



Kent Historical Society

Newsletter



Volume 6, Number 2

Kent, Connecticut

September 2005

You Can Find the Darndest Things in the Walls of Your Old House

Perched on a shelf in our Swift House office is a grubby, forlorn little boot. A sign next to it says *"This little boot was found wedged in the beam and rafter of the old Col. Bull house near Bulls Bridge. The house was torn down by CL&P about 1932. Boot donated*

by Mr. Frank Howard of West Hartford". For years I have been meaning to research the mysterious custom most likely responsible for its existence. Late last year, the subject came up at the Sharon Historical Society (where I also work), when we found a similar item in the collection there. Based on a tip from one of our members, I decided to finally look into it. What I discovered is quite intriguing. Our little boot is known as a *Concealment Shoe*, and is part of a very old, odd practice. I would guess that many New England historical societies have tattered and torn shoes in their collections, brought in no doubt by well meaning folk who found the shoes in the walls of their old houses and wanted to know why.



Human beings seem to have an odd weakness for superstition. Some of these superstitions are rather bizarre, lacking any rational explanation. Concealment shoes definitely fall into this category. The custom dates back to possibly

14th century Western Europe, and is rooted in the ever-present need to ward off evil spirits. Somewhere, sometime long, long ago, someone was building or renovating his home, ripping out windows, maybe removing doors. Afraid that wandering wraiths from the underworld would waft into his home through these openings, he quickly hid a shoe in the nearby wall and felt better, safe from the impending danger. Who knows why? But he had his reasons, and others must have heard about it, because the custom caught on, reaching its peak in 18th and 19th century Great Britain and the northern United States.

Continued on Page 2

Over the years since then, these long forgotten shoes are once again seeing the light of day as our old houses are being remodeled or restored. Most people have no idea what they have stumbled across when they rip the plaster from the wall and find an old shoe tucked into a hidden cavity. No doubt hundreds of these treasures have been thrown away, without being given a second thought beyond the often strange assumption that a child must have lost the shoe *in the wall*. Incredibly, however, enough have been documented that there is an international index of concealment shoes at the Northampton Museum in England, where over 2000 shoes are listed!

Children's shoes are the most common, followed by women's. They are almost always well worn, probably because shoes were much more expensive treasures then – one simply didn't have a closet full of shoes with plenty to spare (not a time when Imelda Marcos would have been happy!). Usually, there is just a single shoe, but occasionally members of a whole family each contributed a shoe in order to better protect their home.

While there is no documentation of when any individual shoe was placed in a wall, the consensus seems to be that it was usually done during renovation rather than in the original construction. According to Jennifer Swope at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, *no one has ever photographed a concealment shoe in its discovered location*. But increasingly, people

have been savvy enough to realize that there is a reason for the shoes to be where they were found, and so they have been saved.

One Sharon family has decided to revive the custom. When Malcolm and Louise Brown were renovating their old house in town, they found *five* shoes tucked together in a wall. The shoes were all old, all small, and accompanied by a 1911 newspaper. Realizing that they were on to something, Louise researched the mystery, eventually exploring the internet for information on concealment shoes. What she found made her feel that not only did the Browns have to return the shoes to the wall, but they also had to add some of their own. This they did, and now a 20th century sneaker and high heel are helping to guard against any evil spirit lurking around outside the Brown home.

So, if you own an old house, chances are there are shoes standing guard within your walls. If someday you decide to make changes in the house and are lucky enough to find a concealment shoe or two, leave them where they are – you don't want evil spirits in the house, do you?

But *do* take a picture, and please do let us know. Even historians can enjoy a good superstition.

Welcome New Members!

Edwin Adlam, Bill & Catherine Bachrach, Ernie Cedar, Richard & Frances Davis, Pat Gallagher, Kent Greenhouse, C.M. Peake, Robert Rothenberg, Mario & Claire Sapia, Wes & Nancy Wyrick.

We've Broken Every Record!

In 1978, Seven Hearths was opened to the public as a museum for the first time. The guest book shows that 60 people showed up that summer to take a peek. Over the years since then the number of names in the guest book slowly began to grow. Generally, a summer exhibit would attract enough visitors to fill up three or four pages with signatures.

Our most popular exhibit, *A Tribute to Our Veterans* in 2002, filled a whole nine pages and we were ecstatic. Then *Barn Again!* arrived, and guess what? We now have to buy a new guest book! We just closed the exhibit, after gathering at least 885 new names. That's more than 28 pages worth. We had people from all over the world – England, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Japan, FL, MN, CA, HI, MO, AL, AZ, DC, as well as plenty of visitors from all our neighboring states. We knew we would attract attention with the Smithsonian name, but we never imagined that the half empty guest book would be filled almost to the last page!

What has been most rewarding about the *Barn Again!* exhibit is the town-wide involvement. From the Bird Barn builders and the entire Kent Center School student body to the Seven Hearths docents and our corps of dedicated KHS volunteers, literally hundreds of people pitched in to help make the exhibit a record breaking success. Many of you called on a regular basis to see what needed to be done next. I naively thought that when the exhibit opened on June 11th, life at the Swift House would return to its normal pace. Not a chance! This is the first newsletter you have received since March, because we have been so busy with *Barn Again!*,



and it's not over yet. The exhibit itself will be at the Windsor Historical Society by the time you read this, but the *Barn Again!* programs in Kent will continue.

Using his popular post & beam model that drew scores of visitors to *Barn Again!*, Andy Chase will demonstrate old fashioned

barn building techniques. The demonstration will take place at the Kent Memorial Library on Saturday, November 12th at 2PM. The model itself is now on display in the Reading Room at the Library, so stop by and take a look. Also at the Library, on October 5th at 4PM, Liz Shapiro, Director of the Sharon Historical Society, will lead a children's program, called "A Barn is Born, Building Your Own Barn" using popsicle sticks and milk cartons to build small models of post and beam barns. Keep an eye on the Library's publicity for details, or call us here at the KHS. On October 23rd, the guest speaker at the Annual Meeting of the Kent Historical Society will be Dr. Briann Greenfield, Assistant Professor of History at Central CT State University. For details on her talk, please see the related story on another page.

We are sad to see this fantastic exhibit leave Kent, but are looking forward to settling back in to our normal routine. If you enjoyed *Barn Again!*, I'd like to ask you to write to State Sen. Andrew Roraback, State Rep. MaryAnn Carson, and to Senators Leiberman and Dodd and Rep. Nancy Johnson to tell you how much you appreciate the state and federal funding that makes the Smithsonian's traveling exhibit service possible. Please be sure to mention the CT Humanities Council, since it was

Continued on Page 4

We've Broken Every Record!

Continued from Page 3

through their sponsorship that we were able to host *Barn Again!*. The CHC also gave us a \$5,000 grant to facilitate the exhibit, and is a wonderful support to any CT humanities-based non profit organization. I would be happy to answer any questions about the CHC. This great summer would not have been possible without them.

In the meantime, keep your fingers crossed. This is the last year for *Barn Again!* to travel the country. It is being retired after a very successful run, and the Smithsonian is looking for a permanent home for it. Ruth and Skitch Henderson at the Silo Gallery in New Milford have put in an application to acquire it. The competition is stiff! It might help if the Smithsonian heard from us, saying how much we want to have it in our area. Call the KHS office for contact information if you would like to help out.

Kent is truly a great town. At the risk of leaving out a name or two, I would like to thank the following wonderful folk who took part in Barn Again! If I have omitted your name, just let me know, and you will receive a mini-BirdBarn, along with my chagrined apologies.

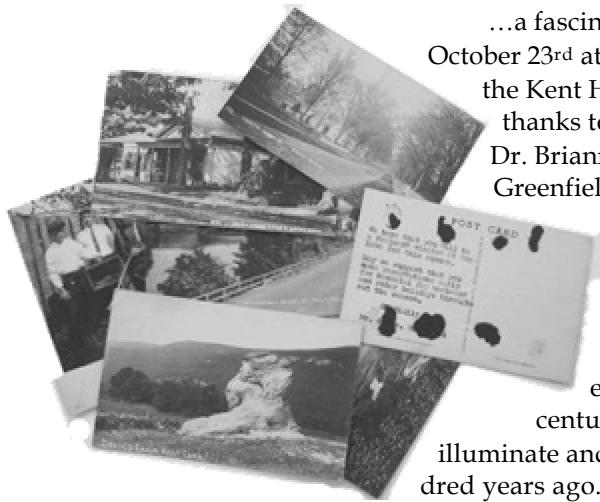
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Memorial Library staff, Kent Town Road Crew, Kent True Value, Kent Volunteer Fire Department, Peter Kirkiles, Merle Koblenz, Bob Lenz, Bill Leo, Ann Linden, Dick & Charlotte Lindsey, Diane Lodge, Halsted Lovig, Bill Lyons, Carol MacRitchie, John Mankin, Ted Marks, Jayne Martin, Jackie & Doug Matson, Shaun McAvoy, Jean-Claude Minier, Wendell & Florence Minor, Roz Molho, Jeff Morgan, Billy Morrison, Jason Mylie, Robert Norton, Dan O'Neill, Marian Pacocha, Tom Page, Dave & Borgny Parker, Roger Peet, Leigh Peet, Amy Perugini, Don & Mary Peters, Tony Pocchia, Bill & Tammy Potter, Elissa & George Potts, Barbara Psarakis, Greg & Natalie Randall, Laurie Rayner, Governor M. Jodi Rell, Heather Rimany, Janet Rivkin, Sen. Andrew Roraback, Barbara Russ, John Scofield, Barbara Scott, Liz Shapiro, Ira Smith, Bunny Soule, Jude Soule, Leanne & Dan Soule, Dawn & Scott Stone, David Strid, Patsy Stroble, Elana Studer, Bill Tobin, Gail Tobin, Arnie Valentine, Mike VanValkenburg, Mike Vreeland, WFSB, Margaret & Larry Weiner, Maggie Wells, Susi Williams & Dick Wyman, Alice Wolf, Torrie & Dale Young, and Jill Zinzi.

Also, great thanks go to The Preview Party & Silent Auction patrons, the visitors to Barn Again! (who told other people to come see it), everyone who donated items to be in the exhibit (many of whom I don't even know about yet, since things came in when I wasn't there), the Bird Barn Bidders and all the Bird Barn Sponsors: Housatonic Hardwoods, Dooley Associates, Morrison Gallery, Panini, Rock Hill Associates, BackCountry Outfitters, Lily's Florist, New Leaf Natural Foods, B. Johnstone, Kent Coffee & Chocolate Shop, House of Books, Stroble Baking Company, Kent Video & Photo, Heron Gallery, Kent Wine & Spirit, Caralee's, Kent Memorial Library, Rest & Relaxation Station, Kent Pizza Garden, NewMil Bank, Upscale Resale, Country Flair Tile, Young Farm, Davis IGA, Paisans, Union Savings Bank, Zep-pagrams.com, The Dog Show, Country Feed & Garden, Lyme Regis, Fife & Drum Gift Shop, Fife & Drum Restaurant, Terston Home Accents, Gourmet Palette, Kent Paint & Decorating, Kaleidoscope Kids, Toys Galore, Sundog Shoe & Leather, Raveis Real Estate, David Bain Real Estate, Foreign Cargo, Richard Lindsey Bookseller, Country Clothes, R T Facts, and the Kent Greenhouse!

Thank you one and all! The Smithsonian is *really* impressed with the reception we gave to *Barn Again!* So am I!

Do You Have a Passion for Postcards ...



...a fascination with farms? If so, you must plan to join us on Sunday, October 23rd at the Kent Town Hall at 2:30 PM for the Annual Meeting of the Kent Historical Society. As part of our *Barn Again!* year, and thanks to a grant from the CT Humanities Council, we have invited Dr. Briann G. Greenfield to be the guest speaker after the meeting. Dr. Greenfield's talk, entitled "*Postcards From the Farm, 1900-1920*" looks at rural life in Connecticut in the first decades of the twentieth century, through the medium of postcards. Postcards were authorized by an act of Congress in 1898 and quickly became a popular means of recording travels, marking important events and documenting community life. This talk examines the production of postcards in the early twentieth century and the ways in which the images they circulated both illuminate and obscure life in Connecticut's rural communities one hundred years ago.

Dr. Greenfield's program is not to be missed. It is full of fun and packed with information. If you're not already a fan of old postcards, you will be by the end of the afternoon. Once available by the bundle at flea markets and tag sales, postcards have become valuable collectors' items. We have a few in our files at the KHS, which we recently supplemented on a trip to Newington, CT to bid on a collection of Kent postcards and stereo-opticon cards being auctioned off by Tim's Auctions. Alerted by a tip from Auctioneer Tim, Kent Postcard Collector Susie Rundall and I made the trek to an estate sale packed with rabid PC collectors. Leaving the intricate business of bidding to Susie, I watched as she carefully amassed quite a treasure trove of cards, skillfully out maneuvering the competition. Actually, many of the would be buyers backed off once the word got around that we were from the Kent Historical Society, but there were a few die hards left, and it took all of Susie's experience to secure some of the cards from Kent. Most of those important cards are now in her possession, and will be on exhibit at the meeting, along with many other looseleaf binders full of cards from her extensive collection.

What makes this particular passle of postcards so very special is that not only are the cards themselves from Kent, but so was the photographer! His name was Dr. George Henry Smith, and it was his descendants' estate that was being auctioned off. Dr. Smith was briefly the pastor at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church here in town, and in his spare time, he was an avid photographer. He equipped his bicycle with a special camera set-up, and rode throughout town documenting his surroundings. Many of the images that we have long been familiar with as we look through both our and Susie Rundall's collection of postcards turn out to have been captured by the talented Dr. Smith. They will all be on display at the meeting, where the equally talented Dr. Greenfield will explain how and why the images were turned into such popular postcards.

An additional attraction at the meeting will be the last chance to bid on the reproduction Colonial pencil post bed, which has been on Silent Auction at Seven Hearths all summer. Crafted by David Churchill, the bed is a beauty! The minimum bid is \$900, and may be viewed in the meantime by making an appointment with us at the KHS.

The Annual Meeting will be held at the Kent Town Hall at 2:30 PM on October 23rd, with Dr. Greenfield's talk beginning around 3, or as soon as the meeting adjourns. Everyone is invited, but to help us gauge attendance, please make a reservation by calling 860-927-4587, or emailing us at kenthistoricalsociety@juno.com

We look forward to seeing you on the 23rd!



MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

There are still a few more Barn Again! events happening in Kent!

Barn Again! Children's Program

"A Barn is Born, Building Your Own Barn"

Wednesday, October
5th, 4PM at the Kent
Memorial Library



Liz Shapiro and Children's Librarian Heather Rimany will host a barn building program for children of all ages. Using popsicle sticks and milk cartons, kids will be able to build and decorate their own barns while they learn what barns are all about.

Annual Meeting Sunday, October 23rd,
2:30 PM at the
Kent Town Hall



Annual Meeting
of the Kent Historical Society.
Dr. Briann
Greenfield of
Central CT State

University will be the featured speaker, presenting Postcards From the Farm 1900-1920. See related story elsewhere in this newsletter. For reservations, please call 927-4587 or email kenthistoricalsociety@juno.com

Demonstration of building techniques used in old barns

Saturday, November 12th

2PM at the Kent Memorial Library

Andy Chase will demonstrate the different joints and building techniques used in old New England Post & Beam Barns.

Our Long Range Strategic Plan

The Kent Historical Society has recently received a total of \$10,000 in grant funds from the Connecticut Humanities Council! As we mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter, we received \$5,000 to implement the *Barn Again!* exhibit. That amount was supplemented by an anonymous donation from two KHS members, with the result that *Barn Again!* was an unprecedented success.

Meanwhile, we have embarked on a Long Range Strategic Plan, and have been awarded a \$5,000 grant to hire a consultant to guide us through the process. Liz Shapiro, Director of the Sharon Historical Society, has her Masters Degree in history from Cooperstown and has worked in many facets in the field. One of her strengths is Board development. Locally she has recently completed a Strategic Plan at the Sharon Historical Society, as well as consulting for the Falls Village Historical Society as they develop their Strategic Plan.

This is an entirely new direction for the KHS. Strategic Plans are becoming increasingly important in the non profit world. Competition for funding is getting stiff, and Foundations look very closely at an organization before giving away any funds. Having a Long Range Strategic Plan in place will greatly increase our qualification for a variety of grants, and we are very grateful to the Connecticut Humanities Council for their support!

DUES ARE DUE OCTOBER 1st, when our fiscal year begins. A reminder letter will be sent out soon, or you may fill out the membership form on the back page of this letter. Please know that we rely heavily on, *and appreciate every penny of*, your annual dues! In addition to the restoration projects at Seven Hearths, we need office supplies, collections care supplies, and of course help with the usual electric, insurance and heating bills, etc. We can't do it without you and are very grateful for your support!

The Kent Historical Society BOOKSTORE

- Kent Tales \$10 each
 - Iron Fever • Barzillai Slosson's History of Kent & Other Bits of History
 - Sherm Chase Remembers: A Kent Life 1900 to 1982 • Rufus Fuller and the South Kent Ore Bed • The Pratts of Macedonia
- Kent Tales (John Adam Journal) \$40 each (By special order only)
- New Life For Old Timber*. \$6 each
- Artists of the Litchfield Hills. \$32 each
- A Register of Some Kent Families. \$30 each
- Farm Life series, by Phil Camp \$12 each
- Ornament/medallion \$10 each
- Mini Bird Barn Ornament \$5 each
- G.L. Nelson Note Cards*. \$6 for a packet of 8, or \$1 apiece
 - *These note cards and "New Life" are done by George Laurence Nelson, noted Kent artist, and previous owner of Seven Hearths
- Photo card of Seven Hearths \$1 each
- Color Copy of 1874 Map of Kent \$10 each

This medallion is the first in what will be an annual series of pewter ornaments offered for sale by the Kent Historical Society. Each year we will feature a Kent scene or building. This year, since it is The Year of the Barn, we are portraying John Lindberg's barn on Bulls Bridge Road. These are beautiful creations, made by Woodbury Pewter, that can be used as pendants, necklaces, ornaments, window decorations, or any other decorative use you can think of.



To Order from the Bookstore:
 Write to: Bookstore
 Kent Historical Society
 PO Box 651
 Kent, CT 06757
 or Call: 860-927-4587

We're not always asking for money!

A very generous anonymous donor recently gave a \$500 savings bond at NewMil Bank to the Kent Historical Society. We promptly turned around and gave it away at the Firemen's Fair. A large number of fairgoers filled in their names and addresses for the free drawing. We are very happy to announce that the winner is Kent resident Borgny Parker, who filled out the form for her granddaughter, Emma Bourneval, also of Kent. A very happy ending for all!

Would you like to contribute to the newsletter?

Do you like to research and write? Do you have any great old photographs? Do you know any obscure facts about Kent history? If so, we would welcome your contributions to the KHS newsletter. We have fairly extensive archives here at the Swift House which you could use to research and write a short piece on any Kent history topic you choose, or to find new questions for the Kent Quiz. We are always trying to add to our collection of old photographs. If you have an old one that you could lend to us, we will copy it for our archives, and publish it in the newsletter. So, if you would like to help out, just let us know!

Kent Historical Society

PO Box 651, Kent, CT 06757

Est. 1954

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Hours Tuesdays 9 AM to Noon

Fridays 1 to 4 PM, Saturdays by appointment
at the Swift House

This newsletter is compiled by Marge McAvoy,
designed by Lynne Hicks, South Kent,
and sponsored by Moore & More Printing, Millerton, NY

Answer to the Kent Quiz: The skeleton of the post and beam barn is at 221 Segar Mt. Rd. It is one of the old Segar barns that thankfully has been reborn, although in a smaller form. As part of our summer of *Barn Again!* and part of 2005 *The Year of the Barn*, we wanted to illustrate the saving of one of Kent's grand old barns. John Mankin and Jayne Martin carefully disassembled the old barn, saving as many timbers as possible. The old timbers have reframed the new barn, which by now is complete. It is our hope that The Year of the Barn will help other barn owners realize the need to save their old barns rather than tearing them down. Gold stars to owners Gabe Zatlin & Lorna Schofield!

Kent Quiz: Where is Alder City and who is buried there?

Kent Historical Society

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