



Avon Historical Society Winter 2014-2015 Newsletter

It's winter in New England—a perfect time to relax with the latest edition of the Avon Historical Society winter newsletter to read with a warm drink. Winter gives us time we don't usually have in the warmer seasons- it is a time for reflection, a time for family, a time for home and hearth. We hope you will enjoy reading our offering while stepping back to earlier days in Avon's history.

HEAR YE, HEAR YE...UPCOMING EVENTS

January through February—"Photos of the everyday lives of Avon residents" exhibit outside the Marian Hunter History Room at the Avon Free Public Library. Curated by Maura Barcellos, this exhibit will have an emphasis on family life in Avon using many of the photos of the collection from the History Room.

March through April—"Legacies of the Civil War" exhibit outside the Marian Hunter History Room. This exhibit (and companion events below) will look at the closing campaign, the way in which the war was remembered in Connecticut and the outcome of the war.

Saturday, March 14, 1:00pm, Alsop Community Room, Avon Free Public Library – A. Wilson Greene, Executive Director, Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier, Petersburg, VA will present "From Petersburg to Appomattox: The Capture of Richmond and Lee's Surrender to Grant."

Saturday, March 28, 1:00pm, (location to be announced)– David Blight, PhD, Professor of American History at Yale University and Director of the Gilder-Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition, will present "Legacies of the Civil War."

Saturday, May 2, 1:00pm, Alsop Community Room, Avon Free Public Library – Carolyn Ivanoff, Historian and Educator, will present "The History of our Nation Set in Stone: Arlington National Cemetery" – a virtual tour of the cemetery from the Civil War to present. (This event is being co-sponsored with the Avon VFW Post 3272 as they start their summer-long commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII.)

Saturday, May 9, 1:00pm, Alsop Community Room, Avon Free Public Library – Matthew Warshauer, Professor of History CCSU and Co-Chairman of the Connecticut Civil War Commemoration will present "Connecticut Civil War Monuments and Mourning." A reception will follow this event as we close the Avon Commemoration of the Civil War.

Sunday, June 7, 2:00pm, Opening Day for Derrin House and 150th anniversary party for the 1865 Pine Grove Schoolhouse! Everyone will be invited to join in the festivities. More to come in the Spring newsletter.

Avon Historical Society News

It is with sadness that we announce that William "Bill" Goralski a lifelong Avon citizen, long-time Society member and friend to many, passed away in December. Many knew and thought of Bill as a local legend; as a writer and historian. Bill was named "Avon Citizen of the Year" in 2009. He touched many lives in his 85 years and left a legacy of memories in his books and stories about growing up in Avon. Bill was the 10th of 11 children, from immigrant parents from Poland, who became a talented athlete excelling in three sports. He attended Trinity College and, while Captain of the football team, sustained a life-changing accident in his senior year. After much rehabilitation he was able to graduate and obtain his graduate degree and became a popular social studies teacher at Simsbury High School for thirty years. His books involved stories of his youth in Avon Center and his travels later on in life. Although his books are no longer in print, they are available at the Avon Free Public Library and some of the stories, and his photo, are on the Society's website at: <http://avonhistoricalsociety.org/StoriesfromAvon.htm> We thank Bill for all he did to keep history alive for us in the Farmington Valley and will miss him in the years to come.

As of this writing the Society is awaiting the replacement of the roof of the Horse Guards Barn on West Avon Road in February. Thanks to many donations of money and materials, the carpenter and builder will be ready to start as soon as they are available. Watch for updates this winter as we will be following the work in a variety of media.

The Society congratulates Roaring Brook Elementary School Vice Principal, Larry Sparks, and the Society's Special Projects Committee, chaired by Janet Conner, for winning a grant from the Avon Education Foundation (AEF) for the creation of educational flip books for the Blazer's Trail Kiosk Stations behind the school. The Society is working with Winding Trails Recreation Center on the creation and design of the booklets which will be ready this spring.



Accepting the award from the AEF Prize Squad are Asst. Principal Larry Sparks and Janet Conner of the Society (2nd from right)

If you drive by the Avon Board of Education building on Simsbury Road (Route 10), you will notice there is a 20' high cupola placed on the front lawn near the flag pole! Thanks to the efforts of Superintendent of Schools, Gary Mala, the cupola that stood on the top of the former Towpath School (annex) from 1949-2003 is now a permanent fixture for all to see. It was repainted this summer by local residents and boy scouts and will have an informational kiosk next to it sometime later this year. In addition, the original plaque that was on the school when it was dedicated in 1949, is now on the front of the cupola. It lists the School Committee and Building Committee members from that time. It is worth a stop to check it out!



Avon Historical Society News continued...

Some grounds keeping around Schoolhouse No. 3 on East Main Street (Route 44) by John Lumani of Lumani's Barber Shop at 10 E. Main Street this winter, has opened up the view of the schoolhouse from all sides! John took down many of the tall pine trees on the east side of the schoolhouse providing for more light in the building and space for gardens. He is doing this to expand his parking and entrance from Route 44 for his shop and the newly opened Studio 44 Salon for stylists who rent space there. The Society plans to work on the grounds, fence and exterior of the 1845 schoolhouse this summer so this help is much appreciated!



The Avon Historical Society Sesquicentennial Committee of the Civil War hosted several outstanding events this past Fall as part of the "Sacrifice" exhibit at the Library. "Sacrifice" commemorated the actions of the CT 16th regiment, made up mostly of men from Hartford County, including 16 from Avon. John Banks, author, historian, Civil War blogger and Avon resident, gave a presentation entitled "Tragic Tales of the CT 16th Volunteer Infantry" which brought to life with photos and stories, many of the heroic men from Avon and surrounding towns who served in this regiment. Another event entitled "An Audience with President Lincoln and General Grant" was the key-stone to the two-month commemoration. It included appearances by Canton resident, Howard Wright, as President Abraham Lincoln and Massachusetts resident, Sam Grant, as Lt. Col. Ulysses S. Grant. Included were six re-enactors from the CT 11th Volunteer Infantry Regiment who served as Guards for the President during the event. Mrs. Grant joined her husband, Lt. Col. Grant, as she shared with the audience detailed background on her husband prior to his arrival. It should be noted that some members of the audience were descendants of soldiers who served in the CT 16th as well as one man whose ancestor served on Grant's personal staff. This event was co-sponsored by and held at the Avon Senior Center. Over 125 people attended and enjoyed meeting with all the historical actors after the event.



Photos courtesy of Deborah Key Imagery, LLC

THE HISTORY CORNER...



The Historic O'Neill's Blacksmith Shop

Still standing and still owned by the original property owner's descendants, are the O'Neill's former blacksmith shop and carriage barn on Simsbury Road. Listed on the Historic Barns of Connecticut website (www.connecticutbarns.org), the O'Neill family, an early immigrant family to the community, has a proud heritage in Avon and dedication to the good of the town is the stuff of local legend.

Patrick O'Neil operated the blacksmith shop in the late 1800's. The brick forge used to make horseshoes is still inside the barn with many still hanging on wire around the inside walls. According to the 1860 census, there were 34 families with Irish surnames in Avon. John O'Neill immigrated to America in 1860, twenty years after the potato famine in Ireland. Patrick was born that same year and followed in his father's footsteps. His son, Thomas P. O'Neill, was born in 1885 and his brother, John Hayes O'Neill, was born in 1892. John was a WWII veteran and proprietor of O'Neill's Chevrolet on the corner of Main Street and Old Farms Road. His son, John Anthony O'Neill, is present day owner of the barn property.

One of the patrons in the early years of O'Neill's blacksmith shop was Walter B. 'Pinhead' Stowe. He sold sewing machines door to door, by horse and carriage, in the late 19th century in the Farmington Valley. It seems that Mr. Stowe was a bit of a character, based on a humorous story in Mary-Frances MacKie's book, 'Avon, Connecticut-An Historical Story.' She related that "Mr. Stowe was known for his parsimonious ways." However, a poem written in 1924 on his 79th birthday by Patrick O'Neill's wife Bridget, is below. This nice tribute to her neighbor was found in the files of the Marian Hunter History Room at the Avon Free Public Library.

On March 7th, 1845 just seventy nine years ago
A little baby boy was born into this world of care and woe,
And his parents promptly named him Walter Bishop Stowe.
The happy years of boyhood how soon they passed him by,
The years of early manhood how quickly they too fly.
In his declining years of life he counts them with a sigh,
Altho he's nearly four score now much younger he appears,
He drives about from town to town his horse he never fears-
He's dealing still in sewing machines, he's agent for fifty years.
He thinks when he looks at his thin grey hair,
Of the days 'twas a nice dark brown.
He has watched the hands of "Father Time",
Work changes round the town-By the merciless sickle of death
His old neighbors are all mown down.
He has watched all his companions, One by one he called away,
With grief at heart he laid them to rest.
In the church yard, where they lay, in peaceful sleep there to remain
Until the judgment day.
I'll turn from his sad reflections leaving all such things to fate.
Lay aside my pen and paper, for the hour is getting later
That boy is seventy nine to-day
And we must celebrate.

THE HISTORY CORNER (cont'd)...

Ice Harvesting on Avon's Ponds



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Back in the days before modern refrigeration, a very risky operation was carried out on Avon's frozen ponds during the winter. This was known as "ice harvesting." Men, along with a heavy wagon and horse, would venture out to the center of ponds such as Stub Pond in Avon Center, Anderson Pond on Harris Road in West Avon or Lily Pond near today's Avon Country Club. They would use horse-drawn saws to score the ice and then it was cut into blocks to sell to farmers. The farmers had ice houses, or underground storage, and would pack the ice blocks in sawdust or hay and it would last until summer.

(Photo credit: George Alcott from the Hunter Family, MacKie pg. 118)



Since dairy products of milk, cream, cheese and butter needed to be kept chilled to avoid spoilage, ice harvesting was a very lucrative business. A small house still standing today on Lovely Street, near Farmington Woods, was used as an ice house and today is a private residence. Imagine a farmer of yesterday seeing our modern, stainless steel, refrigerators today! We have certainly come a long way from the days when a block of ice was a necessity!

The Infamous Blizzard in March of 1888



Frank Hadsell, an early Avon resident, experienced the wrath of this blizzard first hand. He kept a journal where he documented the storm on Avon. Here are a few excerpts from his journal. "It was very cold and the storm had become very severe. The roads were blocked, snow drifts high as the eaves of houses...All trains on March 12." He added: "I had a big stove full of coal but I could not keep warm that night; it was so cold and the wind so strong it seemed to blow in from every side."



(Photo Credit: Frank Hadsell, MacKie pg. 150,151)

the effects of the blizzard had become very severe in places as all trains had ceased to run and plenty of snow was so very deep that it was blowing in from every side.

From the book 'Connecticut Disasters' written by Ellsworth S. Grant he wrote "Let it Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow-The Great Blizzard (1888)" in which he said the following: "In early March a massive northeaster settled over Block Island and pummeled southern New England with gale force winds, near zero temperatures and up to 50 inches of snow."

In the aftermath of this paralyzing storm, there were 400 deaths in New England with \$20 million in property damage. The snow drifts were 10-12 feet high and people had to use ladders to climb out of second story windows!

We hope that Mother Nature will be kind to us this winter!

AHS HAPPENINGS...



The Society wishes to gratefully acknowledge and thank the work of Rose Bennett for her time, effort and donation of fabric to make curtains to shade the south side windows of the Pine Grove School House. These curtains solve the problem of sun damage in the winter and also saved considerable money in not having to have the windows installed with UV light filters. So a great BIG thank you to Rose!

Kudos are in order for the Sesquicentennial Civil War Committee of Avon Historical Society. Once again, they have been collaborating and putting together marvelous educational exhibits in the display case outside the Marian History Room at the Avon Free Public Library. The Fall exhibit, 'Sacrifice', told the story of the soldiers of the Connecticut 16th Volunteer Infantry, many who came from Avon and nearby towns. Meticulously researched text and authentic artifacts were on display! One more exhibit will be on display (see front page) later this winter to mark the end of the four-year commemoration of the U. S. Civil War. (Flag photo credit: www.antiquesjournal.com)



A reunion of the Girl Scouts who attended Camp Gertrude Bryant was held at the Avon Senior Center on August 23, 2014. Friends who hadn't seen each other in many years were reunited and it was as though they had never been apart, judging by the good time everyone was having. Thanks to our own Jeannie Parker, and her team, for their months of planning to make this event such a success. A larger story about the event, with photos, will appear in the Spring newsletter and on the Society website in March.



DID YOU KNOW?

Mary Harrop, longtime Society member and past President, is really a Super Woman! That has to be the explanation for her tireless volunteer efforts on behalf of the citizens of the Town of Avon. Mary received a well-deserved honor from UNICO at Avon Day held on September 27th. Mary was chosen by the Citizen of the Year committee for her years of service on many town committees and as the impetus for the completion of the Rails to Trails Greenway project. Mary is pictured above during the Avon Historical Society's cow chip raffle in 2009 along with Len Tolisano and Ben Isaacson, AHS Trustees. The Avon Historical Society also owes Mary a debt of gratitude. She felt strongly about retaining the town's community feeling, helping to make our town a pleasant place to live, as well as preserving its history. The following is a quote taken from the accolade to Mary at the presentation of the Citizen of the Year Award ceremony at Avon Day as written by Town Historian Nora Howard:

"Mary has been a member of the Avon Historical Society almost since its founding in 1973, and was president for many years. She served on its membership and program committees, and co-chaired its Antiques Show for a decade. On a lighter side, she enjoyed co-chairing the Society's annual Cow Chip Raffle (2008-2012)."

All of us at Avon Historical Society want to thank Mary for her always cheerful spirit and her many hours of devotion to the work of the Society. We wish her all the best in the coming years!



The Wintertime Adventures of Abigail Fieldmouse 2014



When Abigail awoke early one cold winter morning she couldn't believe her eyes! Outside every twig, every branch, every bent over plant was coated in a layer of ice. It was like a land frozen in time. BRRRR! Abigail got out of her cozy nest and bundled up to put on a pot of tea. She took a small tin of leftover cookies down from the cupboard to enjoy with her hot drink. Then she added a few twigs to her small woodstove to warm the room up.

Something was different about this day....Abigail sensed it, her nose whiskers bristled and her fur stood up. It wasn't just the cold, something definitely was afoot....but what? Anyway, Abigail finished her breakfast and then did some chores. She had to venture outside so she wore her warmest clothes. She had to go bring in some more twigs for her small wood stove and she had to bring in some icicles to melt for drinking water. To reach the road, she had to lay a path of straw so she was able to get across the ice layer on the ground.

Abigail decided to go to the nearby farm to get some food and milk. Something told her that she needed to be prepared for bad weather. So she got her small metal bucket for milk and her basket for some pigeon eggs. If she was really lucky, she might get access to the root cellar at the farm and snag some small vegetables. While Abigail was at the farm gathering her goodies, she noticed the cows seemed anxious, the horse paced in his stall and the chickens were clucking loudly. What was it? Then all at once she knew what it was....a squall of snow was coming up fast. Oh My! She abandoned thoughts of finding more food and went to the barn door to head back home to her nest under the floor boards of the Pine Grove School House. But she could not even see across the road! It was a full-fledged blizzard! How would she get home?

She decided to try and find her way back following her footsteps. She set out in the direction she thought she had come. But the wind was blowing hard and the visibility was very low. She trudged on but the snow was piling up fast and she had to jump to take each step forward. On and on she forged but couldn't see her tracks and had no idea if she was headed home. She was getting cold to the bone and her feet were getting numb. What would happen to Abigail? She thought she would just freeze to death right there in a snow drift. She started to cry and became disoriented as to where she was. Her cries were heard by a barn owl that swooped down from his perch in the barn's cupola and gently picked up Abigail in his talons. Abigail thought she was his dinner but with his strong wings he was able to fly through the blowing snow and brought her just inside the doorway alcove of the school. Abigail was nearly frozen so she thanked her rescuer named Dudley, and scurried through a small hole to get down to her cozy, warm nest. Angels are all around us!

The Avon Historical Society wishes you a

Happy New Year!

SPOTLIGHT ON...



A very special lady whose smile is so broad it makes her whole face beam and creates radiating lines next to her eyes like rays of the sun. Her cheerfulness is contagious, her heart is made of gold, and we at the Avon Historical Society consider her a treasure.

We are so grateful for all the volunteer hours she has given as a greeter at our 1865 Pine Grove Schoolhouse. We also appreciate her helping with hospitality at our community events and for the wonderful baking done by her terrific and helpful husband as well.

Even though life has presented her with many challenges along the way, Moira Chubb's smile hasn't faded and we continue to be thankful to know her and to value her as a respected and loved member of our Society. Our thoughts, gratitude and love are extended to this special couple who, despite their burdens, continue to find time to help the Society.



As with most non-profit organizations it is most cost effective to e-mail newsletters and notices to our members. If you do not now receive this newsletter by e-mail, but would prefer to in the future, please send us a note at: ahs.mail.1830@sbcglobal.net and we will be sure to add you to our list. We DO NOT share our e-mail list with anyone outside of the Society.

As always, the Society welcomes comments, suggestions, criticism and help! Feel free to contact any of us at any time and we will do our best to accommodate you.



Avon Historical Society
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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.

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