

BROADSIDE

Summer & Fall 1985

The Sheepwash

Michael Corio, formerly of Bear Brook Road, contributed these happy recollections of summertime in West Windsor. Mike and Betty now live in St. Augustine, Florida and are the Historical Society members living farthest away.

A recent Historical Society Broadside mentioned the "Sheepwash", turning loose a flood of memories for me. Realizing that many current residents are denied access to this community feature, for good reason, I'd like to draw an imaginary picture for you of what the "Sheepwash" was like in its heyday.

Along Washington Road, opposite the McLean Engineering plant and a little west of it, stands a padlocked gate which is the entrance to the "Sheepwash".

Fifty years ago this was the only "recreational" area in the township. Oh, there had been some others. On North Post Road just beyond where the Alexander Road crossed the railroad tracks, where the Toth house stands, there was a great baseball field. Then too, where Will's new service facility stands next to the Alexander Road bridge was another popular ballfield, preceding by many years the first Little League field in town. But the "Sheepwash" was really "it" as it included all forms of family outings.

The whole area was a sandy tract quite high above the water. Frequently, autos going in the sand road would get stuck in a puddle. Following cars would find another route among the trees. The result was a whole lace-work of braided roads leading to the banks of the Millstone River. As cars came to the river they would be parked under the trees ten to fifteen feet above the water.

At this point, the river follows a sweeping curve, and at its deepest the channel was eight or so feet deep. The high sandy bank along the southern side was eroded enough to provide a nice, clean sandy beach. There were large trees along the bank which not only provided shade but served to hold the bank from totally eroding.

Some long-forgotten hero had climbed up in one of the largest trees and attached a stout, manila rope. Thus the brave and reckless could swing out over the river and fall, all arms and legs aflap, into the deepest part of the stream.

The river here was perhaps 60-75 feet wide. The north bank was largely undefined as the river seemed to merge into a swamp which extended all the way to the Walker-Gordon pastures. Along this bank, someone had built a small, dock-like structure. It was a short, pleasant swim across the river where one could sun while ogling the assembled bathing beauties.

Being much more rural in nature than it is today, the neighborhood youth made constant use of the "Sheepwash" especially when it was time for some of the hot, dirty jobs associated with summer harvesting. Bringing in hay, pitching rye, picking potatoes and more so tomatoes left our youngsters not only tired and hot but mighty dirty by late afternoon. It was no surprise to see one of the Roszel flat bed trucks arrive from Dutch Neck with ten or twenty of the hottest, dirtiest kids in the county. They came from Dutch Neck, Penns Neck and just about every other "neck of the woods".

I recall a typical Fourth of July at the "Sheepwash" over 50 years ago: Folks began arriving early to get a good parking spot right along the river bank. Picnic arrangements were quickly set up while the kids raced to get down into the water. After a refreshing swim it was time for a picnic lunch and everybody lunged at the groaning baskets.

After lunch it was time to move the folding chairs out along the foul lines for a good view of the afternoon ball game. Hucksters were there selling sodas and eskimo pies and all was keen anticipation for the start of the game.

Perhaps on this day, the opposition would be the arch-enemies from Monmouth Junction. It's hard to say why there should be such intense rivalry. Perhaps the many railroad workers who lived in the Monmouth Junction area all looked like Paul Bunyan but the word "Ringer" was frequently heard up and down the side-lines.

But we had our heroes too. I don't have actual records of who played for Princeton Junction on a specific date but baseball in those days usually boasted at least one of the Ward boys, Dan Gohring, Horace Reed, Lew Chamberlain, Jim Shorten, Abe Cohn, Frank Roscoe, Johnny Skillman, Joe Wright, Bill Bathie and many more. Time has thinned those ranks.

Which team won or lost those games grows unimportant over the passing years. What is important are the

cherished memories of our little slice of real Americana with our home team pride and the community all together at the swimming hole.

The last time I saw the "Sheepwash" was twenty years ago when we took the Boy Scouts in there for a camp-out. Unfortunately we couldn't get in the water for it was badly polluted then. Further upstream in the Plainsboro area run-off from the farms etc. had made the water unfit.

But in its time, the "Sheepwash" was a neighborhood treasure, as it will remain at least in the memory of those who knew it then.

— Michael Corio



The Stella Cook Hawk
Wedding Dress

Brides— Now and Then

Our Fashion Show of American and International Brides last April was a huge success and raised over \$600 for our restoration fund. The First Presbyterian Church of Dutch Neck was filled with enthusiastic viewers of the parade of 35 American brides beginning with 1980 back by decades to 1860, plus brides from India, Pakistan, China, Malaysia and Indonesia. Appropriate music for each decade and country was played by Arlene Jones and sung by Laura Horbatt.

Carol Kehoe's intriguing narrative, which took us from 1980 back to 1860, is excerpted in this newsletter. Perhaps some of our readers will want to expand on some of the topics raised during the narrative for additional articles later. For example, West Windsor's role in World War II or life during the Depression would be interesting topics.

An hour-long videotape was made of the show by Abe Bakker. We will be showing it at a Historical Society meeting next spring. In the meantime, any club, historical society, or group that would like to borrow the videotape, may do so for a contribution to the Historical Society of West Windsor of \$10. You will need a VHS tape player and a television set to view the tape. Please phone Joan Parry at 452-8598 or Kay Reed at 799-2400 for further information.

Notes on West Windsor History

In April 1985 the Historical Society of West Windsor presented a Brides Fashion Show featuring thirty-five American brides dating from 1860 to the 1980s. Each decade was introduced by some examples of its historic significance to the Township. Here are excerpts from the narration by Carol Kehoe:

Our vintage brides from the end of the 19th Century take us back to a very different West Windsor — a West Windsor made up of a group of small villages or hamlets built around a church and general store. The residents were predominantly farmers or craftsmen providing services to farmers and their families.

In 1874 the village of Dutch Neck was a small center of activity. In addition to the church and general store, it boasted a hotel, blacksmith, wheelwright, carpenter, mail contractor, several painters and shoemakers.

In 1882, the First Presbyterian Church of Dutch Neck built the initial section of its Chapel across Village Road West. The church itself added a section at the back and had to move several old gravestones in the process. Later another section was added to the front of the church, bringing the building out to South Mill Road.

In 1893 the railroad through Princeton Junction widened their tracks from two to four to handle additional traffic along the East Coast. Isaac Hey opened his general store by the tracks on what is now Station Drive.

The entire population of West Windsor was 1,342 in 1910, not much more than the number of students at the high school today. In 1902 the Fast Line Trolley began taking passengers from Trenton to New Brunswick. The high tension lines passing through the Township mark the trolley's former right-of-way. The trolley made stops at Grovers Mill, Conover Road, Penn Lyle Road and the Princeton-Hightstown Road at Mill Road. The latter area was nicknamed "Pig Town" because of a local pig farm there.

The Township Hall was built in Dutch Neck since that was deemed to be the center of West Windsor at the turn of the century. Township farms grew cash crops, particularly potatoes and tomatoes.

In 1902 West Windsor was in trouble with the Mercer County Grand Jury, who handed down a strongly worded suit proclaiming that a section of West Windsor road, between Clarksville and Penns Neck (Route One) was held to be "dangerous to the lives and property of persons traveling on it, and is designated to be a common nuisance." The Jury returned an indictment against the inhabitants of West Windsor Township, accusing them of nuisance for allowing these conditions. Route One at this time was a narrow dirt road.

World War I sent many West Windsor residents into the armed forces, but farming was considered an essential industry and kept many men at home.

In 1917 twin school houses were built at Dutch Neck and Penns Neck to handle Kindergarten through 8th Grade. Both buildings had four rooms. In Dutch Neck School today, this original core building is hardly visible among all the later additions. In Penns Neck, the school was sold during the 1970s and now houses offices at the corner of Route One and Alexander Road.

Horse and buggy school buses were traded in for motor buses. However, horses still pulled wagons along West Windsor's mostly dirt roads.

During the pre-World War I decade, many residents remember Gypsy camps and peddlers moving through the Township. One such peddler was the "Rag Man" who bought old clothes and rags to sell to papermaking factories.

In 1918 a disastrous flu epidemic struck the area. The epidemic spurred development of a cottage health care facility — the first formal Princeton Hospital. West Windsor mothers still had their babies at home and some continued to do so until the 1940s.

The 1920s brought West Windsor's population to 1,389. Electricity came to Dutch Neck and its church in 1923. In 1927, two rooms were added to the Dutch Neck School. The first development was built by Alexander L. Berrien on the wooded tract south of the railroad. He called it "Berrien City." The older houses on Harris, Scott and Berrien Avenue around the Princeton Junction Fire Company are the remains of this development.

The 1930s brought changes to the Township. West Windsor's first building code was developed. Schools established safety patrols for the first time. Electricity came to Bear Brook Road area, one of the last to be electrified.

The Delaware and Raritan Canal ceased operation in June 1934, leaving towns along its path, such as Princeton Basin and Port Mercer, without a commercial reason for being. Transportation focused on the railroads and the Brunswick Pike (Route One). Peddlers, such as the "Pain King", still wandered through West Windsor during the 1930s.

The stock market crash in 1929 hit local farmers two years later. Farms were sold and local businesses hit hard times. Buying motorized tractors created a financial hardship for already hard-put farmers.

In 1938, the Martians landed in Grovers Mill, at least according to Orson Welles' radio play "War of the

Worlds." The grist mill, built before the Revolution, continued to operate.

World War II dominated the 1940s but caused prosperity at its close. During the war, the need for food conservation brought rationing and ration books. Large families were somewhat better off by sharing coupons. Local farm families helped by growing their own vegetables and keeping cows and chickens. Canning became a necessity. One Township woman remembers canning over 1,000 jars in one summer! Farmers were given extra fuel allotments to produce as many grain crops as possible. Local groups got together to wrap bandages and knit scarves for the soldiers. West Windsor's population had now grown to 2,160.

A portion of West Windsor history came to an end in 1945 when the Pursuing and Detecting Society disbanded. It had been formed in 1882 to find stolen horses and wagons. Later it pursued stolen livestock and automobiles.

The Colonial Park development built model houses along Penn Lyle Road in the 1950s. American Cyanamid built its experimental farm along Route One, Clarksville and Quaker Bridge Roads. Route One was still a Township headache. Traffic lights were installed at Washington Road. With West Windsor's population at 2,519, more school rooms were added to the Dutch Neck school: 8 rooms in 1951 and 11 rooms in 1956. Many dairy farms closed because of new health regulations, although the practice of keeping a cow for family use continued. The 1960s saw a growth spurt for all of Mercer County. West Windsor's population was almost 4,000 —almost double that of the 1950s.

The Maurice Hawk School was built for Kindergarten through 3rd Grade to take the pressure off Dutch Neck and Penns Neck Schools. The Township's first nursery school, the Dutch Neck Cooperative Nursery School, was begun using the Chapel of the Dutch Neck Church. Although developments continued to be built during the 1960s, 65 percent of the Township was still actively farmed. However, the local chapter of the Future Farmers of America ceased operation in 1964.

Van Nest Park opened along Grovers Mill Pond. The Lions Club supplied picnic tables, fireplaces and a pavillion. Public Tennis courts were built under the supervision of the West Windsor Recreation Committee.

Early in the decade, Harris Road was cut through to Penn Lyle and Clarksville Roads. The area had been the site of the annual circus, which then moved to the field at Alexander and Princeton-Hightstown Roads, where the Acme now stands.

(Continued in our next issue)

Holiday House Tour

On Sunday, December 8, from 1 to 5 p.m., our annual Holiday House Tour will be held at three historic houses in Dutch Neck:

- 1 Cynthia and Robert Freedman will be our hosts at their 1800s home at 416 Village Road East.
- 2 Ruth and Michael Greschak's 1850s farmhouse, "Whispering Winds," at the corner of Penn Lyle and Village Road will be the second stop on the tour.
- 3 Delia and Clark Santee's renovated Victorian house at 774 Village Road West will end the tour.

A map and self-guided tour brochure of the three houses will be available from 12:30 p.m. until 4:30 p.m. in the parking lot of the former Library at the corner of Village Road and South Mill Road in Dutch Neck or at each of the three houses on the tour. Tour prices are: Adults - \$5; Historical Society member - \$4; Senior Citizens and Students - \$2.50.

The hosts and guides from the Historical Society will be on hand to answer questions during the tour. Refreshments will be served. An exhibit of West Windsor history will be displayed. Maps, drawings of old West Windsor, tree ornaments and old-fashioned paper dolls will be available at a gift shop located at the Santee house.

Proceeds from the tour will be used to renovate the 1761 John Rogers house as headquarters for the Historical Society of West Windsor. The Rogers house, the only building on the National Landmarks Registry in West Windsor, is located in Mercer County Park.

Reserve Sunday, December 8, for an interesting and historical afternoon!

Acquisitions

Our acquisitions continue to grow. The Society has been given the following items for use in our exhibits and to aid in our historical research:

- Wedding dress and petticoat worn by Alice Rigg of Burlington in 1904. Also evening dress worn at graduation from nursing school in 1914 by mother of the donor, and several pieces of hand-crocheted lace. All donated by E. W. Rigg.
- Several post cards showing the Walker-Gordon Dairies and the main street of Plainsboro donated by M. Winar. Also copy of "Old Princeton's Neighbors" produced by the WPA.
- Alice Capels donated her notes on West Windsor history culled from several out-of-print sources, as well as clippings dealing with old West Windsor.

We are very grateful for these donations and hope our readers will keep us in mind when cleaning out closets and drawers. We are always looking for photographs and material about West Windsor's past.

Our election meeting was held on September 9. The Officers elected are: Carol Silvester, President; Joan Parry, Vice President; Kay Reed, Treasurer; Shirlee Bleacher, Recording Secretary; and Carol Kehoe, Corresponding Secretary. Our Trustees are Susan Lodge, Frances Conover, and Marilyn Silvester.

Broadside is a publication of the Historical Society of West Windsor.

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