddenly realizing that she was attracting the amused attention of her neighbors, she sat up, very red of face, and gazed straight ahead of her with stony dignity. Uncle Abijah, who had been hovering in the pew entrance during these maneuvers, now stepped in and sat down, with a sigh of content, on the cushion's softness. The boys, meanwhile, had been stuffing their handkerchiefs into their mouths and were weak from suppressed laughter, but theirs was a glow of satisfaction over one small Christmas gift they had been able to give.

Today as I look at the striking beauty of our churches illuminated with flood lights for the holiday season, their spires rising slender and shining toward the Christmas stars, I think of the wonder and delight with which our grandfathers and grandmothers would have beheld such sights. They had no aid from ingenious technical devices to enhance the beauty and dramatic effect of their observances but perhaps, in the home-centered less complicated way of life, they had no need of anything beyond their own deep reverence and simple neighborliness to light their way to Christmas.

Ryder, Marion Crowell, *Cape Cod Remembrances* Dennis Historical Society/Sullworld Publishing, 1972, pp 49, 50

THE WHITE STALLION

The slender sandspit of Monomoy extends from the landward cliff of Chatham some seven miles to sea; as eerie, isolated, gleaming a bar as ever shone back at the moon. Along that shore the bony ribs of wrecks burrow in drift sand, like skeletons of dinosaurs peering with bolt-rusty eyes at the interfurrowing waves. Years ago a white horse sank to the fetlocks, plowing his way through drifts of "singing sand." A light like a star gleamed in his mane, another swung at the saddle. His broad flanks loomed like a sail against the starless water. He swayed as he walked, nodding

his head, for a long pull through sand drags at the muscles and causes a certain pitching of the body. Many vessels followed him, "the false mirage of Monomoy"; many hulks lie buried in the sand that were once led like winged chariots at the heel of the mooncurser's stallion.

Who owned him? Nobody knows. Nobody tells if he does know. But one night when the wind blew a northeast gale and cold spume frothed at the crests of waves, a light was hung on the stallion's mane, and he was driven over hissing sand by a cruel spider of a master, one who had caught many shining sails like moths in a foggy web. The wind blew full gale that night! The roof of the church rose from its walls and flapped away like a crane; then settled down, tidily, where the shingles were worn on the roof of the Widow Atwood's house. "'Tis the will of God made manifest," said the widow, and sent her nephew up to nail the new roof fast. In that gale the arms were ripped off the windmill of the Atkins Brothers, and the bell on the Hill of Storms rolled down into an open grave. No one dared to pluck the bell forth until the clapper was detached. If one peal resounded under the earth it might rouse the dead for judgment before their lawful time.

Black fields of clouds hung over the sky. No rain fell. Hurricane waves beat up the beach, and not a vessel that could find port was out to risk the seas. Yet the white stallion and his master fought their way up and down the spinning sands of Monomoy. The mooncurser rode his horse till the wind ate through his thin black doublet; then he dismounted and "sand-shuffled" on the lee side of the stallion. The tide, running as never before, knifed its way through the spit; then roared down Stage Harbor Channel like a gang of yelling whale-men broken loose with "three-winter money," making for Mother Thornton's Tavern down New Bedford way.

In two places the stormy sea bit through Monomoy sands. A fast dwindling island was left between these two channels, and on the island stood master and horse. Three men on the landward cliff saw them, but no boat could have been launched, nor could have survived the flood of onrushing water. Clouds parted to reveal a thin cirrus scudding through the upper air. The white stallion pawed at the sand, then stood still, trembling. The spider man mounted his horse, and as the last inch of footing crumbled, he called against the roaring wind, a shriek devoured by the

sea. At that moment the moon came dazzling through the scud. Lunar madness seized the stallion. Wildly neighing, he breasted the tide, swimming in the center of the moonfall. The rider's body, swept away, came to rest two days later on Stage Harbor shore. But the white stallion swam on into mountains of ocean. He still swims beyond the Rip, and when the moon comes out may be seen close to the pointed prows of ships, his white mane gleaming as he guides them over the bars.

The sands lie, an unbroken expanse, on the long sea spit of Monomoy. The red rust eyes of the wrecks keep baleful watch to sea.

Reynard, Elizabeth, *The Narrow Land*, Chatham, MA, Chatham Historical Society, 1978, pp 253

The Frozen Bass

I MAY here say that the day preceding the great fire in New York in 1835 (that consumed more than half the business portion of the city) was as warm as a half-heated baker's oven, while the night of the fire that followed was the coldest that had been known for years, in fact, so cold that the water froze solid in the hose of the fire engines. On that warm day the bass had entered the breach that leads to the sea at the southern extremity of the Salt pond, in countless myriads, and the wind being southerly and both weather and water unusually warm, the immense school of fish stopped overnight near the surface of the water, doubtless meaning to settle down into their deep winter quarters the next day. But early in the night the wind suddenly chopped round to the northwest and brought with it such an unheard-of low temperature that the lake was converted almost in an instant into a sheet of ice some foot and more in thickness, holding in its embrace nearly all of the striped bass that had entered the pond on the day before. A day or two after this I went down upon the pond and saw scores upon scores of men cutting out the bass with chopping axes. They had already piled up hundreds of thousands to all appearance in heaps as big as small hay-stacks. The whole surface of the lake looked like a huge piece of Mosaic thickly inlaid with frozen bass weighing two or three to twenty or more pounds each. New York and other markets were bountifully supplied with the finest fish from this source for weeks afterwards.

Botkin, B. A. Editor
A Treasury of New England Folklore
Crown Publishers, N.Y., 1947, pp255

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Sunday, December 4, 3:00-5:00 P.M.
"Visions of Sugarplums"
DHS Christmas Open House
Jericho will be decorated and ready for
"The Night before Christmas".
Begin your holiday celebration with us.
Traditional holiday refreshments.



1801 Jericho Historical Center
90 Old Main Street, West Dennis

Sunday, December 11, Noon to 3:30 P.M.
Christmas Open House
Part of the *Dennis Visions Stroll*
Costumed docents will greet you throughout
the festively decorated historic home
of Rev. Josiah Dennis.
Enjoy holiday refreshments with us.



1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum
61 Whig St., Dennis Village