

Westbrook Historical Society

A Society That Preserves The Past

Newsletter, Winter 2005, Philip E. Curran, Editor, 17B Dunn Street, Westbrook, Maine 04092

Westbrook Historical Society Purpose and Principle

The purposes of this Society are to bring together those people interested in the history of Westbrook, Maine, and to discover, collect, and preserve any materials and objects that establish and illustrate the history of the area. The Society shall make all such materials and objects accessible for viewing or study on the premises. The Society shall arouse interest in the past by holding meetings open to the general public, by marking historic buildings, sites, etc. and by using other media to gain public interest in Westbrook history.

The Society shall work with other State historical societies and organizations in this field when called upon to do so.

The Westbrook Historical Society meets regularly at 1:30 o'clock on the first Wednesday of each month, with the exception of July and August.

Officers

President, Robert H. Smith
Vice President, Mike Sanphy
Secretary, Suzan Roberts Norton
Treasurer, Nancy Joy Curran

Directors

Bette Bragdon - Diane Dyer
Ellie Saunders - Jane Gordon
Immediate Past President - Betty Morabito

Email address

Email: wsbkhistsoc@zwi.net

The web site was allowed to expire with the expiration of the first annual prepayment.

Tel: 854-5588

Friendship and sunshine cards

Anyone aware of the hospitalization, illness or grief of a member should call **Sylvia Sandora** at **854-5814**. She will see that the person is comforted with a sunshine card.

Open to the public

The Westbrook Historical Society is open to the public, free of charge, Saturday mornings, 9:00 o'clock until noon, is usually staffed the same hours Tuesday mornings, and is open for research by appointment.



Know your honorary members

Upon the recommendation of the Board of Directors and a majority vote of members present, the title of Honorary Member may be conferred on any member in good standing who has made substantial contributions to the Society. An Honorary Member shall enjoy all the privileges of membership but is relieved of any obligations. (*Excerpt from the By-laws*)

The living honorary members are **Bernice Bassett**, **Ella Chipman**, and **Bill Robertson**. Each, in his or her own way, made substantial contributions to the Society and holds a position of honor among us.

Ceiling insulation and fans installed

The landlord's \$5,100 capital improvement project to install ceiling insulation and overhead circulation fans has been completed. Noticeable changes for the historical society are much quicker heat, and warmer and more comfortable quarters.

February meeting

Suzan Norton, Secretary of the Society, was principal speaker at the regular meeting on Feb. 2. She spoke on the history of Westbrook schools from material obtained entirely from the archives of Westbrook Historical Society. **Mike Sanphy** assisted her with



projections of old schoolhouses on the screen.

Next meeting, March 2

Martha Kearsley of the Strong Arm Bindery, will speak about the process of restoring old books and repair of documents at the regular meeting on March 2.

April 6 meeting

John Bottero, an auctioneer, will present an appraisal program. Members are invited to bring personal antique items for display and discussion.

Kay Sullivan's address

Katherine Sullivan
Summit Valley Brook
7000 Johnson Farm Lane, Apt. 208
Chadds Ford PA 19317

Standing Committees

Standing committees, appointed to serve two years, may be Finance, Library & Museum, Publicity, Program, Membership, Hospitality, Friendship, Telephone, Necrology, and Bylaws and Rules. (*Westbrook Historical Society Bylaws*)

Lillian (Bunny) Dyhrberg

The Society mourns the passing of **Lillian (Bunny) Dyhrberg** who died Feb. 6, 2005. She was one of our most active and faithful members, serving as Secretary for many years. On Sept. 3, 2003 she was awarded the title "Honorary Member" for having made substantial contributions to the Society. The wife of the late Dr. Norman Dyhrberg, she leaves four sons, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Biography corner

Reminiscences of Nellie Davis Spiller

Nellie Davis Spiller was born in her parents' Rochester Street home in Westbrook in 1897. She died in Westbrook in 1992. She was a local historian, graduate of Westbrook High School, author and retired school

teacher, and a charter member of both the Windham and Westbrook Historical Societies. She was hugely instrumental in saving the old Westbrook High School on Main Street, after the City Council had resolved to demolish the historic building. Seventy-nine years old, on her hands and knees with spoon and brush, she was one of the members of the now-famous "dig" that found and unearthed the bones of Colonel Westbrook after 232 years of mystery.

In this interview with Beverly Canales for the Oral History of Westbrook Project at Walker Memorial Library, late in her life, she relates some of her youthful experiences in Westbrook and the experiences of her father and older brother, the late Raymond Davis.

In my senior year at Westbrook High School (1914-1915) Westbrook had the State Championship basketball team. At that time the only gym in town was at Cumberland Hall, the second story of the Warren Block. I shall never forget the excitement of a decisive crucial game with Portland High School at Portland. At least two trolley cars were needed to transport the team, band and fans. On the return trip they all alighted and did a snake dance from the east end to the west end of town. My future husband **Arthur Spiller** (guard) was a member of that team. Other members were **Aime "Sam" Guimond, Gerald Knight, and Cliff Welch** (center).

I remember my father and brother Raymond (1895-1970) telling of some of the latter's Westbrook-related experiences. Ray told about "pack peddlers" and one peddler who stepped on a toad, much to the small boy's distress. Ray was much relieved when the toad wiggled out of the soft sand and hopped away.

On his back the peddler of that era carried a wooden box about 30" high, 24" wide and 15" deep. When filled with merchandise it must have weighed at least 100 pounds. On the bottom was fastened a wooden leg on which the peddler adjusted the shoulder straps or showed his wares to prospective customers. Most of these peddlers were recent immigrants. With a small investment an industrious alien could start a business, which, by the next generation, could be conducted in a family owned store. I have a lovely silk lace edged kerchief that I remember my mother buying of a pack peddler in the early 1900's.

Ray recalled details of one Mr. Hawke's "peddle cart" that he saw several times when he was a youngster, at our grandparents' home in White Rock. The peddle cart was build very high, with doors on the sides that swung out to show inside shelves piled with household wares, cloth and accessories. On the outside of the cart hung an assortment of tin ware and other durable merchandise. The coming of the peddler's cart was not only an exciting event for all the family, but also a great

convenience to the women who rarely had an opportunity to go to the City to get needed supplies.

In Westbrook our groceries were purchased at Porter's store on the easterly corner of Main and Seavey Streets. Before the days of telephones and motor cars a clerk went to customers' homes to take orders that were delivered later in the day. Mr. Porter, owner of the store, built the fine house on Main Street, facing down State Street.

As means of earning spending money, Ray tried selling soap and subscriptions to the "Youth's Companion", an excellent and popular weekly periodical. He also sold as old lead, spent bullets that he dug from the clay bank of a shooting range located at Stroudwater near the old tide mill. Early in the spring he would spot skunk holes down in the woods in Lamb's pasture and stake his claims. I am not sure just where that was as the Lamb family owned land from Main Street to and including sites of the present Saunders Dowel Mill and part of Woodlawn Cemetery. In fact, the latter was started with land given by one of the Lambs.

Each spring a man known as Skunk" Shaw came by horse and buggy to buy skins from the young trappers. Good muskrat skins sold for ten cents, but skunk skins without too much white, brought as much as a dollar. The skunk business was going along well until Ray got "perfumed" one morning and then went to school. The teacher sent him home and soon the story went all over Cumberland Mills, enlarged to the point where it was reported that he had gone to school with a baby skunk in his pocket.



When he was 12 years old Ray worked at S. D. Warren Company as a carpenter's helper at \$5.00 a week. When he was in his early teens (1898-1900) he worked Saturdays and school vacation time handling lumber at a saw mill off Seavey Street. This stood near the railroad tracks, probably on the site of a shovel handle factory located there 25 or 30 years later.

Ray always remembered when he once went skating alone on the Stroudwater River above Saco Street. After falling through the thin ice he had a long walk back home to Rochester Street. In the clothes frozen stiff. He said he would never forget his experience when one day in late winter, he was one of several small youngsters taking turns riding bareback on **Fred Pinder's** pony from our house on Rochester Street to Seavey Street. Snow was on the ground but the wheel ruts in the road were filled with slush mixed with the winter's accumulation of horse manure. As Ray felt himself slipping he tried desperately to hang on, but off he went and landing in a wheel rut. A Danish neighbor picked him up by the collar of his coat, holding him at arm's length. Sympathetically shaking his head he sent him on his way home, probably thinking of the job mother would have cleaning him up.

One of my recollections of my early childhood in Westbrook was that of a fish peddler and his barrels of fresh fish on a horse-drawn wagon. Driving slowly along the streets he half shouted, half sang, his wares: "Mackerel, mackerel! swimmin in a barrel. Two for a quarter, swimmin in the water."

Ray Davis was one of the pupils of the old Cumberland Mills School that was replaced by the Forest Street School described elsewhere in this paper. He was one of those taught in the cavernous Cumberland Hall during the transition to the new school. Coincidentally, his sister, Nellie Davis Spiller served the city faithfully in the 1930's as a substitute teacher in Forest Street School.

This old (school) house

Forest Street School

One hundred ten years ago, in the winter of 1894 the Forest Street School opened its doors to some 150 boys and girls. Costing \$20,616, it contained eight classrooms, but only the four upper ones were furnished and occupied at the outset. The first teachers were Bertha Rice, Edith Bragdon, and Ina Allen.



The enrollment in the nearby Cumberland Mills School had been rapidly increasing and the lower grade room was so crowded in 1893 that 40 pupils with a teacher moved to Brown's Hall, which is now the Warren Library. The arrangement proved unsatisfactory, so they next moved to a room over an unused stable. Conditions worsened and it was decided that the school be removed and replaced by a larger structure on land obtained from Mr. Newcomb, who owned a large tract in the area.

During the construction and transition period, in addition to Brown's Hall, classes for the pupils were held in the old Presumpscot Hose House and Cumberland Hall.

Cumberland Hall was fitted with seats and furnishings, and was made fairly comfortable. However, 140 pupils were seated in this room with two small ante rooms for recitations, which accommodated only half a class at one time.

The new school accommodated nine grades, five primary grades downstairs and four grammar grades upstairs. Half of the third grade were taught with the second, and half with the fourth.

Although equipment was gradually acquired in keeping with the fine new structure, electric lights were not installed until 1917, along with a telephone. In 1912 two drinking fountains were installed in the basement and "everyone was pleased to know that the unsatisfactory

drinking cup had disappeared.” A piano was purchased in 1914, and the pupils could then march in and out of the building in orderly fashion to music.

Forest Street School was closed in 1974 and, except for a few semesters when the School Department’s Enrichment Program held its classes there, its days of hosting Westbrook’s school children and future leaders were done.

Like so many others of its noble kind, its next role will be as residential housing.

The foregoing article is derived from a portion of a paper entitled “Eight Decades at Forest Street School” in the Westbrook Historical Society archives. It was compiled by Marion McFarland, who had been a teacher at the school for forty years beginning in 1932.

The Americanization of the Nielsen Family

By Mildred Nielsen Townsend

Mildred Nielson Townsend was born in Gorham before the First World War, attended schools there, graduated from Westbrook High School, and worked in the payroll department of S. D. Warren Company for 30 years. She died in 2001 at the age of 87. Several generations of her extended family continue to live in Westbrook, including her sister, Ruby Nielsen Clark, now 95, with continued interest in the community and pride in their heritage.

Our father, **Rasmus Nielsen**, came to Westbrook Maine, from Orbrek, Denmark, in 1897 at age 17. Our mother, Hildur Anderson, came here from Goteborg, Sweden, at age 16 in 1899. Father must have taken out citizen papers immediately because when they were married in 1903, mother became a citizen automatically. This law was changed in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution gave women the right to vote.

They bought a farm in Gorham. Their only son, Harold, and first daughter, Elsie, were born there. They soon rented the farm and moved back to Westbrook. Annie and Ruby were born at the Jordan Place on New Gorham Road, now a historical home.

When Harold and Elsie started Saco Street School, they spoke a mixture of Danish and Swedish. It must have sounded like gibberish to their teacher. After that, the folks decided “only English would be spoken in our home.”

Before I (Mildred) was born in 1914, the family had moved back to the farm in Gorham. About that time, a neighbor, Jennie Bodge Johnson, started a Women’s

Literary Club, the Arcadia Club which was later nationally affiliated. Mother and her sister, Alfreda Jensen, along with other neighbors, were invited to become members. Programs consisted of reading, aloud, each member taking her turn. Reading English aloud was a new experience for mother and Aunt Freda as their only schooling had been in the Swedish language. They learned a lot, and, as a result, we acquired a small library of the best literature.

Most members of the Arcadia Club had children attending Longfellow Grammar School, a one-room, one-teacher for eight grades, real country, with old-fashioned facilities. A type of parent-teacher relationship became the next project of Arcadia Club. Money was earned in various ways to provide a library, piano, and a general neighborhood of togetherness.

For the duration of World War One, father carried a draft card exempting him from service because he was a farmer and had five children. In 1919, their last child, Florence, was born. During these years, mother and father both worked at learning the English language. After the war, father bought history and geography books and studied for a U. S. mail carrier’s test. He passed the test, but a veteran was given preference for the position.

In 1928, our parents purchased the old Presumpscot Hotel in Westbrook. It had been moved from Main Street to 6 Fitch Street. Before the Civil War, it was a “station” on the Underground Railway, helping slaves escape to Canada. The folks sold the “hotel” in 1947. In 1977, the Westbrook Urban Renewal ordered it demolished. On the night before the scheduled demolition, it burned flat. Although old and unwanted, its finale was a blaze of glory.

Our parents adored their adopted country. They are gone now, but all six children are still living. Harold Nielsen and wife “Marge” live in Standish, Elsie Nielsen Cole in Dunnellon, Florida. Three of us live in Westbrook, Annie Nielsen Parker with husband, Philip, Ruby Nielsen Clark, President of Westbrook senior Citizens, and Mildred Nielsen Townsend, Asst. Treasurer and membership chairman. Florence Nielsen Bryan and husband, Forrest, are in Sarasota, Florida.

We were baptized and confirmed in the Danish Lutheran Church, Westbrook, now Trinity Lutheran with Rev. Allen Barnes as Pastor.

Our Scandinavian Heritage is very special, and we are happy the folks didn’t “miss the boat.”

This paper appeared first in Westbrook’s Bicentennial Booklet in 1988.

**Memorialize your family in the archives of
Westbrook Historical Society**

Far East duty and war's end

By Philip E. Curran

The author is a former U. S. Navy radioman. He was assigned upon graduation from radio school in November 1944 directly to the staff of Vice Admiral Daniel Barbey, Commander of the 7th Amphibious Force in the Pacific. The following article first appeared in the newsletter of the AGC Flagship Alliance in April 1994.

Our draft caught up with Admiral Barbey aboard the "USS *Blue Ridge*" in Subic Bay on a peaceful Sunday morning the day after the battle of Okinawa had begun. We had been ambling through the South Pacific and the Philippine Islands since we left San Francisco in early January, first by army transportation, then as passengers on a small navy ship. We missed the flagship at Manus Island in the Admiralties, and again at Hollandia, New Guinea where somebody apparently thought she was supposed to be, and got boxed into the Philippine Straits in a vengeful typhoon.

The first of the enemy that I actually saw was a wretched Japanese soldier who had been brought to the flagship for questioning. He was being hustled down a passageway to wherever such things were done. I could have touched him.

The next one I saw was General Abe, Japanese Governor General of South Korea who came out to the ship at Jinsen. We hung over the rail in solemn silence as he pulled alongside in the launch and climbed the ship's ladder to the main deck. He was impeccable in dress uniform with sword, jodhpurs, and glistening leather leggings, but as woeful and forlorn in his adornment as the first soldier had been in his dirty clothes and bandages.

We engaged in two small operations, one against

We were anchored in Manila Bay among the graveyard of sunken ships

the island of Borneo at Brunei Bay, and another to drive the remaining Japanese out of Fort Drum on El Fraile Island at the entrance to Manila Bay. It was one of the Seventh Amphibious Forces smallest operations.

The Force made a dozen or so other assault landings between the time

I joined the staff and the end of the war, all of which were directed by Admiral Barbey from the communication and command ship at Subic Bay where I was beginning to apply my trade as a navy radioman.

The admiral transferred his flag and us to the "USS *Ancon*" for a short time, then the *Ancon* was sent to Pearl Harbor for modifications to her special antennae system. In the meantime, all of us on the staff were billeted aboard a nondescript ship anchored in Manila Bay while we waited for another command ship. The suburbs and outlying areas of Manila were still not completely cleared

of the Japanese, but we went ashore as often as we could anyway, and roamed around amid the rubble and rumble of army trucks full of supplies and soldiers going back and forth to the forward areas. It was there that I saw the ruins and havoc of war first hand for the first time, and the desolation and indignity of the people who were victims of it.

We were anchored in Manila Bay among the graveyard of sunken ships resting on the bottom, when the first false armistice came and when the war finally ended. It didn't take long for Admiral Barbey to get his orders and another flagship, this time the "USS *Catoctin*." We moved in with everything we had brought with us and departed aboard the *Catoctin* on 30 August for Okinawa. We were soon caught in two typhoons at once, riding them out at sea between Okinawa and the coast of China, with the outside hatches dogged down for several days, effectively containing the odor of food, a smelly fuel line, and vomit. We arrived at Okinawa amid the devastation of the typhoon on 5 September, three days after peace was officially declared.

The next few months were full of notable adventures for a young man hardly ready to shave. The admiral was assigned to support the Japanese army surrender of Korea, which he did at Jinsen on 8 September, then the surrender of three other army commands on the mainland of China. We went back to Okinawa for a marine command and then proceeded with landings in China at Taku, Tientsin, Tsingtao, and Chin Wang Tao. It was a memorable experience. We were on that assignment for three months before we were ordered home. We went to Chefoo in China, among other places, and then to Hulutao, Manchuria, where a battle was building between the Chinese Nationalists and Communists at the Great Wall of China. The political situation was in chaos.

The admiral's barge was fired on by communist soldiers at Hulutao and our position in the later days of the tour became very precarious. We went as far as Yingkow, Manchuria to survey another like situation. Our last of many ports of call in China during those exciting times was at Shanghai, where we spent Thanksgiving Day. We sailed down the Huangpu River for home on 25 November, 1945 by the Great Circle Route, first to San Diego, then through the Panama Canal to Norfolk, Virginia. We had boxing matches on the sunny deck of the *Catoctin* on Christmas Day, sailing through the Caribbean Sea. We were at ease.

Much of the China tour had been very tense for us. It consisted of a series of important diplomatic missions and harrowing experiences for Admiral Barbey, most performed with only a destroyer for escort and little fire power to back us up. In spite of that, we found plenty of diversion as we went from port to port. Some of us



cruised up the river to Tientsin in an LCI, and stayed overnight for our first real taste of China. We reveled in it. We were young and full of spirit. In Tsingtao, two of us plopped our rickisha runners into their own passenger seats much to their surprise and consternation, jammed their hats on our own heads, leaped between the traces, and raced our jinrikishas down the street as fast as we could go amidst hundreds of cheering (or jeering) Chinese people. That was indicative of our outpouring of relief with the end of the war, the pure joy of living, and with being in that unique place so far from home. They were surprisingly easy to pull.

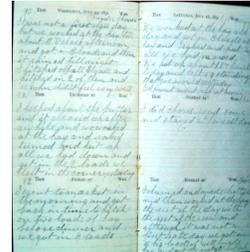
I was discharged from the navy on 30 May, 1946 after 25 months of service. Most of it had been exciting and eventful for an island boy, then only 19 years old. Nevertheless, I shall always call that day the happiest day of my life. We were at peace. I was home. I hitch-hiked from Boston where I had been discharged, and was let off by my benefactor in Portland on the most beautiful and sparkling sunny day of the year.

When I arrived home my mother asked me what the navy would give me for breakfast on such a special day. "Steak and eggs," I lied, grinning, and that's what I got.

Curran, a U. S. Navy reservist, returned to duty during the Korean conflict, serving variously with the Atlantic Fleet, Mediterranean 6th Fleet, and at the Navy's Main Radio, Washington.

**Yesterday is history,
Tomorrow a mystery.
We learn from our history
to prepare for the mystery.**

*From the Westbrook-Warren Congregational
Church Annual Report*



Mr. Roberts' 1891 Journal

Inside

**Bulletin board
Meeting dates and programs
Reminiscences of Nellie Davis Spiller
Forest Street School
The Americanization of the Nielsen Family
Far East Duty and War's End**