



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 27 Number 9

September 2004

Calendar of Events

Board meetings are open to all interested members of the DHS. Next meeting
Josiah Dennis Manse, 7:00 PM, Wednesday, Sept. 8.

Celebration of Dennis Heritage

**Saturday, October 2
10 AM to 2 PM
Josiah Dennis Manse
77 Nobscussett Road**
As part of the Dennis Chamber of Commerce 2nd Annual Celebration the Manse Museum will be open and refreshments will be served.

Dennis Historical Society Annual Meeting

**Saturday, October 16
7:00 PM.**

Don't miss this special program open to all!
Bring a friend.

After a short business meeting we will hear noted interpreter Joan Gatturna present

**"Petticoats at Sea:
The Captain's Wife Who
Wouldn't Stay Home"**

Refreshments.
Carleton Hall
1006 Old Bass River Road
Dennis Village

Remembering When in Dennis Port *by Phyllis Horton*

In the 1930s and 40s Main Street, Dennis Port was the shopping destination for most Dennis folks and others from Harwich, Brewster and Yarmouth. Both sides of the street were lined with stores that could supply just about anything you would need for daily living. All the stores were open six days a week from 8 A.M. to 6 P.M. on week days and until 9 P.M. on Saturday night. Both sides of the street had huge elm trees that arched over the roadway. Looking up you could see the swaying nests of Baltimore Orioles hanging down from the branches and catch a glimpse of their bright colors as they flew from branch to branch.



Saturday was the big shopping day for everyone who didn't live in Dennis Port. The usual inquiry among folks from other villages was, "You goin' t' the Port on Sat-dee?" The Dennis Porters did their shopping during the week so they could have Saturday to park along Main Street and visit with folks from across town who had come for their weekly shopping. The locals always sat in their cars and chatted with folks strolling from store to store. The women would exchange gossip, recipes, and where the best bargains were, and the men discussed everything from world news to the price of grain at Leon Hall's Hay & Grain. Almost everyone kept a few chickens.

Starting on the east end Zebina Small's Dry Goods Store carried women's and children's clothes and sold fabrics, patterns, yarns, etc. Head clerk Alexcina Berry was on duty every day wearing cuff protectors and a tape measure around her neck. Mr. Small sat at his desk in the rear of the store where he worked on his accounts. If someone important came in he would be right there to wait on them personally, wearing a striped morning coat and spats many years after they were fashionable. After his death Mrs. Small (Lilla) sat in a straight backed chair next to the desk taking note of who came in to shop and how much they spent. She always wore a hat and, except on the hottest days, wore her fur coat. She was one of the few local women of her generation to own one. Sundays found Allie presiding at the pipe organ in the West Harwich/Dennis Port Baptist Church checking out the congregation in the mirror installed over the music rack. After church any young person who didn't pay strict attention to the sermon received a reprimand from Allie Berry.

Next in line was Mrs. Beatrice Mercer's Bakery and residence. She was called "Ma" by many of her customers. Walking by her shop in the morning was tantalizing as the smell of baking bread and other goodies filled the air.

After that was an open space that became the town parking lot. A pickup game of baseball, softball or touch football could be called up at a moment's notice. On a

snowy day that was a good place to build some forts and have a snowball fight.

Murray's Clothing Store came next in the newly built block that replaced the Ginn Block after the disastrous fire of October 12, 1931. They specialized in men's and boys' clothing until Mr. Murray died in 1939. The other store in the new block was an A&P Grocery Store.

Directly following that was the Economy Grocery Store, the first chain store that came to Dennis Port. Many of the local high school boys had their first taste of employment at the Economy Store. Mr. Rufus Foss ran the meat department and Mr. Harold Wilson was in charge of groceries. Mr. Wilson's bow tie was just as trim and neat when he locked the door at night as when he opened it in the morning. "Crackers" Eldredge from South Dennis and Bob Horton, Ralph Long, John Garfield and Clayton Young from Dennis Port were among the number of clerks who waited on people, swept the floors and stocked the shelves.

Nancy Thacher Reid remembers fondly the times when her father, Freeman, brought all the children to Dennis Port to do the weekly shopping. Her mother, Hattie, made out the shopping list and sent them all on their way while she took a few minutes to rest and relax with them all out of the house. (No doubt while she was resting and relaxing she was also cleaning up the kitchen and doing dishes after an early supper.) Freeman went into the Economy with his list which he read off to the clerk. The items were picked off the shelves with a long-handled grabber reaching things on the high shelves. The order was placed on the counter, then the clerk jotted all the prices down on a brown paper bag and added them up in a flash. It was always amazing to watch them do it. In the meantime Nancy and her siblings were on Main Street with 10 cents each to spend. Imagine the decisions with two drug stores to choose from, either Hoods ice cream at Estey's or Sealtest from Maloney's. She remembers dawdling in front of Maude's Hat Shoppe to look at the latest in millinery styles. When she was older a trip across the street to Dean's Radio and Record Store to check out the latest sheet music was in order. "Free" always finished up his shopping, rounded up the kids and arrived home in time for them all to listen to the Hit Parade on the family radio.

The next two stores were Estey's Drug Store and Maude's Hat Shoppe. (Note: If you look closely these stores are in the picture on page 1, with the Hat Shoppe on the right.) Maude Snow, a local girl, went to Boston and learned the millinery trade. After 15 years she came home and established a "millinery parlor" in Mrs. Mercer's residence. A year later, in 1924, Maude bought some land on Main Street and built two stores, one for her business and one to rent. It was rented to Frank Estey for use as a drug store. He had learned the druggist business from working with Dr. David Ginn whose office and drug store were in the Ginn Block. The two stores became a family affair as Frank and Maude soon married. Frank dispensed patent medicines, post cards and candy, among other things. There was a white marble counter which served fountain specials to folks sitting at the counter and to the delightful little ice cream shop behind the fountain area. That mini shop held about six little round tables and chairs—the traditional ice cream tables and chairs that are so prized now. Estey's Drug Store made the best vanilla ice cream with hot chocolate fudge sauce sundae in Dennis Port—and it cost 25 cents!

Maude's Hat Shoppe kept her busy creating ladies' hats, trying to make each one different because it would never do to have two look-a-likes showing up at the Baptist Church or at an Eastern Star meeting. For several years her niece, Jean Snow, was hired to sew ribbons on the hats under Maude's direction.

The next little spot was vacant for part of the year. In those vacant times it served as a place to play basketball. In the summer it was home to Pop's Pie Plant. Edmund "Pop" O'Brien made and sold chicken pies with a pint of gravy and also chicken sandwiches to hundreds of followers in the summer. Many people had a standing order for a certain day of the week. The chickens were delivered from his daughter's chicken farm in East Harwich. Pop cooked the chickens, made the pies and then baked them in his two three-burner kerosene stoves in his little building. He was a fixture in Dennis Port and many old timers would give almost anything to have one of his pies again.

The First National Store came next. This was the first competitor to the Economy Store and it did a very good business. In the summer Nick Fueneres ran a fruit and vegetable stand on the west side of the grocery store.

Next door was a brick building that held several stores. It was built in the late 20s. The shop nearest the fruit stand was Young's Sea Grille owned and operated by Gertrude Young. During the Depression she moved the restaurant to her home and Carl Maloney, a registered pharmacist, opened a Rexall Drug Store. Carl's brother-in-law, O. Thomas Murray, bankrolled him to get a start in those lean times. Tom owned a Texaco gas station further along on Main Street. Before Carl arrived a doctor's prescription meant a drive to Harwich or Hyannis.

The Rexall soon became popular with the young crowd whose beverage of choice was a Black Cow (root beer and vanilla ice cream) or Cherry Coke dispensed from the black marble soda fountain and consumed while sitting on the counter stools or in the booths in the back. Carl was also known to dispense other liquids by the bottle "for medicinal purposes" out of his back room to the parents of the young crowd. Dennis was "dry" in those days. A constant attraction for kids was the rack of 10 cent comic books on the front wall.

Having a pharmacist in town was very helpful. In those days doctors made house calls even in the middle of the night. If it was imperative to start a medication right away, the doctor would call the prescription into the drug store, or, if it was at night, he'd get Carl out of bed to go to the drug store, make the medication, and then Carl would deliver it and go back home to bed.

It was a real treat after Sunday night supper when Mom would give one of us \$2.50 to walk downtown for a hand-packed quart each of coffee and chocolate ice cream. Then we'd have to hurry home so it didn't melt. Whoever was working behind the counter would fill the container so full they could barely get the lid and container to meet. We certainly got our money's worth. A lot of people worked there but one name that stands out is Lillian Long. She was there for years and years and was a friend to all.

Next to the drug store was Miss Hubbard's Gift Shop. She carried items that would make good gifts for a wedding, birthday or shower, jewelry and post cards, and also carried the latest best sellers for people to rent, read and return. Summer tourists brought a heavy demand for her goods, as it did for all the merchants on Main Street. Mr. and Mrs. Rufus Blake bought the store around 1940. *(Car is parked in front of Rexall Drugs and Blake's Gift Shop is to the right.)*



The last place on the end was an optometrist's shop owned by Dr. Joseph E. Sternberg, who also had an office on Boylston Street in Boston. He was well thought of by the townspeople and he helped many with their eye problems—sometimes for no charge. He lived here in the summer and commuted to Boston once a week to care for his patients. In the winter he lived in Dorchester and traveled to Dennis Port once a week. An oculist, Ned Wilbur from Harwich, also worked out of that office making and dispensing eyeglasses.

This covers the shops on the south side of Main Street. Another time I'll tell about all the nice folks across the street.

A Special Reminder It's time once again for those of you who belong to the Dennis Historical Society to pay your annual dues and to renew your subscription the Newsletter. Notices have been sent out and you will see the expiration date on the mailing label. We are most grateful to both Denman McNear and Barbara McNear who, although both Lifetime Members, each sent a generous donation to the Society knowing that we needed support for our general fund to continue our work of collection, preservation and education. We hope other Lifetime Members who will not be receiving an annual dues notice will also consider our appeal for a donation to help with Burt's ongoing effort to digitize photographs and collect copies in albums for use in the library. (Originals are returned to the owner.) We now have eight huge albums in our collection which are also preserved on disc. Burt is transcribing original documents, too, and printing them out in albums which are available in the library. June and Peter Howes have helped to transcribe documents as well. Our collections have grown tremendously thanks to our volunteers, with Burt as the prime "mover and shaker". Won't you consider thanking them with a generous donation to DHS? Remember, it's tax deductible!

Thank you Ruth Baxter! Of all our members who change their address in the summertime, only Ruth was kind enough to send a reminder that she would like to receive her Newsletter here in West Dennis in the summertime. Although we try to remember previous seasonal address changes to see you receive your Newsletters on Cape when you are here, often specific dates and addresses change. Each time we have a Newsletter returned to us it costs us nearly \$1, and each time the Post Office has to notify us of a change of address we have to pay 70 cents or more. Won't you help us save those precious dollars by letting us know if you change your address, either just for the summer or permanently? You deserve to receive your Newsletter on time! Thank you, Ruth Baxter, for helping.

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THE WAY WE WERE

Who was that man in his tall silk hat and greatcoat carrying a cane on **June 16, 2004** on Quivet Neck? Could it be **Brendan Joyce**, our neighborhood tour guide, ready to take you for a walk back in time as he tells stories of sea captains and merchants and entrepreneurs who lived in that East Dennis village? If you missed the walk maybe you can persuade someone to tell you some of those wonderful stories, but if you missed the day, you missed out on an impromptu house tour and, at the end of the walk, very welcome refreshments thanks to **Maureen Joyce** and her helpers.

