



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter January 2023

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As is our January custom, there will be no Board Meeting this month.

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



Happy New Year! Here's Hoping 2023 Is A Great One!



The Story of Frontier Valley

This amazing tidbit of Dennis history began for me on May 26, 2019, with DHS receiving the following email from Cape Cod writer Christopher Setterlund - *Hello, I am working on an article for Cape Cod.com about the old Frontier Valley western park which existed for a few years where the Melpet Farm and now affordable housing exists. I was writing to ask for permission to use a couple of photos of it which you have in your archives for the article. I will of course credit them to the Dennis Historical Society Digital Archives. I have used your photos several times before with permission, but always like to ask before using them. Thank you!*

Ed. Note - Because of the open nature of the DHS Digital Archive, there is nothing the Society can, nor wants to do, to keep the public from taking advantage and using the wealth of material offered. The Archive page which opens when one clicks on the tab does say, however, *for commercial use, you must contact us at info@dennishistoricalsociety.org for permission.* It is refreshing how many researchers and authors like Christopher Setterlund have contacted us before using material which supplements their work!

Remembering from his earlier email that Christopher was writing an article about Frontier Valley, I searched the web and quickly found *The Story of Frontier Valley* which appeared last August on *CapeCod.com*. Wishing to use the article in its entirety, I emailed Christopher and asked permission to do so. Unfortunately, at press time, I haven't received a response. This article is presented giving Christopher Setterlund full credit for the research and the writing.

The 1950's were the infancy of television. In 1950 only nine percent of American homes had a television; by 1960 that number had reached ninety percent. A common staple of television in those days was the western. It was a show set in the old west, usually starring cowboys. In the 1950s westerns like Gunsmoke, Maverick, The Rifleman, The Lone Ranger and more dotted the daily schedules. The western craze was nationwide; it stretched all the way to Cape Cod. Did you know that for a time beginning in the 1950s, there was a western-style village located in Dennis? This is the story of Frontier Valley.



DHS Digital Archive



DHS Digital Archive

Frontier Valley would get its start as land belonging to John Melanson. He had established Melpet Stables in 1952 on Rt. 134 in Dennis. In 1957, the seeds for Frontier Valley were being laid as a tract of land at Melpet was leased to a group of men comprised of Paul Sullivan, his brother Jim, and their friend John Doherty. The idea for a western-style amusement park in Dennis was spawned from another project being built in Hyannis by Jim Sullivan called Storyland. This fairy tale themed park operated on the grounds of the future Cape Cod Mall. The group constructed an authentic-looking western Main Street among the deep pine forest that once made up much of the area. After arriving at Frontier

Valley down a tree-lined dirt road, visitors would see buildings with names such as Frontier Hotel, Cattlemen's Bank, Pony Express, Dusty Gulch Jail, and Uncle Milt's Trading Post. The ownership group brought in roughly twenty actors to fill roles for the park which included mock robberies and shootouts. The group also scoured New England in search of genuine western equipment like stagecoaches to make the experience as authentic as it could be.

Opening in time for the summer in 1957, admission at Frontier Valley cost ninety cents for adults and fifty cents for children (approximately \$8 and \$4.50 in 2019), while children under age six were free. Running from sunrise to dusk the park was an immediate hit. Visitors would come early and stay late enjoying the true to life western town. The first season was a rousing success.

In late 1957, after the first season of Frontier Valley, the rural area of Dennis nearly had another new attraction. Warren McDermott, who owned twenty acres of land on Airline Road in Dennis not far from Frontier Valley, petitioned to build a stock car race track on his property. The land once used to train horses would be home to the track and grandstand which would have seated 4,000 people. The cost was rumored to be \$100,000 (\$904,000 in 2019). Despite there being similar tracks in use in Norwood and Seekonk, the track idea was refused by the town. McDermott would cut his losses and eventually run a trailer park campground on his land instead.

Frontier Valley would continue its success by incorporating horse shows and rodeos into its schedule. This would include shows featuring the Barnstable Hoofbeats Horse 4-H Club which held a special show at the park on Memorial Day Weekend 1959, complete with an exhibition from John Doherty's daughter Katherine and her trick horse Ginger. In October 1960, a horse show run by the Cape Cod Horseman's Association would draw 400 people. However, the highest point of Frontier Valley was its association with a television western star, Texas born Rex Trailer, who came to Boston in 1956 to star in his own children's show 'Boomtown.' Rex would be a frequent guest performer at Frontier Valley and other Cape Cod locales. His fame, talents, and child friendly show made him a perfect guest. He would continue his appearances at local fairs and events throughout the 1960s with his Boomtown show lasting until 1974. Frontier Valley would not last nearly that long.

The ownership group of Doherty and the Sullivan brothers ran Frontier Valley for a few years with success. When their other business ventures began to take up much of their time though, they knew they had to cut ties with something. The group would sell their park to Interstate Theaters, owners of several Cape movie houses, as well as the Yarmouth, Dennis, and Hyannis Drive-Ins. The western craze soon died down, and Frontier Valley would not survive. It was closed shortly after being sold, and the property became a stable where horses were boarded.

Aside from three suspicious fires in the ensuing years, the property would remain relatively unchanged until 2000 when A&P Supermarket petitioned the town to open a 40,000-square foot grocery store on the grounds. The company promised to donate ten acres of the land for public open space and 600 plantings to give their store more of a park-like feel. However, that did not sway the town. Though meetings and debates raged on throughout 2000 ultimately the supermarket chain was rejected.

In May 2001, the Town of Dennis purchased the 19-acre Melpet Farm and gave 6.4-acres to the Dennis Housing Authority to maintain affordable housing units which already existed on the premises. Those would be torn down in 2013 making way for the Melpet Farm Residences built there in late 2015. The affordable housing shares the property with the Bits & Bridles Farm. **Thank you Christopher Setterlund!**

Did You Know?

When growing up, I'll bet that Bo Durst was always ready to take a dare! On Halloween, she was probably the one who would sneak up and knock loudly on the door of the old, ramshackle, supposedly haunted house at the dark end of the street. While maybe not quite so daring now, Bo is still up for a challenge, especially if Dennis history is involved! So, although very appreciative, I wasn't surprised when she sent me the following story with historical insight by L. Ray Sears III and inspiration, encouragement and photograph by Diane Rochelle –

As so often happens, when someone presents me with a puzzle, I get intrigued and try to see what I can find out. As I was talking with Diane Rochelle one day, she mentioned finding a town line marker on Rt. 6A between Barnstable & Yarmouth—no, not those big white metal signs at the side of the road, but old/ancient stone markers. She then surmised that there must be one between then Yarmouth (now Dennis) and Harwich (now Brewster). Diane said she had looked at one time, hadn't found it, but would search again. Since I live in East Dennis near Route 6A, I decided I should have a look for it also. How hard could it be? Thus, a few days later on a balmy, autumn day, I traipsed the extension of Old County Way. Not finding it, I then searched all along 6A and the western section of Old County Way - nothing!



Bo Durst, photograph by Diane Rochelle

Yarmouth & Harwich. Amazingly, Officer Martin said he knew where it was and pointed it out! No wonder I couldn't find it - just a stone with a very faint line in the middle that you would see only if you knew where it was. I hadn't noticed it in all the years I've walked the path. How many times had I been right there where I knew it had to be?!

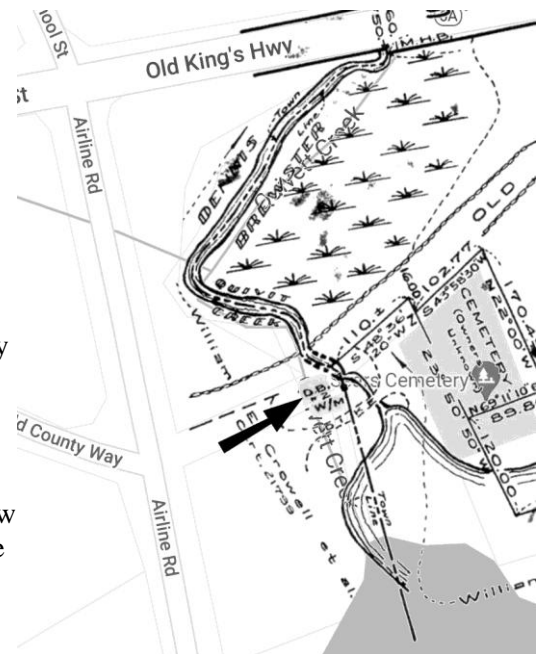
When I got home I emailed Diane that I had found it. We decided to meet in the parking lot the next week and check it out. I brought my bucket and scrub brush along and some clippers to clip back the briars. Using water from the brook, I scrubbed that stone, and low and behold, there appeared "B"/"D". Diane then took her turn at scrubbing. Dennis became a town in 1793, and Brewster didn't break from Harwich until 1803, so this stone had to come after 1803. Was there an earlier stone with "Y" and "H"? Who knows!

I also contacted L. Ray Sears to tell him about the find. Following is the quote from Ray who has a picture of the stone from about 20 years ago, when you could still read it. "The Dennis and Brewster selectmen used to meet there every year to agree 'that's the boundary'. It's called the 'perambulation of the line'. It was a state-mandated duty to do every 3 years but now done every five years by order of state law! Apparently there was a 15-pound penalty back in the day if they didn't perform the perambulation as prescribed!"



Photo by Bo Durst B/D have been darkened by Ed.

Ed. Note –The map is an overlay of a 1958 Subdivision Plan by Nickerson & Berger, Civil Engineers sent to me by Diane. It is superimposed on a map of the area on Google Maps to show Airline Road and Route 6A. The boundary is marked.



Courtesy of Diane Rochelle and Google Maps

Ed. Note - Ray continued with links to the following sources – <https://www.wickedlocal.com/story/needhamtimes/2007/02/22/selectmen-walk-town-boundary/40434142007/1711> or [Wickedlocal.com/Needham Times](https://www.wickedlocal.com/NeedhamTimes), published 2/21, 2007, updated 2/22/07. "A requirement of antiquity still performed, one-third went to the person who ratted them out and the rest to the town's poor."

Thanks, Cousin Ray! I can always count on you!

I also reached out to a Dennis Selectman to ask if anyone there had ever heard of the perambulation. Obviously they are not still doing it, although I would bet the law is still on the books! At the time I am writing this I have not received a response!

Thank you Bo, Diane and Ray!



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2022
DHS Annual Appeal

You should all have received your Society's 2022 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**

*If you have already given
Thank you!*

***A Thank you from
Phyllis Horton***



To All Who Sent Cards,

I would like to thank you for the thoughtful card you sent me as I usher in my 95th birthday. To some of you your card brought back great memories spent together and for those of you I have yet to meet, thank you for your wonderful thoughts.

Gratefully,

Phyllis