

# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 27 Number 3

March 2004

## Calendar of Events

**Saturday, March 13**  
**Girl Scout Day at the  
Manse**

**Thursday, March 18**  
**House Dating Workshop**  
**Josiah Dennis Manse**  
**10:00 AM to Noon**  
Historians Nancy Thacher  
Reid and Phyllis Robbins  
Horton will show us how to  
gather the information we  
need to date our old Cape  
Cod houses.  
Please call (508) 394-0017  
so we can plan for limited  
space.

**DHS Board Meeting**  
**Saturday, March 20**  
**10:00 AM at the Manse.**  
All interested members are  
welcome.

**Coming in April**  
**Jim Perry will talk on**  
**Quilt Patterns and the Un-**  
**derground Railroad.**

Did certain patterns on  
quilts which were hung out-  
side indicate safe houses for  
runaway slaves? This will  
be an interesting subject for  
historians and quilters alike.  
Watch for time and place in  
our next Newsletter.

**In May: "Capt. Seth Crowell  
From Sailor to Senator"**

## Come Home When the Whistle Blows

*by Nancy Thacher Reid*

Growing up in South Dennis (and I'm sure in our other four villages as well) in the 30's and 40's, our weekends and school vacations had a predictable routine. Up at the usual time, we did our weekend chores—emptied the water under the ice box in warm weather, filled the kerosene jug, and did all of those necessary household tasks that our children know nothing about. When all was done to Mother's satisfaction, it was playtime! "Stay in the neighborhood," Mother would say, "and come home when the whistle blows."

Our neighborhood stretched from the north side of the railroad tracks to the Clough's house, opposite where the Red Cottage now stands. The boys often played in the woods at the back of father's garden, stretching all the way to Eagle, without interruption. The girls could choose to cross the street to play in Priscilla Hall's playhouse, a little building equipped with doll furniture, or maybe go up to June Wheldon's to climb up in the apple trees and invent stories. Wherever we went, we were always listening for the whistle to blow.

The "whistle" was the fire siren. It was attached to the old Town Office, which stood in the north parking lot of the present Town Office building, near the big tree. It was sounded as a test every day at noon—well, more or less at noon. It was the responsibility of the Town Clerk, Mr. Ben Sears, to sound the siren, and if he was busy it could be a few minutes late. The noon siren was one blow of the whistle, up and held for maybe 15 seconds, and then allowed to wind down. The siren was a new addition to the daily routine in town. Until serious fires in Dennis Port in 1930 and 1931 forced the town to establish and fund a Fire Department, we had only a volunteer Firemen's Association. Due to there being few telephones in town, sometimes the only method of notifying the volunteers of a fire was to send neighbors to knock on people's doors. Father used to say that all the fire fighting equipment to protect South Dennis was in his barn, and consisted of a pail of sand and two brooms—a little bit of an understatement. The Firemen's Association had raised money for a 200-gallon pumper, mounted on a carriage. It could be pulled to the scene of a fire in back of a car, or even a horse. But of course if there was no additional water available, it was small protection. After the disastrous fire at the Dennis Port School in March of 1930, the town voted \$2,800 to provide the volunteers with more equipment and \$1000 for two sirens, one for the South side and one for the North side. The shock which followed the destruction of the whole business block of Dennis Port in October, 1931 caused the Town Meeting to vote for an official fire department. Richard Sears Hall (1907-1999) was the first chief.

## Come Home When the Whistle Blows, cont.

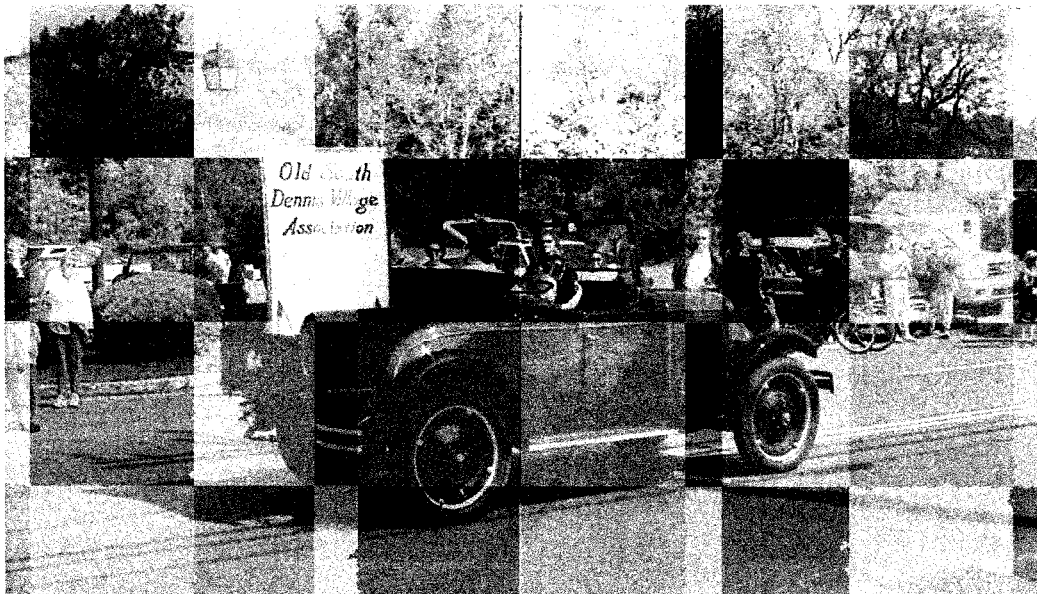
As I recall, the siren was sounded a different number of cycles depending on the village where the fire was located. The longest signal meant the fire department was being called to assist at an out of town blaze.

The siren took on a new meaning during World War II. The Cape was in a continuous state of "brown-out", meaning neon lights were banned, and automobile headlights were painted black halfway down the glass. We also were required to turn headlights off altogether when descending Smith's Hill at the East Dennis end of route 134 or Charlie Hallett's Hill at the Dennis village end of Old Bass River Road. In addition, we began practicing "black-outs", when total darkness was required. The signal for a black-out drill was the fire siren—not just up-and-down, but a long continuous blast lasting for several minutes. At first we were told that a practice was to be held, but when we had it down pat, surprise drills were called unannounced. It was scary not knowing if that wailing siren meant a practice or an actual threat. It was a welcome sound when the all-clear was blown, three to four minutes of ups and downs.

The warning siren system was expanded during the Cold War, with a siren placed in each village. Drills were held once again including drills during school time so that the children could prepare for day time attacks.

Recently, the Old South Dennis Village Association has had the siren at the Town Office building refurbished and put into operating condition. The siren has been presented to the Selectmen and will eventually be put into service again, as a noon time whistle. But not before a real effort is made to warn the citizens of the town that the sound of the siren does not mean a disaster. It is just an attempt to revive an old custom, one which was common to every town on the Cape before cell phones and car short-wave radios. If you should hear the whistle blow and you are away from home, you should remember that it's time for lunch.

NTR



It's usually nearly lunchtime when the antique cars parade through town. Here's the Old South Village Association entry at a Memorial Day Parade. What if the siren sounds???

## The Dennis Port Community Hearse

from Priscilla Dean

The Louis Dean family lived on Main Street in Dennis Port in the 1930's, right in the center of town, across from First National Store. Our bay window gave us a front row seat to whatever was happening on Main Street. We had a great view of the big fire when the Ginn Block burned to the ground! At other times we watched our one policeman, Ben Kendrick, directing traffic from the street in front of Frank Estey's Drug Store. Frank sold ice cream, candy, Kodak film, and patent medicines. Ben would step into the street and stop traffic to cross us over safely if we had a penny to spend on candy or a nickel for ice cream—or rarely, a dime for a funny book. (We called the comic books funny books.) Maude Estey had her hat shop next door to the drug store, in the same building. An empty lot of land stood between Estey's and the big brick First National Store.

One summer Sunday morning I was the first one up and out of bed. I could hear people laughing outside, so I hurried to the living room and looked out the bay window. I saw the ancient community hearse parked in the empty lot across the street. I quickly got dressed and went out to see this unusual sight.

One of Dennis Port's Saturday night party boys (Was it Henry or John?) was laid out in that old hearse with its purple fringed curtains and glass sides. Was he asleep or just passed out? Seems as though his pals had put him in the old hearse as a joke. Then they worked together to pull the hearse to Main Street and joined the gathering crowd waiting for their friend to wake up. They knew the sleeping reveler would open his eyes, suddenly become aware of where he was, and not be sure if he was dead or alive. Everyone was laughing, and even Ben Kendrick was watching to see what happened.

I looked into the hearse. The "body" was on his left side and curled up with his hands under his head for a pillow. Because his back was facing me, I never knew which of the drinking men it really was. The adults apparently did not think it a proper sight for young eyes and I was sent right back home. I never did get to see what happened when he woke up. I'm sure his friends hoped their joke was a sobering experience.

*I cannot remember where the horse-drawn hearse was stored, but perhaps a reader will remember. Mr. McHenry sold caskets, so perhaps it was stored in the barn in back of McHenry's Furniture Store?*

When Phyllis Horton read Priscilla Dean's hearse story, she had one of her own to tell:

One day when Phyllis was at Yarmouth High, she had to stay after school to make up some work she had missed when she was home sick. That's how she happened to be walking home late. As she was going across the Bass River Bridge, Oscar Homer, who worked for Doane, Beal and Ames, pulled up in a hearse and offered her a ride home—as that's where he was headed anyway. Why was he going to Phyllis' house? Thankfully, it was only to deliver the goat which was riding in the back of the hearse. (Phyllis wanted us to know that this was a more modern hearse—one with four wheels and a motor.)

**Important Notice** This is to alert you to possible problems for those of you who have a **P.O. Box**. Since today's mail is automated, a computer sorts the mail before it reaches our post offices. The computer puts the mail in order of PO Box #. It needs to read the words **P.O. Box** as well as your number to do this. If the address has just a box number, it may be returned to the sender. Do we have your correct address? Name, the **P.O. Box** followed by the number, City, State and Zip. *For those of us who remember when people sorted the mail and even knew what box to put it in, this may seem puzzling at best!*

Dennis Historical Society  
PO Box 607  
S. Dennis, MA 02660-0607

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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## THE WAY WE WERE

When people were in charge of the post offices instead of computers, I'm told you could mail a letter from Dennis in the morning to notify friends in Boston that you would meet them later that day. You knew their mail would be delivered in time for them to meet your afternoon train.

In East Dennis, Susan Sears was Post-mistress. Upstairs in the front of the building there was a Social Library. In the back upstairs was the first telephone office. Grant Phillips had the agency. His daughter, Gladys, and Muriel Sears were the first telephone operators.



Photo from Priscilla Sears Gray, South Street, E. Dennis