



Dennis Historical Society

Newsletter

December 2021

Volume 44, No.12

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**The Next Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, December 14th, 2:00 pm at the Dennis Memorial Library
1020 Old Bass River Road, Dennis Village**

Members Welcome

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

Looking Back

As 2021 enters its final month, it might be enjoyable, interesting and timely to revisit some of the wonderful articles which have been in past DHS December Newsletters. These issues are available on the DHS Website, click the Newsletters tab on the Homepage. We will start with one by our late, great, 12th generation Cape Codder and Dennis historian Burt Derick from 2001.

A Christmas in Dennis Port

With Christmas approaching, thoughts naturally drift to those old traditions of times past. Christmas time was special when I was a child in Dennis Port. The hunt for the Christmas tree was a singular excursion for a young boy. Dad would take us to the Plashes to look for that wonderful creation of God, the swamp cedar. Ugly of appearance due to the sparsity of branches, soft to the touch, and fragrant beyond belief, one had to cut a 12-foot specimen to end up with a bonafide 6-foot tree. After helping to select the one tree for us, and dragging it to the truck, we would then at home conduct an hour's worth of surgery – cutting branches, drilling holes in the trunk with an auger, and placing new branches in places where nature never intended. The result was a tree of remarkable fullness and symmetry, something never before seen in the old Peat Bog. It was always a beauty, part nature-made and part man-made. Our earliest trees had no lights. They were liberally decorated with glass balls, chains made with construction paper and white glue, and strings of cranberries and popcorn. How many hours we sat patiently with an enormous blunt needle stringing those kernels and berries -- although we had to have twice the volume of raw materials to make up for what found its way to our bellies. The final touch on the tree was aluminum icicles -- carefully saved from Christmases past, some of which were so worn and matted that they were far too short to be called icicles. But, Oh my! was that tree beautiful! In the week or so before Christmas, my Dad, Dutch Derick, and uncle, Bob West, would climb to the roof of the little RLDS Church on Sea Street to install loudspeakers and a sound system. Every evening the Saints would gather, under the direction of my mother, Pauline, to play and sing Christmas carols, broadcasting the message to the entire "down-along" village. Old and young would arrive after supper, all prepared to tune up their finest voices. In those days I was a soprano, and could actually carry a tune! (At age 12 all changed, and the only tune I can now carry is in a bucket.) My favorite song was "O Holy Night" sung by aunt Babe West. I would run outside the church and stand to listen -- the music coming downward from the rooftop made it sound like Heaven's angels were singing. On Christmas Day, the strongest memories are of the family dinner. We always congregated at Ma Wixon's, the whole clan. Dinner was finalized in the busy kitchen while Pa Wixon amused the grandkids (and himself) with the practical jokes brought by Santa (rubber chewing gum, fake dog poo, spring-loaded snakes in the can of peanut brittle, etc.) The main feature of dinner was Ma's chicken pies, smothered in gravy, new potatoes, Mother's home-canned green beans, squashes and turnips from the garden, and home-processed condiments and pickles. Mother's chocolate-chip-cherry cake was served with the meal and after. The big treat after dinner was the chance to raid Pa's chocolate candy, with which he was always generous to all the kids. My love of chocolate has persisted since those days, and it is unquestionably one of the major food groups. If there was snow, a final treat was sledding. The kids would get bundled to the point of near immobility. If we couldn't get the adults to move, the kids would go to the tiny slope on Depot Street near Capt. Judah Nickerson's house. If, however,



From Warren Wigginton's glass plate collection

the adults were willing, we would all pile in the panel-van and go to Bass River Golf Course, where we joined dozens of other kids from all over the area. Through a child's eyes the hills there seemed purely mountainous! And after sledding, we might be treated to Ma's pink tea or hot chocolate. We might also go ice-skating at the Plashes. As a kid with the weakest ankles in the village, I would spend more time on the ice than above it. Someone would find an old tire and set it alight, providing some warmth among the chill. We would wait for Mr. Henry "Ding" (he was Henry Chase, a village character) to appear at the pond. Mr. Henry was the most fantastic skater, doing leaps and whirls and spins, like a slightly-pudgy Todd Eldridge, the extent of his acrobatics made in proportion to how much alcoholic beverage he had imbibed before his arrival. Those were wonderful days. Days full of family, church and community...days of simple but profound pleasures! Days, alas, to which we can never return except in the depths of our memory.

How fortunate we are to be able to share Burt's memories!

Last year's December Newsletter featured the beloved article *Bayberry Candles on New Year's Day*, by our equally beloved member Phyllis Horton. Our next nostalgic look back is from the December 2008 Newsletter. It was written by Phyllis, originally in 1994.

Christmas Past

The economic downturn we are experiencing is causing many people to change their annual customs of celebrating Christmas in grand fashion with expensive presents for all, a decorated home and grounds that looks as if it should be in Macy's windows in New York City and entertaining to match. A few families have already started the transition to simpler celebrations and say the whole season has become more meaningful. Let us hope the ones scaling back from necessity can find the same pleasure as the ones who did it from choice. Cape Cod and Dennis in particular has run the full gamut on Christmas. The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth on December 25, 1620. Thomas Jones, master of the *Mayflower* wrote in his logbook that it was Christmas Day, but not observed by these colonists as they were opposed to all saint's days. In 1659 the Puritans in Boston passed a law declaring the celebration of Christmas to be illegal. Any person found celebrating would be fined five shillings for each offense. Christmas 1856 was declared a holiday in New England. In fact, it had been celebrated in homes along the eastern seaboard starting in the 1700s. Mariners who had visited other countries and even our South where most plantations hosted groups of visitors with music, dancing and endless amounts of food and drink for two weeks brought the custom home. Many plantations nearly went bankrupt because of the owner's excesses in entertaining. The early Cape celebration consisted of gift giving—usually items the father had brought home from a voyage. The custom of a decorated Christmas tree was common in Europe and it began in England in 1840 when Queen Victoria placed one in the palace to please her husband, Albert, who was German. It came to Virginia in 1842 and no doubt spread up the east coast. We have no record of when the first one was set up in a Dennis parlor, but it must have been very exciting. Chances are pretty good that a sea captain introduced the first one. Quite a few captains were hard taskmasters on the deck of his ship but real pushovers in the bosom of their family. In the Victorian years Christmas became a very important holiday in church and at home. All but the very poorest among us decorated a tree even if the decorations were homemade and the children would receive presents, also homemade. People of any means at all had lovely decorations hung on the tree, primarily made in Germany, and later stored away in the attic. Many old records show December 25th as a regular workday into the late 1800s. It seems some of the old timers didn't believe in all that folderol. It sounds like Scrooge moved over here from England. It also appears that Christmas weddings were popular. They were held at home, preferably starting at 8:00 P.M. with a sumptuous supper to follow. Santa Claus became a vital part of Christmas due to the influx of European immigrants. Their lovely stories and customs were eagerly adopted by young America, especially after, "T'was the Night Before Christmas" and "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus" The Crash of 1929 affected many people around the country, but not many on Cape Cod. The old saying was, "Cape Codders were always poor, they just didn't know it." The majority in Dennis fell into that category. They lived off the land and sea and made the most of what they had. Somehow, in the poorest of families the kids would wake up to find their stocking filled with an orange (a rare treat) or an apple and a scarf, mittens or warm stockings and always a shiny new penny in the toe of the stocking which promised, hopefully, better days in the year to come. Mother spent many evenings pulling old sweaters apart to knit them into something useful for her children. Often the gift under the tree was a new winter coat which had been cut down from great-grandfather's coat stored away in a trunk in the attic. Dad or Grandfather did their part by carving wooden toys or making wagons from scrap lumber for the boys and doll cradles for the girls. Everyone had a Christmas tree. They went out in the fields or into the cedar swamp to cut it, bring it home. As the Depression deepened Dennis people were still able to be well fed. They grew their food in the back yard, had some fruit trees, kept a few chickens and relied on the sea for fish and shellfish. They never went hungry. By the late 1930s mothers had a wonderful new fabric waiting for their needle. Chicken feed sacks! They had always been made of cotton, now they

were printed in colorful patterns. Mother's palette for Christmas was greatly expanded. New dresses, blouses, skirts and shirts were proudly worn and Mother was pleased that her gift had not cost anything but her time. World War II brought a whole new prosperity to Dennis. Work at Camp Edwards gave an infusion of cash money. Suddenly, Estey's and Maloney's Drug Stores, Zebina Small's Dry Goods Store and Charley Smith's Hardware Store in Dennis Port were full of gifts to go under the tree, and the occasional trip to Grant's or Woolworth's 5 & 10 in Hyannis could provide anything else you might wish for. It's 1945--and the war is over. Dennis men came home from around the world. They married, bought houses, had families and vowed their children would always have more than they had, and it would never be hand-me-downs. Each succeeding generation has tried to give their children more--sometimes so much the kids needed to be coaxed to finish opening their gifts. This year may be different. We wish you a lovely Christmas filled with family, fun, and appreciation for all you have and looking forward with hope for a better year ahead. Happy Holidays to all!

Thank you Phyllis for allowing us to share your memories too!

Our final look back is from the December 1979 Newsletter. At the time, the editor was too modest to use her or his name, so I cannot credit the author, but suspect that both were Nancy Thacher Reid. I would appreciate it if a member would email info@dennishistoricalsociety.org, and confirm or correct this.

A Nineteenth Century Christmas

The First-comers to our beloved peninsula did not celebrate Christmas. Religion was serious business and left no room for merriment. The only holy days in the church calendar were occasional days of fasting and penance and even more occasionally, Thanksgiving. But as other cultures were woven into the fabric of Colonial life, the celebration of Christmas became common in New England. From the Dutch came Santa Claus, from the Hessians soldiers who served as mercenaries in the Revolution came the Christmas Tree, from the Episcopalian Virginians the English traditions of Yule log, holly and ivy, and the Wassail Bowl. By 1854- Christmas traditions were so much a part of the New England life that a clipper ship owned by Joseph Nickerson and Co. was christened "Santa Claus", and had a figurehead representing the old gentleman complete with his legendary pipe. (Capt. Bailey Foster of Brewster was for some time Master of this vessel, which was designed by Donald MacKay.) *Ed. Note: With Jericho presently closed for renovations, how wishfully we read from 1979 - Come to the Jericho House on Sunday, December 2, from 3-6 P.M. and help us recreate a nineteenth century Christmas. We promise a Wassail bowl, holly and mistletoe, seasonal music provided by Georgia Bagge, interesting company, and the beautiful atmosphere of lovely little Jericho House, dressed for the holidays by the members of the West Dennis Garden Club.*

Not Unknown This Time

It's been awhile! The last time readers were asked to identify historic homes in Dennis was in the February Newsletter's *Old House Scavenger Hunt*. In keeping with the season, I went looking for pictures in the snow and found one. As was the case with the hunt, the answer is known, but can you find out? Please mail your deductions to info@dennishistoricalsociety.org. The first person with the correct answer will be recognized in next month's newsletter. Credit must be given for the use of this picture, but unfortunately, it will give away too much information. The source will be acknowledged in January.



Wishing everyone a Joyous Holiday Season!



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Sorry to Annouce!

Unfortunately, due to the continued threat from the Delta Variant of Covid-19, these December Events have been cancelled!

- ***Dennis Maritime Museum Christmas Open House, Dec. 11th***
- ***DHS Member Meet & Greet, Dec. 11th***
- ***Christmas at the Manse, Dec. 12***

2021 DHS Annual Appeal

Soon, members will receive their Society's 2021 Annual Appeal letter asking for support for *wish list* items for each of our three museums.

Please give generously! Your contribution will greatly assist our museum volunteers in fulfilling our Mission Statement.

**To Preserve, Protect & Promote the
the History of Dennis, Massachusetts**

*(For some, it may still be tax
deductable)*