



MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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November 2013

PRESIDENT'S CORNER



The quick drops in temperature as the sun goes down, remind us that soon the only autumnal color that we will see will be the leaves on the ground waiting to be raked. Once again, the Mansfield Historical Society had a booth at the Festival on the Green in September. An exhibit on the Mansfield Hollow Dam was displayed nicely on our new multi paneled exhibit board. Our electronic quiz board had many visitors, both adults and children, working to identify unnamed agriculture items. Thanks to Ann Galonska and Quin Harper for preparing the displays and the following volunteers who helped with the booth: Anne Bennett, Bruce and Donna Clouette, Mary Feathers, Dick Roberts, and Anne Greineder.

Connecticut State Historian Walter Woodward put on a great program on the contest for a National Anthem during the Civil War at our annual meeting and dinner. Walter and the three musicians that accompanied him led us through the many songs considered for our National Anthem in addition to some Southern songs written in response to Northern ones.

I would like to thank outgoing Vice President Bruce Clouette and Member-At-Large Dick Roberts for serving two terms in these positions. We are grateful that both have agreed to remain on the board. Bruce will serve as Chair of the Program Committee and Dick as Chair of the newly formed Genealogy Committee. We are currently in the process of filling the vacancies for Vice President and Member-At-Large. Please consider volunteering to serve on one of our committees. Each of you can help us keep Mansfield history alive.

Our next program will be on Sunday, November 10 at 1:30 p.m. Please note that this is an afternoon program rather than our customary evening program. Diana Ross McCain, Head of the Research Center at the Connecticut Historical Society will present "*It Really Happened in Connecticut.*" The outreach programs of the Connecticut Historical Society are always entertaining and informative. I hope to see you there.

And finally, some reminders. In this issue you will find the membership renewal information. If you haven't done so already, please use the enclosed form to keep your membership current. We have two new books published this year that are great additions to our previous publications and all are great ideas for holiday gift giving. The books are available for purchase at the museum, the Town Clerk's office and at Mansfield Supply.

As always, should you have any suggestions for the Historical Society and its museum, please contact Ann Galonska or me via mail, phone (860-429-6575) or e-mail (mansfield.historical@snet.net).

Keith Wilson, President

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Sunday, November 10, 1:30 p.m.: NOVEMBER MEETING & PROGRAM

Diana Ross McCain, Head of the Connecticut Historical Society Research Center, will present "It REALLY Happened in Connecticut." Location: Buchanan Auditorium, Mansfield Public Library (Route 89, Mansfield Center)



Illustration from *The Kingdom of Darkness*, Written by Nathaniel Crouch, Published in London by A. Bettesworth and J. Batley, 1728. Connecticut Historical Society, World Imprints Collection.

IT REALLY HAPPENED IN CONNECTICUT

At our meeting on Sunday afternoon, November 10, **Diana Ross McCain**, Head of the Research Center at the Connecticut Historical Society, will share several of the strange but authentic episodes featured in her books *It Happened in Connecticut* and *Mysteries and Legends of New England*. Her presentation will include witchcraft trials and executions, a mysterious vagabond who walked his way into Connecticut lore wearing a 60-pound suit of leather, and a serial killer who inspired a hit movie. This presentation is a part of the Connecticut Historical Society's adult education program. To learn more about CHS and its programs, visit www.chs.org.

McCain is also the author of *Connecticut Coast: A Town-by-Town Illustrated History*; *Connecticut: Mapping the Nutmeg State Through History*; and the award-winning publication about Connecticut's official state heroine, *To All On Equal Terms: The Life and Legacy of Prudence Crandall*. Copies of her books will be available for purchase and autographing following her presentation.

The Mansfield Historical Society's latest publications: *Gurleyville and Hanks Hill: Farms, Factories and Families* by Rudy Favretti and *Mansfield's First Citizen Speaker: The Honorable Shubael Conant, Esq.* by Roberta K. Smith will also be available. It's a good opportunity to do some early holiday gift shopping! (Note: We cannot accept credit cards, so please bring cash or a check.)

We hope you will join us on November 10, 1:30 p.m., for this entertaining and informative program. It will be held at the Buchanan Auditorium at the Mansfield Public Library. **Admission is free to**

members and children under 16; \$3.00 for non-members.

A SUCCESSFUL SUMMER AND A BUSY FALL AT THE MUSEUM

We have just concluded another successful season at the museum. The museum opened on June 2 and during the summer months we welcomed visitors from throughout Connecticut and New England. I'm happy to report that there was an increase in visitation this year. Once again I want to thank all the volunteers who hosted at the museum this summer and the board members who staffed it each Saturday.

Although the museum closed on September 29, the library is open year round by appointment. Please call or email if you need to use the archives. The museum will open again next June and you can look forward to a variety of new exhibits and programs.

On September 22 we again participated in the annual Festival on the Green. This year we featured a display about the Mansfield Hollow Dam, constructed in 1949-1952. It was an eye-opener to some people who enjoy the reservoir and parklands today but were unaware of the controversy over the flood control project in the 1940s. Some 200 families lost properties to the project and 30 homes were destroyed or re-located. Our electronic quiz board was also a popular attraction. There were many visitors to our booth and quite a few took our free admission passes and visited the museum on our final weekend.

Now that the museum has closed for the season, we have turned our focus to the collections. Many new items have entered our collections over the past year and are waiting to be cataloged.

Per Isabelle Atwood's wishes, Joshua's Trust has generously given us numerous artifacts, papers and photographs from Isabelle's estate that pertain to Mansfield history. Notable among them are several pieces of pottery by Peter Cross and a Connecticut sideboard, c. 1760, that once belonged to the Fitch family of Mansfield Center.

We also purchased several artifacts at the Atwood estate auction held on October 5, including a figured jacquard coverlet, c. 1850, and a Victorian hair wreath. These items had previously been displayed in MHS exhibits and we are pleased to welcome them back.

Over the fall months, Museum Committee members will be cataloging these artifacts and many more. We are also working on re-organizing our storage areas to better house our collections and to create more space. Quin Harper, the E.O. Smith student who volunteered at the museum last summer, has also returned to help with our endeavors

Please contact me if you would like to join the Museum Committee. Extra hands and ideas are always welcomed!

Ann Galonska, Museum Director

THE MANSFIELD COMMUNITY COUNCIL AND THE WAR ON POVERTY

In his State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson proposed legislation that would become known as the "War on Poverty." During his administration, the U.S. Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act, which established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to administer the local application of federal funds targeted for poverty relief. Federal programs as Head Start, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and Job Corps continue today as legacies of Johnson's War on Poverty initiatives.

In 1966 the Mansfield Community Council was formed to address local issues of poverty. Over the past year, Betty Heiss, a former co-chair of the MCC, has been compiling its history and documenting the important contributions of this group to the War on Poverty. She has presented her archive of materials to the Mansfield Historical Society. It includes written statements by former MCC volunteers and members of the Mothers Group, along with newspaper articles and photographs. Below are her own recollections of her work with the Mansfield Community Council.

As Co-Chair of the Mansfield Community Council in 1968, I will write about my involvement in the Council and some of its history. It's now 2013 and you are probably wondering why it has taken more than forty years to tell this story. I do so at the urging of my friend Ann Smith, an active member of the League of Women Voters in town. She knew of the Council's important work in addressing the needs of Mansfield's low income population and thought it should be documented.

Back in 1967 I was the Chairman of the Human Resources Committee of Mansfield's League of Women Voters and we did a study accessing the need for day care centers in town. I was not naïve and knew there was poverty in the inner cities and rural areas of the country. But, like most of the Storrs academic community, I was unaware that it existed right here in Mansfield. Most of the poor lived in trailers or isolated houses throughout the town. As I surveyed a section of town called Eagleville I met a number of large families living in Eagleville Court. Their needs were many and I felt a strong inclination to help.

It was fortuitous that just around the time of the survey I got a call from my close friend Barbara (Bobby) Ivry inviting me for coffee. It turned out that Bobby was chairman of the Mansfield

Community Council from 1966 and, while she wanted to remain a volunteer, she asked me to take on the role of chairman. I said "yes."

The Council was an outgrowth of the Windham Area Community Action Program (WACAP). WACAP was created as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty and it encompassed most of Northeastern Connecticut. Bill Olds was the Director and he persuaded Bobby, the two Town Public Health nurses, Mrs. Newman and Mrs. Abbey, and the Town social worker to form the council. Bill Olds wanted the Council, formed late in the spring of 1966, to be the sponsoring group for the Mansfield Head Start program and the Surplus Food program.

Since I agreed to be chairman, my next step was to meet Trudy Coolbeth, WACAP's neighborhood worker for Mansfield. Her job was to deliver the surplus food to the town's low income population. (This was the era before food stamps.) Once you met Trudy, you'd never forget her. She was a warm, vivacious woman with a head of bright reddish orange hair. Sadly, she died last year at the age of 92. The two of us hit it off right away.



Trudy Coolbeth delivering surplus food

She suggested that I accompany her when she delivered the food to the mothers in Eagleville and she would introduce me as a volunteer who was available to help in whatever way would be most productive. Trudy herself knew what it was like to be

poor, having raised nine children on a meager income.

Before meeting with the ladies on a Tuesday afternoon, I received "Trudy's rules" (actually these were the guidelines for all WACAP neighborhood workers):

1. Don't overdress.
2. Ask about gripes but don't take notes.
3. Get information little by little – not too much at the first visit.
4. People are very sensitive about their age, amount of education, and money.
5. Never promise anything. Let them know there are economic guidelines.
6. Confidentiality is important.

That spring afternoon Trudy and I went to the Machados' house. It originally was the Eagleville

district school but in the sixties it was rented to low income families. It is now restored and is currently the headquarters of Joshua's Trust.

I felt appropriately dressed in slacks and a blouse. The ladies, however, wore their Sunday best and, though I didn't say anything, I felt a little embarrassed. Trudy introduced me to Betty, Jean, Joyce and Gladys. I remember saying to them that I was a faculty wife and mother and I didn't know what it was like to be poor. I asked them to consider me as a resource person with many connections in town. I would listen to their concerns and do my very best to meet their requests.

Well, I flunked their first request. They wanted to learn how to sew in order to make clothes for themselves and their children. I told them that I almost failed sewing in elementary school but I would find someone to teach them. I was thinking of my friend B.J. (Betty Jane Bennett) who was not only a nurse and fantastic cook, but an excellent seamstress as well. If not B.J., I would come up with someone else. Our first meeting was a success because they said "We'll see you next Tuesday!"

The following week I came with Trudy and B.J. with her sewing machine, fabric and thread. B.J. had a kind, patient, no nonsense way of connecting with people and the women took to her right away. B.J.'s skills and mine complemented each other perfectly and that evening I asked if she would be my co-chair of the Council. Happily she said "yes."

During that afternoon while the women took turns at the machine I just hung around and listened and listen I did. There were requests to have a garden area to grow vegetables, a recreation area and ball field, an expert who could help them manage money, and someone to tell them how to pay for a funeral if the need ever arose. I set about finding ways to address these needs.

The Machados' house sat on eight acres of usable land owned by two men in New York. They agreed to lease the land to the town for one dollar a year as long as they had no liability costs. UConn's President Homer Babbidge offered to have the agriculture school plow and make the land ready for

planting. Jay Shivers, Mansfield's Recreation Director rounded up some men and built a playground and ball field. The town contributed money and even teenagers got in on the project, sponsoring a dance at St. Joseph's Church in Eagleville to raise money for equipment. David Fury from UConn's School of Business gave a presentation on money management and funeral insurance.

All of the above were done in less than two months. By this time the group had outgrown the Machados' house for meetings and moved to the Storrs Congregational Church. The small group of women mushroomed into a plethora of other mothers recruited by Trudy, the Eagleville women and our two public health nurses. The local churches, with Gerry Zazama in charge, recruited a large number of volunteers to do a wide variety of tasks - everything from transportation, childcare (while the mothers were meeting), chaperones for teen dances, and building playground equipment. The Town's First Selectman, Meryl Klinck, and UConn's president and faculty members were also involved in the effort.

The Sixties were a time when the Women's Movement was making its impact felt in America. The rise of feminism, however, was largely focused on the middle class and *Ms Magazine* highlighted this with its many articles.

I wanted to see something written about working class women and I was fortunate enough to discover a writer who contributed to *Ms*. Her name was Nancy Seifer and she had recently written an eighty-five page pamphlet called *Absent from the Majority: Working Class Women in America*.

I contacted Nancy in her New York City office and invited her to spend a weekend in Storrs to meet with the Mansfield Mothers Group, take pictures and write a story for *Ms*. It didn't work out quite that way. Instead of writing an article, Nancy became mesmerized by Terry Dezso, a member of the group. Nancy was in the midst of writing a book called *Nobody Speaks for Me - Self Portraits of American Working Class Women* (New York: Simon

MANSFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP

Please check your address label. A RED DOT indicates that you have not paid your dues.

Name(s) _____

A d d r e s s

Telephone _____ Email _____

MEMBERSHIP LEVEL

Student (\$10) _____	Small Business (\$75) _____
Individual (\$20) _____	Contributing (\$100) _____
Family (\$30) _____	Patron (\$150) _____

Sustaining (\$50) _____

Corporate (\$250) _____

I wish to make an additional contribution of _____ to support the Historical Society.

PLEASE CONSIDER VOLUNTEERING! Check the volunteer opportunities that interest you.

_____ Host/Hostess

_____ Exhibit Preparation

_____ Collections

_____ Educational Programs

_____ Genealogy Research

_____ Historical Research

_____ Office Work

_____ Special Events

_____ Handyman

Please make checks payable to The Mansfield Historical Society. Mail membership form and check to: Mansfield Historical Society / P.O. Box 145 / Storrs, CT 06268.

and Shuster, 1976). She chose Terry as one of ten women to have a chapter devoted to her life.

Terry, a devout Catholic mother of nine, was recently divorced and was told of the Tuesday meetings by Mrs. Abbey. She attended one afternoon and was picked up by Nancy Chance, one of our most dedicated volunteers. Over the years the two became very close friends. Sadly each died within the last few years.

The chapter devoted to Terry Dezso in *Nobody Speaks for Me*, includes an interview with Terry and Nancy describing their involvement in the Mothers Group. Terry stated: "I hate to think how my life might have been without the Mothers Group. It was like an oasis because it was a place to go and get some kind of relief, and some kind of enjoyment and knowledge. It was something that directed me to the things I needed and helped me to find things I didn't even know about."

In addition to group activities, there was another aspect to the Council's work. B.J. and I learned through Trudy that there were a number of isolated low income families who needed more hands-on help. Since I knew Dr. Eleanor Luckey,

head of Family and Child Development at UConn's School of Home Economics, I asked her how she might assist us. She graciously gave us eight graduate students who we placed in the homes of mothers who could benefit from some personal help. These young women spent two afternoons a week with their designated families and found out that their skills were needed in just helping these moms cope with everyday stresses. Some mothers were emotionally and intellectually challenged and felt overwhelmed. Having someone there to wash dishes, change diapers and lend an empathetic ear was something they appreciated and looked forward to each week. The students in turn came away with a whole new understanding of rural poverty and its deprivations.

Additionally there were quite a few elderly people who welcomed visits from volunteers, both men and women, to give a hand with chores, take them to appointments with doctors and such, and just spend an hour or two chatting or watching TV together.

(Continued on back page)

**Mansfield Historical Society
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REMEMBER: November 10, 1:30 p.m. – Meeting & Program Please renew your membership!

(Mansfield Community Council continued)

In 1969 my husband got a one-year position at the College of the Virgin Islands and our family moved to St. Thomas. As a result of my volunteer work with the Mansfield Mothers Group, I landed an exciting position with the poverty program there. When we returned to Storrs I became an administrator for WACAP. It was a full time job so I was no longer active with the Mothers Group. But it continued to flourish until the 1990s.

I will always remember my organizing and working with the Mansfield Community Council. The wonderful people I met, both volunteers and those they helped, the energy and enthusiasm of all – these are the memories I'll cherish for a lifetime.

Betty Heiss

NOTE: In the years following Betty Heiss' involvement with the Mansfield Community Council, the volunteer group continued to grow and expand the scope of its work. A food-buying cooperative was formed and a successful clothing exchange program was established. Classes on nutrition, parenting skills and many other topics of interest were offered. A day care center was opened in the basement of the First Baptist Church. The group also raised funds each year to send local disadvantaged children to summer camp.

However by the early 1990s, much of the Mansfield Community Council's outreach work had been incorporated into the structure of local government. The group ceased to meet and only the campership program continued. Betsy Hamill continued to coordinate this program and spearheaded the annual fundraising efforts. Unfortunately it ended in 2011 with her passing.

For over three decades, the Council brought together women from a broad spectrum of economic, social and academic backgrounds and they enriched each other's lives. Perhaps Terry Deszo expressed it best in describing the Mothers Group: "... it was a chance for low-income women and middle class women just to know about each other. I think it's good for the low-income people to know that there's somebody who cares and wants to help them. And I think it's good for all people to be aware of the fact that there are people who have less, because it's so easy to forget. ... a lot of good came from it." (*Nobody Speaks for Me*, page 472)