



The Avon Historical Society Summer Newsletter 2013

When you think of summer in Avon, you think of all the usual summery things...watermelon, grilling, lightening bugs, swimming, sunburn, family trips, fireworks and playing outside till dark. These things were just as much fun 50 years ago in Avon as they are today. So enjoy reading some summer-themed stories of the bygone days of Avon in the good old summertime!

HEAR YE, HEAR YE....UPCOMING EVENTS!

June 2 - September 29 - The Pine Grove School House and the Derrin Farmhouse will be open for summer tours on Sundays from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. There will be a greeter at each location to hand you a brochure for a self-guided tour. At the Derrin house, there are two raised-bed kitchen gardens and on the north side of the house, a colonial bird bottle attached to the house. At the school house bring your children to see how kid's classroom were after the Civil War complete with outhouse!

June 4 – August 31 – The Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee of the Society presents an exhibit entitled Gettysburg: "nip and tuck, right smart fighting" to commemorate the 150th year of that historic battle. Please visit the Avon Free Public Library to view the exhibit in the glass display case outside the Marian M. Hunter History Room. It features an authentic Civil War cavalry saddle, cannon balls, maps, photographs and a bayonet.

July 16 - Edwin Cole Bearss, Chief Historian Emeritus of the National Park Service and a nationally known Civil War historian, will present "Major General Dan Sickles: Soldier, Scoundrel, Statesman." Lecture at 7:00 p.m. at the Avon Free Public Library Community Room. Please register at the Reference Desk, online or leave a message at 860-678-7621.

August 20 - David Ward, president of Civil War Tours in Winchester, will present "Mr. Lincoln Goes to Gettysburg: The Crossroads of History and Hollywood." Lecture 7:00 p.m. Avon Free Public Library Community Room. Please register at the Reference Desk, online or leave a message at 860-678-7621.

September sneak peek: The Avon VFW Post 3272 will present an exhibit on the 50th anniversary of the entrance of the United States into the Vietnam War. The exhibit will be located at 'The History Corner' outside the Marian M. Hunter History Room of the Avon Free Public Library beginning in September.



THE HISTORY CORNER...

Memories of the West Avon Community Club

The West Avon Community Club operated for about 75 years and was the social meeting place for local families. The clubhouse, still standing although in disrepair, was located on West Avon Road, across from the High School. It began about 1924 when families needed some place for summer fun and land was donated by the Burnham family. By 1925 residents sold stock to build a club house which is still standing and located directly across the road from Avon High School. Dinners, dances and games all took place here and in 1947, a 30 ft. x 60 ft. swimming pool was added. The pool was originally fed by underground spring water – talk about cooling off in the summer! A resident who used to swim there said 'It's a quite a unique experience –it's cold and clean, not soupy'. He added 'There isn't that chemical taste or smell to the water'. By 1996 the pool was filled by the town water system.

The membership fee in 1996 was \$125 for a single resident's fee, and \$150 for one resident plus the addition of a child for the entire summer. People could come and go as they pleased as there was a combination lock for entry by members. The pool was open from mid-June to mid-September. There were no lifeguards as parents were expected to look after their own children. One condition of membership was the volunteering on one Saturday a month to help with the pool and grounds maintenance.

During the war in a 1944 newspaper article, there was an appeal for volunteers to help at the Club. "The young men of the club are scattered from the Pacific to Europe, so there are few of them at home except the ones who are carrying on the very necessary farming of the community." Local residents donated time to maintain the property and the pool. Some quotes from historic newspaper articles regarding the beloved summer spot are: "The Community Club represents one of the things our boys were fighting for. We know they are going to be pleased to come back and find the swimming pool all ready for them." "The men and women who started and developed this club built character as well as a building." "The older folks have done a magnificent piece of work during the war."

Local citizens felt that there was a sense of the history that this place represented within the community. Stories had been passed down from earlier generations of the various social events they had attended there and enjoyed. Historic articles mention tire tub races, relay races, underwater races and retrieval games from the bottom of the pool for the kids. One humorous note regarding an egg and spoon race (on land) was that 'owing to the current price of eggs, golf balls will be substituted for the eggs'. Imagine those folks of yesteryear seeing the prices of our eggs today! Folks from the older generation remembered Saturday nights when square dances were held as well as other events such as strawberry festivals, pot luck suppers, garden club meetings, and fire department carnivals. Other civic and political organizations used the club house as well so it was a very active community meeting place for many years.

Alas, the West Avon Community Swim and Pool Club, as it later became called, is no more due to economic factors and having been replaced by the newer Sycamore Hills Pool and Senior Center. Longtime town residents no doubt have fond memories of those pleasant summer days around the pool and the convivial evenings at the club house. The common thread gleaned from the historic articles used in the research for this article was mention of the nice people and relaxed family atmosphere at the Community Club. Unfortunately, like so many other places that have fallen into disrepair, all good things must come to an end. In 1996 the building received a new roof and new paint but the building is vacant. It is a shame to watch a physical place, that created such carefree summer memories, disintegrate over time. The music that was played in the dance hall on those warm summer evenings still resonate in the collective consciousness of our senior citizens.



THE OLDEN DAYS AT CHERRY PARK FAIRGROUNDS

Before the terminus of Lovely Street heading north toward Canton, was an area of Avon formerly known as Cherry Park. There existed a legend of an old Indian chief who liked cherry rum and was rumored to live on the rock bluff and hence called Chief Cherry. When the land was purchased by the Farmington Valley Agricultural Corporation in 1882, it is thought Cherry Park was chosen as the name of the fairgrounds based on this legend.

The 126 acre fairgrounds operated during the late summer in different incarnations from about 1883 through the latter part of the 1950s. It was a destination for both exposition and entertainment. During the early years of its operation, the fairgrounds of Cherry Park were like a country fair where farmers showcased their produce and prized livestock. Farmer's wives competed for best in show with their homemade pies, culinary creations, flowers and handicrafts. Even children could exhibit their pets to compete for ribbons.

In addition to the agricultural aspects, entertainment features began to be added over the years. There were competitions in driving and trotting horses known as 'trials of speed' and in 1898 an 'exhibition of strength' where oxen pulled stone boats. People could pay to take a hot air balloon ride and there was a daredevil act where a parachutist leaped from the basket of the balloon and landed on the infield, hopefully!

Historic newspaper articles reference The Cherry Park Fair which was a two-three day event in late September. Schools were closed for one of the days to allow school children and their families to attend and estimates were that eight to ten thousand people visited over the course of the event. Just before 1900 a grandstand was built from which people could view all the events. Admission to the park in the early days was 25 cents for adults and 15 cents for kids under the age of 12. For an extra charge of 20 cents folks were allowed to sit in the grandstands.

As the years progressed, the look of the Fair changed to resemble more of a carnival-type atmosphere complete with booths selling food and games of chance run by "fakirs" or in modern parlance, "carnies". By the year 1909 Cherry Park became known for horse racing as a loam track was added for trotting and pacing races. The park was listed on the Hartford County Circuit for the Great Stakes Races. Unfortunately there was a track accident with a resulting lawsuit that forced Cherry Park to close in 1911. The Farmington Valley Agricultural Association went out of business and the property was sold.



Under new ownership the Park eventually re-opened in 1920 keeping harness racing but also adding cattle and horse auctions, airplane exhibits, and a midway. The Park prospered until the Great Depression of the 1930s when it then became primarily used by the 4H Clubs and the Boy Scouts. After that more modern day racing in the form of midget cars and motorcycles competed at Cherry Park, but the glory days were definitely over. Eventually the property was sold to a residential real estate developer for a housing subdivision in the 1960s. Longtime locals recall tales of the golden, olden days of the Fairgrounds with its' lovely maple tree-lined entrance and of the fun times had by all at Cherry Park.



SPOTLIGHT ON...

Talking to History-My breakfast with Avon's Military Veterans

On Monday, May 27th, I had the privilege of attending a breakfast for military veterans preceding the Avon Memorial Day parade. The weather was perfect and the breakfast was held in the garden of the Wilson's home. I 'worked the room' walking around to the tables and introducing myself. I told the veterans I was there to get a sense of the group to write an article for the Avon Historical Society newsletter. I did not have a written set of questions to ask as I decided to just 'wing it' with the exception of one pre-planned question that I reserved until the end of the conversations.

The garden area was festooned with flags and patriotic table décor. There was a lovely offering of breakfast food selections and drinks all contributed by the Wilson's neighbors and some friends to say thanks. As I observed the group as a whole, what stood out was the camaraderie among these men and women. Though they were of different ages and military conflict eras, they were clearly bonded.

I asked what country each person I spoke to was stationed in primarily for my own edification so I could place their service in historical context. What a treat it was for me to meet some gentlemen from my father's service era, WWII, 'the greatest generation' as Tom Brokaw's moniker refers. What struck me speaking to these older men, was the courtesy and humility characteristic of this timeframe in history. One man almost brought tears to my eyes with his gracious answer to the question I had reserved. I asked if he had to do it all over again, would he still have enlisted. This man said yes he would but was so humble as to say that he felt he got more out of his military experience than he put in. That is the striking thing about these people. There is not a boast among them. They all did their duty, fought for what they believed in, and are appreciative now to just get a quiet 'thank you for your service' nod.

There were a greater number of them from the Korean War and Vietnam War era present understandably. I had the pleasure of meeting some from the Army and Air Force who were stationed in Vietnam and Thailand during their enlistment. As I observed the interaction between them, that oft-mentioned sense of brotherhood was apparent. Again I asked one veteran if he would make the same decision to serve and it was not a surprise to receive an answer in the affirmative.

After breakfast, I was off to watch the parade with my husband. Our vantage point was across the street from the Avon Congregational Church on the northeast corner of East Main Street and Simsbury Road. The church bells were playing a medley of patriotic songs. As "America the Beautiful" played, I looked up at the cloudless, powder blue sky which was so appropriate to the lyrics of the song at that moment..."oh beautiful for spacious skies..." I looked across the intersection to the southeast corner where I marveled at the Constitution pin oak tree that would once again bear witness to the honoring of our town's veterans. And lastly, I gazed to the right to see the flag atop the flagpole at O'Neill's car dealership snapping smartly in the breeze as if to wave in salute of our military men and women.

The choice of military service is a personal one. There are different historical events that have influenced people's decisions to enlist. One thing was obvious from my conversations with these veterans. They had the courage then and they have the courage now and would not think twice about putting on the uniform again to protect the ideals and values of America.

Coming in September 2013, Avon VFW Post 3272 will present an exhibit at the Avon Free Public Library commemorating the 50th anniversary of the entrance of the United States into the Vietnam War. All are welcome.



ABIGAIL'S RIVER ADVENTURE

Summertime had come to Avon and the children at the Pine Grove School House went home for summer to help their families on the farm. Abigail missed the company of the children who were learning above her as she watched them from beneath the floorboards of the little one-room schoolhouse. So Abigail decided to go on a summer adventure! She puzzled and puzzled until she came up with a most marvelous idea. She thought, wouldn't it be grand to take a ride on the Farmington River! Oh what fun that sounded like and she began to plan her trip. First, she would need a way to reach the river. She decided to catch a wagon headed to Farmington to sell goods by way of the Old Red Bridge. The bridge went over the river and connected Farmington to Avon. She hopped off the wagon and waited for a boat passing under the bridge to hop on to. Abigail had packed a lunch in her little basket and she brought some catnip just in case she encountered a cat to distract it so she could make her escape. And just as she had planned, not very long after Abigail was on the bridge, a small boat with two fishermen came by paddling down the river. Perfect! Abigail being very clever, threw a small rock KERPLOP! into the river near the boat to distract the fishermen's attention as she dropped from the bridge into the boat. Off she sailed, peeking out from under some coiled rope, down the river. How fun! The fishermen were headed toward Unionville Dam where the fishing was known to be good. Abigail hadn't thought much about how she would return to Avon. She was just having so much fun sailing along on the river. When the fishermen arrived at their fishing spot, they threw the anchor overboard and sat for hours fishing. By now Abigail was getting very bored and wanted to go home. But how? She was in the middle of the river and could not swim. But Abigail must have been born under a lucky star for a painter turtle was swimming by just then. Abigail climbed over the side of the boat on the anchor's rope and waved her arms at the turtle. The turtle came closer and Abigail asked if she could ride on his back to shore. The turtle agreed as Abigail had promised him a piece of the cake she had in her basket. The turtle, of course, had never tasted cake so was anxious to sample this sweet-sounding delight. So off Abigail went on the turtle's back safely to shore. Now what? How was she to get home as it was getting near dusk. She saw a little house near the edge of the river with the glow of candlelight already ablaze through the windows. Abigail warily approached the house and hoped to hitch a ride back to Avon in the morning. Most farmers needed to take their grain to a gristmill to be ground into meal every few days or to bring their produce to town to sell. So Abigail hoped the farmer would be headed for Avon the next morning. Abigail found a secluded nook in the woodshed to rest overnight. But as she settled in, she felt as though she was being watched. She heard nothing. Suddenly she picked up the scent of a cat! Oh my! The cat had its eyes fixed on Abigail and flushed her out of her hiding spot. Abigail scurried across the woodshed floor as fast as lightening and scooted right out of the space under the door throwing the catnip she brought behind her. Luckily the cat could not resist the aroma of the catnip and gave up the chase. Phew! Abigail paused at the base of a big old tree to catch her breath. From above her she heard....'whooooooooooooo is there?' Abigail looked up to see a screech owl in the tree hollow above. Now owls are usually predators of mice but this owl was different as this species preys on insects. So the owl agreed to fly Abigail back to Avon on his back as Abigail told him that the bugs in Avon were way bigger and juicier than the Unionville ones....talk about a fish story! Anyway, Abigail got back to her den under the floorboards of the Pine Grove School House and settled in for a nice cup of tea and scones before bedtime. She would sleep well after her exciting adventure sailing on the Farmington River!



KID'S CORNER

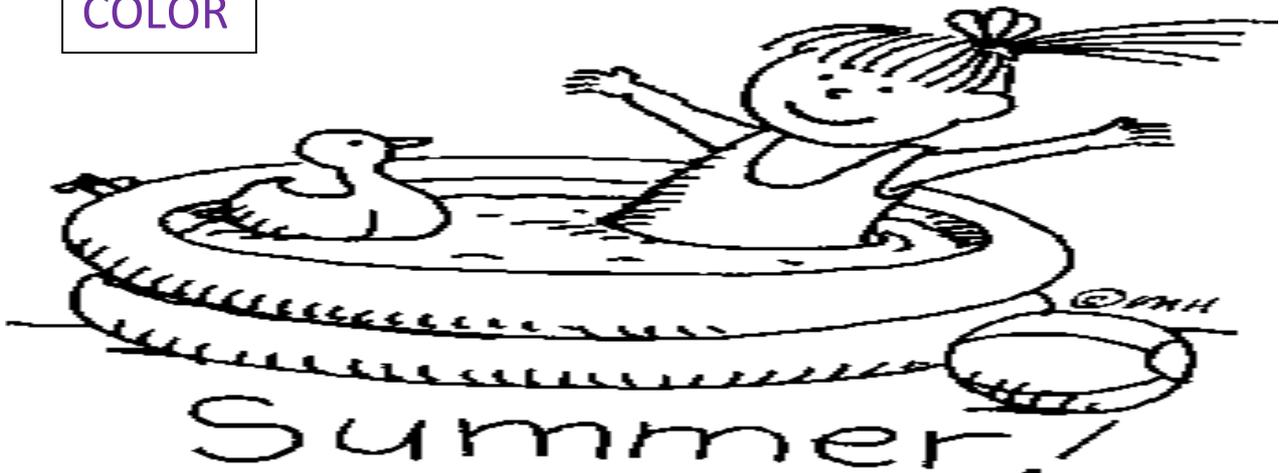
Summer challenge questions:

1. Name five things you might take to the beach.
2. What are your favorite summertime foods ?
3. Name some animals you see in the summer.
4. How many flavors of ice cream can you name?
5. What is your favorite thing about summer?

Fun things to do in summer – Always ask a parent for help.

1. Catch fireflies or moths in a jar...let them go soon to be free.
2. Draw a picture of a bullfrog.
3. Create a sculpture out of popsicle sticks and white craft glue.
4. Make a necklace or bracelet using pony beads.
5. Collect sea shells at the beach and put them in a shoebox lid with some sand for display. Can you name some of the types of shells?

COLOR



POSSIBLE ANSWERS TO SUMMER CHALLENGE QUESTIONS, BUT THERE ARE NO WRONG ANSWERS!

1. beach towel, pail and shovel, sunblock, flip flops, umbrella
2. ice cream, hot dogs, hamburgers, ice pops
3. frogs, moths, butterflies, woodland animals, fish in ponds, toads, turtles
4. strawberry, chocolate, vanilla, butter pecan, fudge swirl, coffee, peach, pistachio
5. no school, no homework, no early bedtime

WORTH NOTING....

Volunteer greeters are needed for the Derrin farmhouse and the Pine Grove School House on Sundays beginning June 2 through September 29 from 2:00-4:00 p.m. No experience necessary except a welcoming smile and friendly attitude. To help, please contact the Avon Historical Society and leave a message on the phone and someone will get back to you.

The Avon Historical Society is planning an Open House event later this year and requesting items for donation to our collection. We are most interested in items that pertain to the early families of Avon such as photographs, diaries, deeds, will, letters, quilts and the like. It is preferred that the items should be Avon related and a 'Donation of Gift' form be signed giving AHS ownership of the items to preserve and/or display. More information will be forthcoming so plan a trip to your attic soon!

It is with heavy hearts, we pay tribute to Gladys August who passed away recently. Below is a photo of Gladdie (right) posing at the canal plaque dedication last summer at the Living Museum. Gladdie was part of the team that worked with the town to move School House No. 3 (formerly the Living Museum) building to its current location. Every time we enter the building through the front door in the Spring, we shall remember Gladdie from the scent of the lilac bush planted there in her honor years ago. We shall miss you Gladdie.



Gladys August (far right)

The Avon Historical Society was recently gifted a relic of yesteryear—a lace Tatting kit. This kit contains 'sample entries' of tatted lace and spools of thread. It was used by Mrs. Irene Buckland, wife of Oliver Buckland who ran a saw mill in Avon. They resided here during the period between 1923 and 1934. Handmade lace is a long lost art that used to be popular in the early part of the twentieth century. Women made delicate and intricate designs and the lace was used to adorn clothing, hats, and even to embellish household items such as pillowcases and table runners. A few tatting magazines from the 1930s accompany the kit. The donation was made by Julia Harvey on behalf of Mrs. Buckland's daughter Marjorie Wilson.

We are pleased to tell you of another great addition to the Avon Historical Society's collection. From the collection of Anthony T. Enders, New York City, formerly of Avon, CT, we were gifted with:

1. 7 Highway Maps covering the towns of Hartford County, dated 1938, showing approximate location of houses and buildings
2. "Map Air Sector – Avon. W.W II" showing homes from Farmington town line to route 44 and West Hartford town line to just west of the Farmington River
3. Aerial Photograph of the Farmington Valley from south of Farmington to north of the Ciderbrook Cemetery and from the top of Avon Mountain to the west of West Avon Rd. date unknown
4. Photostat of an old map of Farmington dated 1829, with Simsbury on the north, Burlington on the west, Southington on the south and Berlin and Hartford on the east.

The maps are available for viewing on request at the Marian M. Hunter History Room of the Avon Free Public Library.



WHAT and WHERE IS IT?

The first person to contact the Avon Historical Society by email or phone to correctly identify what is shown above and where it is displayed will receive a set of the brand new notecards being created this year. Designs for these new cards were selected from submissions by several talented art students of Avon High School made just for us!

DID YOU KNOW?

The Avon Historical Website is being updated this year and will have great new history stories, activities of the society, information about visiting the society's properties, articles contributed by members and so much more! Be sure to check back to watch the progress being made as our hope is to bring you a new look, an archive section, and more space!

There exists a History Club at the Avon High School that presently has about a dozen members from various grade levels. This is a student run organization with an elected president. Recently the history club asked the high school art department to have students participate in a contest to come up with a new design, preferably of local historic sites, for the new note cards for the Avon Historical Society. Prior to a scheduled AHS meeting, voting was held to choose several designs for the new AHS notecards that will be featured in the AHS gift shop online. We wish to thank Mrs. Drapeau and Mrs. Glick of the high school's Art Department for their oversight on this project. The notecards will be available for purchase from AHS in the near future. Upcoming projects for the history club, in conjunction with the National Honor Society, may include community service work on behalf of AHS. These community service hours may take the form of freshening up (painting) the AHS property on Main Street now known as School House #3, garden work at AHS properties, and perhaps greeting visitors at AHS properties during the Summer!

Mark your calendars now....Avon Day 2013 is coming on September 21st and the Avon Historical Society will have an attractive booth to visit and fundraiser to be announced soon!



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The Mission of the Avon Historical Society, founded in 1974, is to identify, collect, preserve, utilize, publish, display and promote the history and heritage of Avon.