

River & Sound

Old Lyme Historical Society
"The history of Old Lyme – the people of Old Lyme"

Issue Seven ❧ Winter 2010

"Telling stories out of school": Society launches oral history project

Recording the history of an area requires gathering information from many sources. Vital records, newspapers, books, photographs, memoirs, letters, postcards: all shed light on past events and their significance. Perhaps one of the most valuable ways of learning about local, living history is to speak with people to record their accounts of events, individuals, and places past. It is often through talking with the living—young and older—that we can make sense of a past that we did not experience.

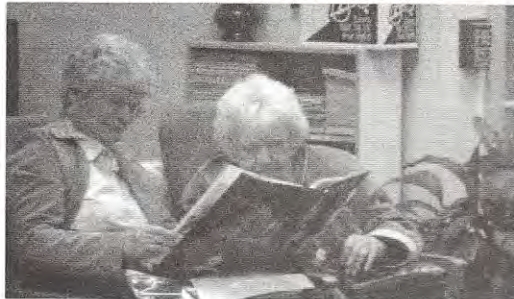
Since its founding in 2005, the Old Lyme Historical Society has conducted informal interviews with several town residents. As research for our 2008 book, *The Hurricane of 1938: Old Lyme Remembers*, we interviewed more than 25 people who were here when the hurricane struck the Connecticut shore. We are fortunate to have spoken with two prominent residents of the town, John Noyes and Willard Huntley, before they died. And we have interviewed two engaging nonagenarians, Sylvia Marsh

and Mary Symonds. After the hour-long interview was over, both Sylvia and Mary felt that they had much more to say—which highlighted the fact that we had no formal mechanism in place to conduct, record, and preserve additional interviews.

Now, however, we do have such a mechanism, thanks to new trustee Sousan Arafeh. An education researcher and longtime oral history "gatherer," Sousan has a background in research and evaluation using qualitative data collection methods like in-depth interviews and focus groups. She heads the OLHSI's Oral History Committee, which is holding periodic "Oral History Days," where people with memories of Old Lyme can be interviewed. The videotapes and audiotapes of these interviews will be ultimately incorporated in the

Society's historical archives and website database.

Members of the committee interviewed 26 people at our first Oral History Day, held November 14 at the Lymes' Senior Center. Our next session is scheduled for Saturday, March 6, at 2 p.m., also at the Senior Center. All interviews



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Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.

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Message from the Chairperson

As the Old Lyme Historical Society celebrates its fifth birthday in February, a comparison to Piaget's child development model is inescapable. We've survived the innocence of infancy, the teetering toddler stage, the terrible twos, tantrum threes, and preschool fours, and now we can sit with the big guys for dinner. It's amazing what a few people can do when they set their mind to it!

Actually, last June our governing board doubled in size. It was a wise decision. Our enlarged board of trustees abounds with renewed energy, fresh talent, excellent ideas, and problem-solving skills. Meetings are open to the public: come join us on the second Monday of the month at 4:00 in the Community Room at the PGN Library. We welcome your ideas for future programs.

Last September, at a reception at the Florence Griswold Museum, we launched our latest publication, *The Land Savers*. On a picture-perfect evening we sipped wine and munched on Coffee's Country Market's superb hors d'oeuvres while watching the barn swallows swoop across the Lieutenant River. It was an ideal setting in which to celebrate this book about Old Lyme: what attracted people to settle here, and why they have stayed. We greatly appreciate the Museum's generosity in serving as our host for the evening and for providing invaluable assistance in selecting American Impressionist illustrations from its archives for inclusion in the book.

The staff of the PGN Library have graciously offered to sell our books when the Society's office is closed. We'd love to see you on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, from 10:00 to noon, in the Genealogy Room. But if that's not convenient, please swing by the library any time to buy *Poverty Island*, *This Ancient Town*, *The Hurricane of 1938*, and *The Land Savers*. A friend said she had bought the four books as a "welcome to Old Lyme" gift for a new neighbor—we hope that local realtors will pick up on that idea. We provide a 10% discount on a purchase of all four. These books wouldn't exist without the David and Mary Dangremond Publishing Fund. This revolving fund supports production costs for the books, lovingly designed by Jim Meehan and printed by Beauvais Printing in Guilford.

Speaking of books, we anticipate an early-summer publication of a book on the Old Lyme beaches. Written by husband-and-wife team Michaelle Pearson and James Lampos, it promises to be a lively historical story about life

and adventure at our beach communities. (See more on page 3 of this newsletter.) An accompanying exhibit is also planned. We'll keep you updated.

Perhaps the Society's most exciting new venture in 2009, and the topic of this issue's cover story, was the November launch of a yearlong oral history project. Under the direction of trustee Sousan Arafah, we interviewed 26 Old Lyme residents, all with superb stories to tell. The tapes are being compiled and will soon be available in several formats. Taking our cues from oral history projects like those at the Library of Congress and StoryCorps, we've used the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage's Interviewer Guide as part of our volunteer interviewer training. If you'd like to tell us your favorite story, or if you know someone whose interview is a must, or if you would like to participate in some other way, please get in touch with us. You may leave a message at the Society's office (860-434-0684) or send an email to me

(alisonmitch@comcast.net),

or to Sousan (sousan@researchimages.com).

Shortly you'll see a whole new look to our website. The Society is grateful to Patsy McCook for a generous contribution, which has allowed us to hire Stephen Shaw and his team at Internet Solutions (their delightful website is at WhoIsTheOldGuy.com), who impressed us with their design of the Madison Historical Society website. Through a compelling, interactive website lies the way to reach young people and make them as excited about history as the rest of us!

Don't forget to renew your membership: February is the time. We've been forgiving about lapsed memberships. But with increased mailing costs, we have to get tough. Paid-up members receive announcements of coming events. For example, on Friday, February 26, the Wesleyan University a cappella singers known as The New Group will be performing at the Lymes' Senior Center. Who would want to miss hearing this wonderful free-spirited mixed chorus?

Happy New Year! May this be as exciting a year for the Historical Society as the last five have been!

Alison C. Mitchell
Chairperson, Board of Trustees
Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.

New oral history project

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will be transcribed and eventually digitized. People who are interested in being interviewed, or who know a potential interviewee, should call the OLHSI office (860-434-0684) to schedule a time at this event. Two more sessions will be held throughout the year.

“Collecting and preserving oral history is often difficult because people can be reluctant to share their stories,” says Sousan Arafeh. “Some think that what they know is not important or interesting. Others don’t know what they would say. But when they sit and speak with an interviewer, memories begin to flow. It’s a fascinating process, and it’s often the only way to know much about where you live and the things around you. We are pleased that so many people are coming forward to share their experiences and that so many are working to preserve these for posterity. It’s a wonderful community effort.”

Once the remembrances are posted on the OLHSI website, it will be possible to make the past come alive for young people in a format with which they are thoroughly comfortable. As the Society holds true to its mission of “preserving the social, civic, economic, and political past of the town of Old Lyme,” we also expect to provide an enjoyable, educational experience for families in Old Lyme and beyond.

In memoriam: Three friends of the Old Lyme Historical Society

Connie Pike. An early member of the Society, Connie died in September. She was also involved with the School Volunteer Program, the PGN Library, the Old Lyme Children’s Learning Center, and the Old Lyme Conservation Trust.

Jessie Smith. An original member of the Society’s board, Jessie died in December. After serving as secretary to the superintendent of schools in Old Lyme, she served for many years as the town clerk of Old Lyme.

Marian Jewett. A member of the Society—as are her son and daughter-in-law, Ellis and Mary Ellen Jewett—Marian died in September at the age of 101.

On the 2010 calendar

Beach book to be published this summer

Rum runners and governors, bluebloods and socialists: the history of the beach at Old Lyme holds more than meets the eye.

From the genteel moonlight sails, whist parties and hops of the early 1900s to the raucous honky-tonk scene complete with bikers, strippers, and brawling sailors, the area that came to be known as Sound View has always been a bit of a conundrum. A rowdy playground in the midst of a tranquil New England town, it is one of the finest bathing beaches in the country, but better known for its sublunary delights.

This summer the OLHSI will publish a book—our fifth monograph—by James Lamos and Michaele Pearson that explores the area’s unique history, including its unusual geology, the transition from farmland to resort, and social influences from the Prohibition era to the present day.

Revised village walking tour to be available this spring

In September we welcomed our first intern in the OLHSI office: Jessica Bender, a senior at Connecticut College. Jessica, whose assignment was to revise a walking tour of Old Lyme village, spent the fall semester researching the historic houses along Lyme Street and the Historic District. She also conducted archival and Internet research at the PGN Library and interviewed local homeowners and town officials.

Jessica’s work will result in a self-guided audiovisual walking tour that classifies the buildings by architectural style, considers them collectively, and gives information about Duck River Cemetery. The tour, which can be downloaded to an MP3 player or a cell phone, will be launched this spring.

Historian John Pfeiffer to give presentation in March

As part of a series of talks on the history of Old Lyme and its environs, town historian John Pfeiffer plans to give a presentation this winter on local Indian burial grounds. Like Dr. Pfeiffer’s previous talks, it will be held at the Lymes’ Senior Center and will include a dinner catered by Coffee’s Country Market. Scheduled date (to be determined by early February): one of the following Friday evenings—March 12, 19, or 26.

Benefits of OLHSI membership

- A subscription to this semiannual newsletter
- Advance notice of forthcoming events
- Invitations to member-only events
- Priority status to obtain genealogical research material at the PGN Library
- A 10% discount on our books, and the opportunity to purchase them in advance
- Discounted rates for certain events
- Opportunities to learn more about the history of Old Lyme
- Training in historical research
- Training in oral-history interviews, and the chance to become part of our yearlong "Telling Tales Out of School" project
- The realization that your tax-deductible contribution is supporting a vital cultural resource.

Join us in bringing Old Lyme's past to the present!

Please become an OLHSI member or renew your membership.

The OLHSI gratefully accepts contributions
or loans of town and family memorabilia.

Membership fees and other donations are fully tax-deductible.

New member Renewing member

Please make your check payable to the Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.

Thank you for your generosity!

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Address _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Individual \$15 Family \$30 Patron \$100

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Please ask your company about a Matching Gift program.

My check for \$ _____ is enclosed.

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The OLHSI is a non-profit corporation incorporated
in the State of Connecticut.

It is a registered charity with the state Department of Consumer Protection
and is recognized by the IRS for 501(c)3 status



The mission of the
Old Lyme Historical Society Inc.
is to collect, preserve, and interpret
the rich history of Old Lyme
and its environs for the benefit of
its residents and visitors.

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Did you know? *Harold and Hilma Berggren*

(a recurring feature about an Old Lyme resident, historical building, or artifact)

Hilma Berggren lives at 93 Lyme Street, in the yellow house across the street from the Florence Griswold Museum. She grew up in Essex and first came to Old Lyme in 1929 at the age of 15, to see the “Mile of Roses.” This was a display of roses, planted by Judge William Noyes, that grew along the east side of Lyme Street—starting just north of the Swedish Tea Room (now Mrs. Berggren’s house)—and stretched past Judge Noyes’ house (#105). Mrs. Berggren, whose parents were from Sweden, said she thought the “Swedish Tea Room” was an amusing name, because Swedes drink coffee, not tea!

She met her future husband, Harold Berggren, through a mutual friend, and it was love at first sight. He worked at the A&P in Collinsville, a factory town west of Hartford. After they were introduced, he invited her to go swimming in the Farmington River. It was too cold for swimming, so they got ice cream, and he took her to meet his mother. They were married in 1936.

In 1937 Mr. Berggren earned \$15 a week. Their rent was \$15 a month, a month’s worth of coal cost \$15, and they lived on what remained after paying those expenses.

In 1939 the Berggrens moved to Old Lyme to run a grocery store on Lyme Street in what is now the J. Elms building. During World War II the store was closed, and Mr. Berggren went to work at the U.S. Navy Underwater Sound Laboratory in New London, where he supervised the electronics shop. He was employed there for 30 years.

During the war, Mr. Berggren bought U.S. savings bonds—he was one of the first Underwater Sound Laboratory employees to sign up—and was subsequently able to use them to purchase and remodel a building, constructed in 1923, that had a history of its own. It first housed the Lyme Auto Service garage (see back page of this issue), then the Swedish Tea Room, and finally a pottery



business, The Potter’s Wheel. The Berggrens bought the property from Mabel Harris, who had inherited it from her mother, Mary Harris, and her father, Dr. George Harris, the town doctor.

On learning of the Berggrens’ use of U.S. Savings Bonds to finance the purchase and remodeling of their house, the U.S. Department of the Treasury used their story as the basis for a publicity campaign—the Bucks and Bonds Brigade—to encourage Americans to

achieve the American dream of owning their own home. An article on the Berggrens, accompanied by photos of the house and a photo of Harold and the Berggrens’ son and daughter—was published in newspapers across the country, with the slogan “Save for your Independence.”

Harold Berggren and his father-in-law, Alvin Larson, remodeled the entire house by themselves; the interior job included new partitions, walls, ceilings, and installation of heating, plumbing, and electrical systems, and insulation for six large rooms and a bath. Mrs. Berggren did all the painting and paperhanging. Mr. Berggren even found a way to cope with a lumber shortage. In addition to his job at the Underwater Sound Laboratory, he owned a small-radio business. One customer, the owner of the Essex Lumber Company, was so pleased with his repaired radio that he rewarded the Berggrens with the lumber they needed for the house.

Mr. Berggren dug the foundation from under the building by hand and hauled the dirt away in a manure loader that he bought from Roberts Farm on Sill Lane. He used the dirt to fill in a low area next to a stream in back of the house. The front porch was part of the Stanley Furniture Shop (see article in the Summer 2008 *River and Sound*). The Berggrens bought it for \$50 when the building was taken down to make way for the Connecticut Turnpike, now I-95.

—Martha Hansen

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