

# DENNIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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Co-editors--Phyllis Robbins Horton and Nancy Thacher Reid



## A CITY BUILT UPON OUR AQUIFER

Much in the news these days are the problems of the plumes of pollution which are stretching in many directions from the Massachusetts Military Reservation (MMR) on the Upper Cape. The Reservation covers 25,000 acres of land in Sandwich, Bourne and Falmouth, where the problems are acute. But now, towns as far away as Dennis must be concerned as well for the plumes seem to be stretching ever further, unchecked as far as can be determined.

MMR is here on Cape Cod as a direct result of the colonial system of local militia, instituted in the Cape towns at the time they were established. For decades, the local militia was each town's responsibility. Over time, local militia became state militia, then State Guard and finally National Guard. Today, that institution is responsible for maintaining a force of citizen-soldiers, ever ready to defend our country.

For many years, Massachusetts State Guard trained at Fort Devens in Ayer, Ma. About 1930, Devens was declared to be too small for guard training, perhaps due to increased enlistment because of the Depression. Talk about placing the training camp on the Upper Cape surfaced. As early as November, 1931, the "Harwich Independent", a local weekly newspaper, published an editorial in opposition to the suggestion, stating that the area was primarily residential and was becoming popular as a vacation destination.

According to Sandwich historian, Russell A. Lovell, Jr., a part of the large tract of land which the State Guard wanted to utilize had been purchased in 1916 by a group of out-of-state investors who proposed to turn the Cape back in time to its agricultural roots. Over a period of five years this group, the Coonamesset Land Company, purchased 14,000 acres of land in Sandwich, Bourne and Falmouth. Their aim was to establish the largest ranch east of the Mississippi. At about the same time, Percival Hall Lombard, a man with Sandwich roots who was a successful rancher in Colorado, had a similar thought, and began to accumulate acres of land in Sandwich, calling his spread the Bear Hollow Farm. Some farming was done on these two ranches, even a herd of cattle was kept at Coonamesset, but neither venture was as quickly profitable as had been hoped. Now the state wanted to use this partially cleared land for a training camp.

The proposal first came before the voters of the involved towns in 1934. Opponents of the plan campaigned vigorously, using the same arguments put forth by the "Harwich Independent" in 1931. It was also pointed out that the firing ranges would be noisy and dangerous, that the land would do more for the economy if privately developed, and that the sprawling camp would hinder the construction and change the route of the proposed mid-Cape highway leading from the Bourne bridge. In 1934, the voters agreed with these arguments and voted down the proposal. But proponents got to work to point out the tremendous economic benefit that the construction of the camp would have, as well as the continued benefit of the hundreds of trainees who would spend time at the camp and money in the nearby towns. When the question came up again in 1935, the economic benefits of WPA and ERA were in decline. This time the voters reversed themselves and accepted the proposal.

Building began immediately. The Camp was named Camp Edwards in honor of Maj. Gen. Clarence R. Edwards, commander of the 26th Division in World War I. At first Edwards was a tent city, with 40 miles of unpaved roads. The first encampment was for 1200 men and took place in June of 1936. Over the next few years, a huge parade ground was cleared and leveled, athletic facilities built and an air strip and rifle range constructed.

In 1940, the Federal Government took over Camp Edwards and began construction of barracks, post exchanges and other buildings for the use of soldiers who would be trained for overseas duty. Dennis was among the towns to benefit from the thousands of new jobs. Groups of workers-- carpenters, electricians, plumbers--car-pooled to the camp, where they often stayed for several days of labor, then came home to Dennis for a couple of days of rest. From September until December of 1940, 1,500 buildings were constructed.

The Camp also had an effect on everyday life in our town. The presence of so many battle-ready troops increased the possibility of air strikes on the Cape, and of spies being landed on our shores. As a result, the first years of the war were years of blackouts, air raid drills and closed beaches, patrolled by Coast Guardsmen. Troops about to depart for Europe spent their final weeks on field maneuvers in the woods of South Dennis, now Patriot Square and Route 134. We were also treated to the sight of bombers dropping practice bombs on the West Dennis breakwater. Later, German POW's were detained at the Camp and some were sent to help clear up the mess left by the hurricane of September, 1944 on our south beaches.

Camp Edwards, now known as MMR, has been a fact of life and an influence on the history of Dennis since its inception. The question remains to be answered as to how much its history will effect our future.

## CALENDAR

March 11 7:30 P.M. Board meets at Brendan and Maureen Joyce's

### MARK YOUR CALENDAR

April 19 2:30 P.M. West Dennis Community Building

Program: Pre-Historic Archeological Sites along Bass River

Presenter: Archeologist Mark Horvath

March Cape Cod Saying--There are five seasons on Cape Cod--Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and March--and March is the longest!

### REPORT ON OUR MID-WINTER FESTIVITY

As we entered Christine's for our annual luncheon on Valentine's Day, a collage of pictures of the house at 100 Uncle Barney's Road was on display. The pictures of the move of the house to Uncle Stanley's Way in South Dennis were taken by Shirley Griffith, Marion Tobias and Ken Grady. After the meeting was called to order by President Kitty, we observed a moment of silence in memory and appreciation of the members we have lost to death since last we met. In addition to our usual fare --good food and good company--we were updated on the progress of the committee for the preservation and restoration of West Dennis Community Building given by the chairman of that committee, Ray Urquhart. And finally, we listened to the music provided by the Men's Chorus of the Dennis Union Church. They succeeded in drawing us all in to their enjoyment of singing and at the end had us all singing, too. Were you surprised that so many knew all four verses of "America?" We didn't do so well on the second verse of the National Anthem, however! Thanks gentlemen, and all the others who helped to make our Mid-winter day so special.

### NEW LIFE MEMBERS

Membership Chairman Isabelle Flynn reports the names of recent Life memberships. They include: Ruth W. Baxter, Kathleen Byron, Patricia B. Rothermel, Joel G. Crowell, George W. Wilson, Jr., and Richard D. Ellis. More new members next time.

### SPRING ON THE CRANBERRY BOGS

Local cranberry growers didn't have much luck sanding over ice this winter. 1997-1998 may go down in the annals as "the Year Without a Winter," and it's all blamed on El Nino. Makes me think of "The Year Without A Summer," called by the old-timers "1800 and Froze to Death." That took place in 1816 and the cause was probably not El Nino, but a thick cloud of volcanic ash which circled the globe following an eruption in Europe. Whatever the reason, we'll take a winterless year over a summerless one anytime. As for spring, that's always a short season on Cape Cod--"one warm day in May," is a common description. And the cranberry folks have to make the most of what few spring-like days we have. Growers will be busy setting out birdhouses, clearing ditches, and readying their equipment. Because of the iceless winter, many farmers will be sanding their bogs directly.

There are things to watch for as the cranberry bog comes awake after the winter season. The cranberry vine, *vaccinium macrocarpen*, is classified as a trailing evergreen vine. True, it does not shed all of its leaves in autumn, as do some deciduous plants. Those of us who look carefully at our bogs can testify to the change from green to a deep burgundy red which the vines assume in fall and winter. But now as the longer, lighter days of spring approach, the vines will "green-up" again and become a different vista for our senses. Also, the bog's birdhouses attract interesting birds an added reasons for looking carefully at our bogs. Spring is slow on Cape Cod, but it can be found, if you search for it. Check your favorite bog tomorrow.

Dennis Historical Society  
P. O. Box 607  
South Dennis, MA 02660-0607

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