

# Westbrook Historical Society

## Newsletter

*A Society That Preserves The Past*  
Spring 2009

### PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

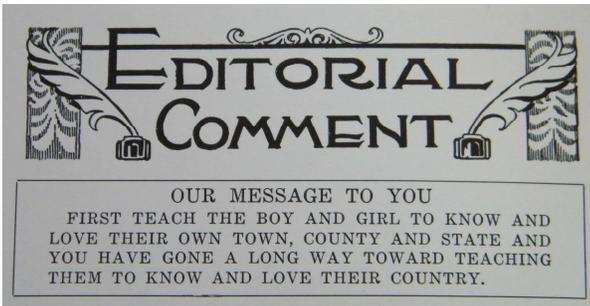
After spending three wonderful warm, snow-free months in the southwest I arrived home to find everything under control at the Historical Society! The great thing about modern times is that computers and e-mail kept me up to speed while all the volunteers, under the able leadership of VP Byron Dyer, kept the home fires burning and the organization running smoothly. Thanks to Byron, Ellie, Vaun, Diane, Nancy, Suzan, Beverly, Rowena, Mike...and anyone else that I might have missed, for helping out on Tuesday and Saturday mornings and for doing the research for the e-mail queries. It is always wonderful to see how smoothly things go without the 'boss' around! Thank you all!!



#### *Kourapis Farms*

888 Main Street – Route 25  
One mile from Maine Turnpike  
Westbrook, Maine

Featuring Whitman Candies - Imported and Domestic Wines and Beers - Specializing in Fruit Baskets for all Occasions -Lunches.  
Open 5 a.m. Daily



*Sprague's Journal of Maine History 1926*

A good motto for any Historical Society

Society members were happy to welcome members of the Westbrook High School's History Club on a tour of our Collection recently. The students were enthusiastic over the materials they saw and hopefully some will return to assist us in filing, recording and organizing.

Louis Kourapis came to Maine from Athens, Greece in the early 1900s to work in a paper mill at South Windham. In 1914 he entered the fruit business by opening a store on Central Street.

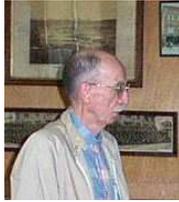
In 1946 he purchased the C.P. Paine estate property at 888 Main Street. (Paine originally acquired the property in 1869 and the buildings on the site were believed to be the oldest buildings in the Vallee Square business district.) Kourapis razed the old wooden buildings and erected a brick one-story building for approximately \$25,000. This building housed the new Kourapis store. The store remained in business at this location until Urban Renewal took the area in the 1970s.

On **Saturday May 16<sup>th</sup>**, the Kourapis family will be featured in the **3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Westbrook Immigrant Program** to be held at 1:30 PM at the Society. Please plan to come and bring a friend.

[The photo of the interior of Kourapis Farms is on a post card in the Society's Post Card Collection. It was printed in 1971.]

**The Westbrook Historical Society mourns the loss of  
Honorary Member**

**PHILIP CROOKE**  
who died March 15, 2009

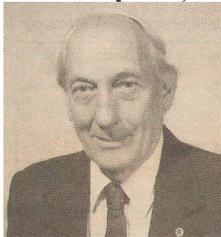


Phil had been a professor of Biology at Cornell and in his leisure time was an avid genealogist. He joined the Historical Society in 1999 and was very active during our move to 17 Dunn St., packing and unpacking boxes, building and painting shelves and becoming a general 'handyman'. He designed and built our kitchen area and created most of the uniform forms in the Collections area. Phil spent many a Tuesday morning helping file material into our Collection.

His quiet and friendly demeanor will be missed by all who knew him.

**The Westbrook Historical Society mourns the loss of  
Charter and Honorary Member**

**EDWIN "BILL" ROBERTSON**  
who died April 9, 2009



Bill was a member of the S.D. Warren 40 Year Club but it was his love of railroads, covered bridges and history that lured him to the Historical Society. Bill wrote about 20 books telling of the history of railroads and covered bridges. He operated the Robertson Book Printing Press on Saco Street where he printed and distributed his books throughout New England. He also contributed copies of all of them to the Society's library.

We will miss his smiling face.

**The Westbrook Historical Society mourns the loss of  
Honorary Member**

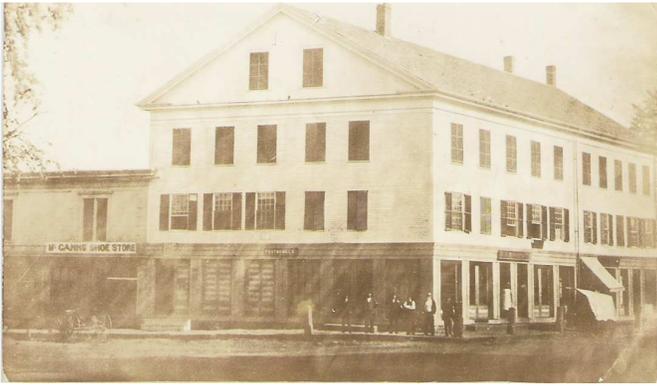
**PHILIP LaVIOLET**  
who died April 6, 2009



A life-long resident of Westbrook, Phil was active in a wide variety of City organizations. He was a family man, a Christian, a veteran and a history buff. Phil started and maintained the St. Hyacinth Historical Society and was a member of our Society since 1998 and served a term on the Board of Directors. His patriotism and love of military history lead him to keep a record of all of Westbrook's servicemen from the Revolutionary War to present day conflicts. Service records, news clippings and obituaries are all organized in notebooks for future generations to read. This collection, along with military ephemera and artifacts were donated to the Society where Phil could often be seen adding to and updating the records. His works encouraged others to donate to the Collection and it was for this reason that the Society named the collection in his honor in 2008:

*The Philip LaViolet Military Collection.*

His death is a loss to the Society and to the Community.



**- A WESTBROOK LANDMARK -**

The building on the corner of Main and Bridge Street that most of us know as the 'Vallee Block', began its life in 1849 when John Warren, a prominent lumberman, built a large three and ½ story building there. It was called the Warren Block. Various stores occupied the lower level of the block, while the upper floors included doctors' offices, apartments and, in the 1930s, the Foresters' Lodge.

Charles B. Woodman moved his drug store across Main Street and into the corner space of the Warren Block soon after its completion. The 1900 *Portland Board of Trade Journal* stated that "no branch of trade had proved of more direct value and importance to Westbrook than the drug and prescription trade...and [this] is due in part to the old established and prominent men connected with this trade. At the head of the list is the drug store of C.B. Woodman." It goes on to state that the store was a leader in introducing important specialties to the public and handled only the freshest and most reliable goods. Mr. Woodman was described as having a most reliable character; he was a public spirited businessman, served as Post Master and took great interest in the city's welfare. C.B. Woodman Drug can be seen in many old photographs of Westbrook.

From 1891 to 1905 the Westbrook Police Department operated out of this building before moving to Carpenter Street.

Ralph Whitney, D.D.S., was one of the dentists who had an office on the second floor. In 1909 he was described as "representing the most modern and progressive ideas in dentistry...the mouth and teeth are being given scientific treatment." Dr. Whitney was from Gorham and a graduate of the University of Maryland. He practiced at this site until his retirement in the early 1950s.

In the 1930s Edwin B. Carr purchased the building and it became known as the Carr Block. Carr's Shoe Store was located on the street level on Bridge St, next to Vallee Drug. A huge sign "Give Your Feet a Treat, Carr's Shoe Store" advertised on the side of the building.

When employee Charles Vallee purchased the C.B. Woodman Drug Store in the early 1900s, it was renamed The Vallee Pharmacy. Hubert Prior Vallee, better known as Rudy Vallee, worked at his father's store while attending high school. Rudy did not care for the drug store business and went to work at the Star Theatre on Main Street, becoming assistant projectionist. He later worked at the Strand Theatre in Portland before entering college. As we all know, Rudy Vallee went on to become a famous singer and musician, performing on radio, stage and movies. He became the darling of Westbrook! In 1931, on one of Rudy's frequent visits to Westbrook to see his family and friends, Mayor Eugene I. Cummings declared the intersection of Main and Bridge Street (where Vallee Drug was located) 'Rudy Vallee Square'. Today, seventy-eight years later and with no sign of Vallee Drug or any other identification, everyone still refers to this area as 'Vallee Square'.



Today the block looks very different from the 3 ½ storey original building. On February 13, 1942 a fire broke out in a two story building on Bridge Street attached to the Carr Block. The fire originated in an oil stove used to heat the beer parlor of Ovila J. Boissonneau. When the oil burner exploded, flames spread into the adjoining Carr's Shoe Store and through the ceiling into Vallee Drug Store, Tom's Restaurant, Rocheleau's Clothing Store, The First National Store, F. W. Woolworth's and McLellan Store. The fire spread rapidly through the old wooden buildings. Second floor tenants Leon Bean, Lawrence Bean and Lawrence Smith raced down the stairs to safety. Mrs. Annie Kollock, age 91, Mrs. Jeanette Bean and Mrs. Arlene Bean were evacuated via ladders from the second floor.

The buildings were damaged so badly that the upper floors were dismantled by local contractor O. G. K. Robinson and the remains renovated into the one story commercial space that it is today. Damage from this fire was estimated at \$200,000.

Carr's Shoe Store, Vallee Drug Store, Tom's Restaurant, Rochleau's Clothing Store and McLellan's all reopened in their original spaces and remained in business many more years. McLellan's was the last of these stores to go out of business, closing in the mid 1990's. [The McLellan name can still be seen on the sidewalk in front of Full Court Press.]

In 2007-2008 the block was extensively renovated and present tenants include: The Frog & Turtle Restaurant, Aquatic Concept's, Studio 59 Pilate Fitness Inc, Fajita Grill Mexican Restaurant and Full Court Press.

Plans are now underway for a rededication of Rudy Vallee Square to be held on Saturday July 25, 2009, the weekend before Rudy's 108<sup>th</sup> birthday. Watch for further information and join us for a Rudy Vallee weekend! If you'd like to help with the planning committee, call Donna Conley @ 854-2464



## - THE CATHOLIC ORDER OF FORESTERS -

On the top floor of the Warren Block was the Foresters' Lodge. This is a national fraternal benefit society organized in 1883. The Westbrook Chapter was organized on June 8, 1900. Charter members were Joseph Lebel, Amede Rousseau, Joseph Sampson, A. C. Gouzie, Dr. Adjutor Couturier, Joseph Guimond, Oliver Giguere, Henry G. Rocheleau, Augustin Sicard and Thomas Welch. Starting with a small group, the membership grew to 130 by 1950.

The order is unique in that it is a fraternal organization that sponsors a youth group called the Rangers. Juveniles from birth to 9 years old are known as Boy Rangers and from 9 to 16, Forest Rangers. The youths have a certain amount of degree work to complete so that by the age of 16 they are ready to continue their activities as adult members. The Westbrook Chapter began its work with boys in 1948 and had 29 youth members in 1952.

The organization's name was listed in the 1953 City Directory but no longer showed up in 1961. The organization is still nationally active but there does not appear to be a Westbrook Chapter.

[Ed's note: It is always interesting how one article for a newsletter can lead you on to something else. I started off with an article about a city landmark but ended up learning about the people and businesses in the building, as well as developing a curiosity about the Foresters' Lodge which rented space on the top floor; so evolved the previous item. It is also of interest to note that H.G. Rocheleau, of the following articles, was a member of the Foresters' Lodge and a tenant of the Warren-Carr-Vallee Block.]

### “When I first came...”

H.G. Rocheleau, founder of Rocheleau's Clothes Shop which was a longtime Main Street fixture, made this quote in 1914:

“When I first came 30 years ago last May, in 1884, this little town of Saccarappa looked very dull. Especially in the evening, the stores were using oil lamps for lights. The sidewalks were made of wood and there was a sidewalk only on Main Street. The American Express Co. was then delivering packages with a wheelbarrow. But today (1914) this little city of Westbrook is up to date in every way.”

## - SHOPPING NO FUN FOR LOCAL WOMEN -

Prices may be frozen but [area] housewives can still pay up to \$1.59 more a pound for boned sirloin, \$1.10 a pound for top hamburger, and other fancy prices...if they've got the bankroll.

The chart below is a selected list of grocery store items...based on a survey of ...chain stores.

Product	.....Dec '49	.....Dec '50	.....Jan '51
Hamburg	.59	.69	.75
Butter	.75	.81	.83
Bacon	.59	.73	.75
Flour, 5 lbs	.53	.54	.55
Eggs, med.	.49	.83	.55

But these aren't necessarily the prices you'll be paying. Your grocer may have higher, or a lower ceiling. Apparently it's going to pay to shop around a bit!

(Article from Scrapbook #54, Levine Collection)

Apparently all that's changed in 58 years are the prices!! We're still complaining about them!

**- HISTORICAL SOCIETY HAPPENINGS -**

**- ROCHELEAU'S CLOTHES SHOP -**

Rocheleau's Clothing Store opened in the early 1900s at 861 Main Street. Westbrook was then a thriving community of local businesses. The store survived the Great Depression and the "great fire" of 1942 but it couldn't survive urban renewal!

November 1981 saw the end of 80 years of Rocheleau's Clothes Shop in Westbrook. The store, still at 861 Main Street, was started by the Henry G. Rocheleau and, at the time of its closure, was owned by his grandson, William.

The American Journal of Nov 25, 1981 called Bill Rocheleau the last "survivor of the one-store retailers who made Westbrook what it once was...a thriving community of local businesses tied by their common interests to the customers they served." The long years of upset due to demolitions and torn-up streets, as well as loss of foot-traffic due to elimination of the post office, police station and other retailers, contributed to the closure. Westbrook Urban Renewal Authority was listed as the culprit. At that time Rocheleau's was listed as the City's oldest retailer.

**HELP WANTED  
NEWSLETTER EDITOR**  
Must be able to use a computer; no other experience needed!

Any comments, suggestions, ideas for the Newsletter?  
Any Westbrook history you'd like to learn about?  
Tell one of your Officers, call 854-5588 or e-mail  
info@westbrookhistoricalsociety.org.

**\*\*\*\*Due to the success of our last Saturday program, please note that the Immigrant Program will be held on a Saturday!**

PROGRAMS & MEETINGS:

May 6, 2009 – 1:30 Regular meeting followed by trip to 89 Conant Street to view land being offered to the Society

Saturday, May 16 @ 1:30 -

**Westbrook Immigrants Program, 3rd Annual**

June 3, 2009 @ 1:30 - **Annual Meeting**

June 6, 2009 - **Westbrook Together Days** –

Westbrook Historical Society open 9 – 2P

A beautiful Commemorative Harvest Table is on display at the Society. It was made from a wide board removed from the attic of the Johnson/DeWolfe farm which stood on its Stroudwater Street site from 1776-2008. (See the Spring Newsletter for an article on the DeWolfe House)

The house was demolished to make way for the new middle school. The table will be on display until the new Westbrook Middle School is opened. The Department of Art of the Westbrook School System had the table made as a reminder of the historical significance of the site

ACCESSIONS-

*BEGINNINGS, Information on Bethany Hall,*

compiled by Barry Stultz. [This material was donated in response to the request in the last Newsletter for information on this congregation started by Howard F. Stultz.] The article is now on file in our library.

Artt Frank music CDs – donated by Artt

Sea Scout uniform & Manual from Peg Torrey

WHS football squad picture from Beverly Sinclair Marion

Westbrook Dairy shirt from Peter Hay

American Legion Post sport patches from Robert Gordon

City Voter Registration cards 1900-1950s from City Clerk

Maine Centennial Official Program from Barbara Beesley

WHS 1960 graduation photograph from Stephen Elwell

We are sorry to hear that the St. Hyacinth Historical Society is closing its doors forever. However, we are very thankful that they have donated many scrapbooks, photos, school items and miscellaneous Westbrook ephemera from their Society to ours. It will take much time to catalogue and incorporate the marriage, anniversary and obituary data into our collection but we are so pleased to have it. Thank you to members of the St. Hyacinth Historical Society...those who originally collected and organized the items, and those who were thoughtful enough to ensure that the data remain in Westbrook.