

# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 26 Number 11

November 2003

## Calendar of Events

### Board Meetings Fall/Winter

Board meetings are open to all interested members of the DHS. It has been our practice to move the fall and winter meetings from Wednesday evenings to Saturday mornings from 10:00 to Noon, and this year the meetings will all be held at the Josiah Dennis Manse on the corner of Nobscussett Road and Whig Street. The next meeting is Saturday, November 8.

**Christmas at the Manse  
Sunday, December 14  
12:00 Noon to 4:00 PM**  
Step back into a Colonial Christmas as costumed docents serve traditional refreshments, including Colonel Negus Punch. Stroll through the house and enjoy the lovely holiday decorations.

**Note: The Visions of  
Christmas program at  
Jericho will not take place  
this year.**

## Letters to Phyllis...

*Over the years Phyllis Robbins Horton has received countless letters from her friends who have lived in Dennis. For some reason a performance on the "bones" by Joshua Crowell at the last board meeting (to add a little fun at the end of our deliberations) coincided with a letter from Eldon Davidson, now of Savannah, Georgia, and a recollection of a November 1, 1983 letter from Betty Dean Holmes to her daughter which was later forwarded to Phyllis. Hence this Newsletter.*

2 October 2003

Dear Phyllis,

I really enjoyed reading your article in the last issue of the Newsletter. How well I remember eating at The Chicken Pie Supper!!! Never in my travels around this world have I seen anything to compare with it.

As a matter of fact I have one of the old "settees" in our Green Room and I pass by it many times each day and remember Carleton Hall and the Chicken Pie suppers and also the Christmas tree affair that was put on by the Chatterbox club with my father coming down the chimney to pass out presents to the children. I also remember flying from the West Coast to Corpus Christi, TX to pick up my wife and two sons and flying up to Boston to meet my father and mother to drive down to Dennis in order for my father to give a present to his two grandsons. They never caught on to who Santa was until years later. Of course Santa spent a little more time with them than he did the others.

I also remember when Virginia Ellis, Joe Walker and I played our musical instruments for different affairs that took place in the Hall.

Then of course there were Minstrel shows with all the local characters taking part. As I recall Budge Hall's father wrote up all of the parts.

The Fourth of July Ball was another occasion that I used to look forward to. Ah what memories. I was up on the Cape last July for a few days and took my wife into the Hall and told her again about the many good times I had there.....

Keep up the good work,  
Best regards  
Eldon

Dennis Historical Society  
c/o Phyllis Robbins Horton  
July 21, 2001

Dear Phyllis,

I recently came across a letter I had written to my daughter Cynthia when she was away at college. I found it hard to believe the "Dennisport Days" happened so many years ago. It was a grand gathering.

Nov. 1, 1983

*Sunday morning I went from Swampscott to Boston on the bus to meet my sister Priscilla.... She and I then drove to Cape Cod. We were on our way to Dennisport for a gathering sponsored by the Dennis Historical Society at the Village Improvement Club Hall called Dennisport Days. The oldest Dennisporter in attendance was eighty-eight years old. People told tales of olden times in Dennisport. One man had not been back to town since well before World War II. His memories were clear about old events. I was fascinated. Priscilla and I told some of the times our mother had told us about. Esther Moody Dean coached minstrel shows in the 1930s.*

*Priscilla asked how many people in the hall had been in the minstrel shows in that same hall. To our amazement, over half the people raised their hands. One person said there were so many local people in the show it was a wonder there was anyone left to be in the audience. But tickets sold out every night.*

*I told the story of the end man who was so loaded that he passed out on stage. Dad, always a stage hand for Mother's shows, reached from off stage with mother's cane and pulled the end man right off the stage. The audience thought it was part of the show and howled with laughter. "I wonder if it was..." "No, I bet it was..." as they tried to guess which end man it was that had passed out. It was such a successful bit of business, the end man was hauled off stage at every succeeding performance.*

*Priscilla told the story of the night one of the end men was late coming to the show. When he arrived, he had a little brown hen tucked under his arm. He took the hen onstage and tied it by its leg to his chair. Whenever things got a little dull, he would give a little shove to the hen with the side of his shoe. The hen would squawk, flap its wings, feathers flying, the audience would roar with laughter, and when the laughter subsided, the hen would settle down again.*

*Someone got up and asked if anyone remembered just who wore the shoes attached to two long boards. A man got onstage and began to tell jokes and then slowly began to lean further and further forward, defying gravity. The shoes with the long boards had been nailed to the floor! The audience loved that.*

*Someone told a story of a poem made up about Esther Dean, minstrel show coach, who was attempting to keep one of the end men, who were pretty spontaneous, from offending any more worthy citizens with their high jinks. .... The gist of the poem was that it was too late to stop the end man; he was already on stage.*

*At that meeting I learned from Phyllis Robbins just where the five working windmills were located that Mom had told us were in Dennisport when she first came to town. There were several open rivers wandering through Dennisport that I have never seen, as they were all filled in long ago. Now when the cellars of houses fill with water, new owners may*

wonder why. *The old Townies know.*

*People brought old postcards of Dennisport which were wonderful.*

That is what I wrote to my youngest daughter about that meeting. Because I have been gone from Dennisport since 1942, and off the Cape since 1946, I didn't recognize many of the people at that meeting, but I sure had a good time.

Nostalgically yours,  
Betty Dean Holmes

May 6, 2003

*Betty Dean Holmes*

#### Parade of the Wooden Soldiers....

Esther Moody had seen the snappy precision wooden soldier drill performed on the vaudeville stage at the theater in Brockton where she worked when she was in high school in the 1920s. During her job at the theater, she saw many first-run vaudeville shows. After her marriage to Louis Dean, she moved to Dennisport. Esther adapted and incorporated some of what she'd seen into her minstrel shows at the VIC. The minstrel shows were always sell-outs at the VIC, and later the successful cast traveled to other Cape Cod towns to perform.

Our toy soldier uniforms were royal blue Indianhead cotton pants and red cotton jackets with two-inch wide belting cross straps. Our tall hats were oatmeal boxes painted gold. We wore little red circles of rouge on our cheeks. Every little kid who wanted to be in the minstrel show could be a toy soldier. We practiced marching and marching until more than fifty years later I still hear, "and a left and right and a left and right..." whenever I hear the "Parade of the Wooden Soldiers." We moved our arms up and down as we marched in unison. By opening night, we had turned into a sharp looking drill squad. We had a wonderful time at the performance, except for Louise Higgins, who got a flake of gold paint in her eye from her oatmeal box hat and it hurt! She cried and it washed out.

Our routine was very similar to the Radio City Hall Rockettes except I do not think that we copied the Rockettes domino effect of falling down at the very end. Our "Parade of the Wooden Soldiers" was a big hit in the Minstrel Show.

#### About the "bones"...

Joshua Crowell polished his skill on the "bones" when he played with a banjo band during what he calls his pub ministry. The ones he plays were made by a cabinetmaker in East Brewster from a block of ebony given to him by Mr. Howard Hall, who also sent along one "bone" for a pattern. The good workman made 2 sets for Josh and charged him \$2.00 apiece. "Never again!" he declared, as he had dulled every tool he'd used in making the curved bones from the dense ebony.

Josh remembers the wonderful fun of the Carleton Hall Minstrel Shows where men disguised in black face expounded political and social commentary they would not dare to make otherwise. The Selectmen and Finance Committee and important townsmen such as John Stone and Bill Stone, to name just two, became the butt of the jokes and jibes.

As form of entertainment from the mid 1800s to the 1940s no one ever gave a thought that a Minstrel Show might be "politically incorrect." Josh agreed that some today might call it a form of "unrecognized racism," but those who enjoyed the fun also knew that the men behind the black face were themselves staunch supporters of civil rights!

## Dennis Historical Society

P.O. Box 607

South Dennis, MA 02660-0607

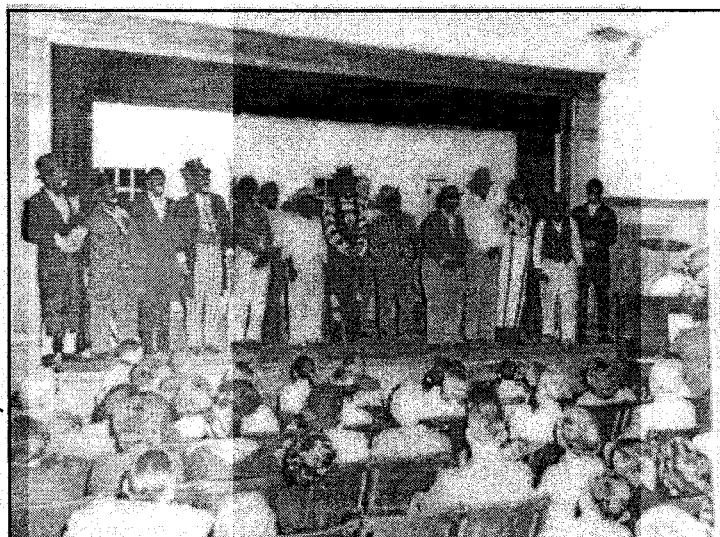
ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Non-profit  
Organization  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Permit No. 2  
South Dennis, MA  
02660

# THE WAY WE WERE

## MINSTRAL SHOW AT CARLETON HALL

When they all got together these citizens of Dennis had everyone wondering what was coming next. Some of the showmen were Norman Hallett, Ralph Richardson, Dick Sylver, Howard Hall, Roland Taylor, Earl Whittemore, Lyndon Howes, Bob Eldred, Ernest Crowell, Phil Dubin, Dan Walker, Clark Potter, Paul McDowell, Joe Walker, Clint Gardner and Chris Nyland. Mig Maher and Edie Howes were known to do a song and dance routine in blackface. The orchestra was made up of Roland Taylor on the trumpet, Phil Dubin on the violin with Dan Walker playing the banjo. Earl Whittemore whistled, Howard Hall played the bones and Bob Eldred recited poetry. And this was in 1956!



Picture from the Howard Hall collection

When Ed Brooke was running for election in Massachusetts, supporter Howard Hall is known to have said, *Anyone who determines their vote on the color of a man's skin is a damned fool!*