

Westbrook Historical Society

"A Society That Preserves the Past"

Winter

2014

Purpose:

The Westbrook Historical Society meets regularly in its rooms at the Community Center at 426 Bridge Street, Westbrook at 1:30 pm on the first Wednesday of each month. The purpose of the Society is to bring together those people interested in the history of Westbrook, and to discover, collect, and preserve any materials and objects which establish and illustrate the history of the area.

Westbrook Bicentennial Celebration History Contest

The Westbrook Bicentennial Committee is planning a 200th anniversary celebration of Westbrook becoming a town. The 2014 civic birthday will feature the opening of a time capsule which was buried in Riverbank Park as part of a centennial celebration. The 1914 celebration ran on June 7, 8, and 9 and included a parade and the burial of the time capsule. A plaque on the rock marking the burial site says it should be opened on June 9, 1914 which falls on a Monday.

The purpose of the contest is to preserve our City's history and to celebrate the Bicentennial of the Town of Westbrook. There are two entry levels – Adult and Student (K through 12)

- 1st prize : \$50 plus 1 year membership in the Westbrook Historical Society
- 2nd prize: \$25 plus 1 year membership in Westbrook Historical Society

Anyone is eligible to enter but entries must be about Westbrook.

Typed entries should consist of 500 words or less – only typed entries will be considered. Photographs may be added to an essay, but only the word will count in choosing a winner. Video or Power Point presentations should be 20 minutes or less and include a hard copy. Oral interviews should also include a typed transcript.

Entries must be submitted to the Westbrook Historical Society by **May 1, 2014**.

426 Bridge Street, Westbrook, ME 04092

Include name, address, telephone number and other contact information with entry.

For further information and/or questions, contact: Donna Conley 854-2464 or info@westbrookhistoricalsociety.org

All entries will become the property of the Historical Society and will be placed into the Society's public reference collection.

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

A Sample of Donations – Taken from the Accessions Register

- Letters and Photos
- Collections of various memorabilia from St Mary's, Rudy Vallee, clubs, families, etc.
- Programs, photos, scrapbooks, letters, and yearbooks

- Fire and Police items including old horse drawn fire engine Bottles, china, pewter, paintings, coins

THE MAINE FOREST FIRES OF 1947

The program on December 4, 2013 at the Society was “**The Week Maine Burned**”: An extremely dry autumn in 1947 resulted in the October breakout of hundreds of wildfires all over the State of Maine. The resulting disaster was called the Fire of ‘47 and is often nicknamed “The Week Maine Burned”. Hardest hit was York County where fires in Shapleigh and Waterboro destroyed both communities and with only a few exceptions, most of the homes. More than 200 fires throughout the state were fueled by fierce winds and drought conditions. Over 200 homes and businesses were destroyed. The village of Bar Harbor was saved by heavy plowing around the downtown although the most of the outlying mansions and buildings were destroyed. Over 5,000 acres were burned.

Ed Marks from the Portland Fire Museum presented the program using film, mementoes and personal recollections, in order to recount this catastrophic event.

Ruth Knight, a member of the Historical Society, shared personal remembrances of her experiences in Brownfield. She was in elementary school at the time, when the children were quickly led out of the building and taken out of the area. Her Aunt, with whom she was living, said grab what you want and get in the car. Ruth saved her doll which she brought to the meeting carefully wrapped in a blanket. Her first-hand account told of the frightening drive to escape the flames as they were turned back in Hiram and Fryeburg and finally made it to the Conway area of New Hampshire. Cattle and livestock had been turned loose and were in the roads and fields. People lost all of their possessions including clothing, crops that had been harvested and their homes. Most of Brownfield was wiped out by the flames.

Philip Curran, past Editor of the Newsletter, told of his experiences as a young man during the fire in an earlier newsletter.

Nineteen forty seven was the year of the great forest fires in Maine, when the entire state was tinder dry and suddenly exploded with such force and intensity that entire communities were wiped out.

The third week in October was known thereafter as “the week Maine burned”.

The college (Portland Junior College later merged into the University of Maine system) closed and sent volunteer corps of students up into the backlands and small towns to help fight the fires. I piled onto a stake-body truck with a gang of other students headed for North Waterboro with tanks of water on our backs, and shovels. We were lucky to get there without getting bounced off the truck. I have never really known where we were at any given point in time, and the pattern of events escapes me after so many years, but in some order we joined fire-fighters in the woods in Waterboro in sheets of flame; then we piled into trucks and were driven to Parsonsfield, and Newfield, and then someplace else, depending on where the fires jumped or sprung up with the most violence.

We fought fires all night, the next day, and the next night, until I was so exhausted and full of smoke and fright that nothing seemed to matter. We slept for a couple of hours on the pews

in a church in some village, before the whole town went up in flames. It was like a war. I recall how shocked I was to come upon Dwight Brackett clubbing a porcupine to death with his shovel and then realized that it was really an act of mercy. I remember Walter MacVane's panic, with his shrunken leg, when we had to run for our lives ahead of a wall of flames. I remember how our line of defense crumbled before a farmstead in the face of a grove of pine trees exploding with fire one after another before the fire jumped to the house and took it.

We went home to get some rest, then returned to the fire areas again with the American Legion contingent. We followed the same pattern of being whisked from one area to another, wherever there was a blowup or wildfire. In such out of the way places as Hiram, Brownfield, and Porter, sometimes in the woods, and other times to try to save houses and barns.

Finally, in a state of numbing tiredness, I hitched a ride on a Portland fire engine that was being relieved and went home, and then back to school. I returned to one of the towns on a cold, snowy day at Christmas time, Brownfield I think, and helped to distribute food baskets and staples to the sober and hapless townspeople there.

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

INTERESTING WESTBROOK PEOPLE



Dr. Thor Miller was known to many Westbrook people. He delivered more than 4,000 babies – perhaps you were one of them.

He was also a pilot with his own small plane. I remember him coming to the house to treat my grandmother and my father flew with him and took aerial pictures. Image – a house call! Negatives of these photos are still around, one day they flew over the Battleship Missouri as it stopped in Casco Bay after signing a treaty after WWII.

Born in Portland and attending local schools, he graduated from Deering High School in 1919 and went on to attend Bowdoin College in Brunswick and the University of Maine in Orono.

He served as a teacher and principal at New Gloucester High School for a short time before receiving medical training at Boston University School of Medicine, graduating as valedictorian in 1930. He started his general practice in 1931 in Westbrook, where he practiced for 50 years.

He also served as physician for the Well Baby Clinic and as physician for S. D. Warren Paper Co.



January 8, 2014 Program -William David Barry returns to talk about his new book, **MAINE - The Wilder Part of New England**. In this book he traces 500 years of Maine history and tells how the changes in economy, religion and ethnicity, along with others, molded our State into what it is in 2013.

Books will be available for sale and autographing.

******Since our regularly scheduled meeting date would fall on January 1st, the date of this program is one week later.**

TID BITS FROM EARLY NEWSPAPERS OF WESTBROOK

From the 1885 Westbrook Chronicle – Newspaper which started in 1880.

This issue in 1885 cost \$1.00 per year – In 1898, it was available for \$1.50 per year, George Albert Haley, Editor. It was located at 21 Main Street, Westbrook and was published on Fridays.

“We are much surprised that the delightful pastime of boating is not engaged in here to a greater extent than it is. There are very few boats on the river where they should be counted by dozens. The boating facilities here are excellent, the sail up the Presumpscot is charming, and the rowing of an easy-going boat is a healthful and pleasant occupation for parties of both sexes. We have in mind a town not many miles from here where there is a beautiful river – something akin to the Songo – and a fine chance for boating, which is improved every pleasant day and evening by large numbers of people. The ladies there take about equal interest with the men in boating and are often seen bending to the oar and pulling with even and graceful stroke. In this recreation is found both strength and pleasure.

An unusual thing occurred on the street Wednesday, the arrest of a man for being drunk and disorderly. Not that men are not frequently in that condition here, but it so happens that the officers are not likely to be round at such times.

We have received a communication alleging that a man, who with his “wife” is now living in town, cast an illegal vote on Election Day. The claim is made by our correspondent that the man in question has a lawful wife in another state. The evidence in the case seemed a little doubtful and we withhold the communication for the present. If investigation proves to be well founded, we shall speak again in the future.

Cumberland Mills – The new house on Haskell street, with its walls partitions etc., made of 3-inch plank splined and grooved, is a new departure for this part of the country and is quite a curiosity and a matter of considerable interest to carpenters and builders in this vicinity. It is claimed that the building will be stiffer, the rooms warmer and the liability of damage by fire, rats, mice, etc., less than it would be if built after the manner prescribed by the majority of architects of our time.

Red Hot From the Gun – Was the ball that hit G. B. Steadman of Newark, Mich., in the Civil War. It caused horrible Ulcers that no treatment helped for 20 years. Then Bucklen's Arnica Salve cured him. Cures Cuts, Bruises, Burns, Boils, Felons, Corns, Skin Eruptions. Best Pile Cure on earth. 25 cts a box. Cure guaranteed. Sold by H. G. Starr, Cumberland Mills, and Scates & Co, Westbrook Druggists.

April 5, 1899 – How the Presumpscot Blew Up this Morning, Causing Death and Destruction.

The Engine Presumpscot blew up near Sacarappa on the Portland & Rochester Railroad this morning. The engineer, J. A. Bickford, received injuries from which he died on his way to the hospital. Fireman John F Eldridge was instantly killed. Fire from the engine's fire pot was blown into two houses setting fire to them. Three boys playing beside the railroad track was badly scalded by steam and water. The front of the engine was blown through the dormer window of a near-by house. No passengers were injured seriously.

Train number two had left the depot of the Rochester depot of the foot of Preble Street on its regular scheduled time is consisted of the locomotive Presumpscot a combination car and two passenger cars. The train was in charge of Conductor Frank H. Cleaves.

From Narragansett Sun May 9, 1895

A bit of Indian history printed from the History of Westbrook.

The first settlements within the limits of Falmouth of which any recorded data have come down to us, were made upon Richmond's Island, which may still be seen off the Cape Elizabeth shore, near the mouth of Spurwink River. Here, as early as 1628, dwelt one Walter Bagnal, otherwise called "Great Wat," who was engaged in receiving furs from the Indians in exchange for English merchandise and other commodities. He is said to have incurred the hatred of the red men, in consequence of which he was killed by them in 1631. A companion of Bagnal was also slain and their house plundered and burnt.

The crimes were supposed to have been perpetrated by a chieftain named Squitterrygusset, and his men; but it was not until the following year that the blood of Bagnal and his companion as it cried from the sod of Richmond's Island penetrated the dull ears of the English; then, however, in January, 1633, the crew from a vessel which was cruising along the eastern shore in pursuit of pirates, put in at Richmond's Island where they found a sachem from Massachusetts known as "Black-William of Nahant," whom they proceeded to hang to the nearest tree, notwithstanding he protested his innocence and was known to be a friend of the whites.

Meanwhile, Squitterrygusset, for whose act Black William was thus made to suffer vicariously was spared to give to the white land speculator the first deed of lands within our city. This sachem with the long name is supposed by the late Hon. William Willis, to have ruled over a tribe or clan of Abnakis, known as the Ancociscos from which is abbreviated our familiar name of Casco. This is thought to have been the same tribe which fished and hunted along the Presumpscot river, and whose squaws planted, in springtime, at old

Ammoncongan, and over which in subsequent years, reigned the half-breed, Polin who was shot by Manchester at New Marblehead, now Windham in 1756.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Hi Everyone, It's a new year and 2014 will be a busy year as we celebrate the Westbrook Bicentennial. I am working with City Clerk Linda Adams and the city Bicentennial Committee in the planning of the celebration, including the opening of the time capsule at Riverbank Park on June 9, 2014 and a Parade. I am also working with Suzanne Norton and Gene Berg on a book about Westbrook with Arcadia Publishing Company. Donna Conley is also publishing a book on the Mayors of Westbrook with old photos of Westbrook. The American Journal has also approached the Historical Society on doing a Commemorative booklet that they will release under our name during the actual celebration that will be during the last week of May and first week of June. I am looking for new ideas and volunteers to step up and help in this celebration, Hopefully The Bicentennial will show the citizens of Westbrook that the Historical Society is a valuable Resource and Contributor to our Community.

Mike Sanphy, President

Westbrook Historical Society 426 Bridge Street Westbrook, ME 04092 Tel: 854-5588
