



Gaslight News

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

Riverton, N.J.

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Meeting: Monday, November 30, 1992

8 p.m.

Auditorium, Riverton School

Program:

"Christmas Customs in the Pinelands"

.....Mrs. Judith Olsen

Mrs. Olsen wears many hats, in addition to those of wife and mother. She is a genealogist, historian, author, lecturer, teacher, librarian. At Burlington County College she is the Library Director, and teaches classes in Genealogy and Children's Literature.

Tonight's program will cover Holiday season customs and traditions of the Pinelands for the past two hundred years. The seasonal observance begins with Advent, and carries through Twelfth Night. In the closeknit communities of the Pinelands, it was a season for conviviality, sharing, hospitality, and reunion, in simple ways.

Genealogical research into Gibbs and Lamb family lines, through diaries and documents, proved to be a principal source for the study of family and community activities of the Christmas Holidays. Mrs. Olsen will illustrate her talk with ornaments and decorations, including greens arranged according to the area and period being discussed.

Meeting: Monday, January 25, 1993

8 p.m.

Auditorium, Riverton School

Program:

"Anniversary Clocks"

.....Harry R. White

Mr. White is a local resident, and a member of our own Historical Society, who says he has always been a collector of things that captured his interest. About twenty years ago he began to collect mantle and cuckoo clocks, adding one or two each year. Five years ago he received an Anniversary Clock as a gift, and by now has built a collection of more than a hundred of them.

Anniversary Clocks are 400-day clocks, requiring winding just once a year. A particular anniversary date is usually selected by the owner, as a reminder for winding, thus the name by which this type of clock is known. As their popularity waned, they became an affordable collectable item. Since they are no longer made, however, acquisition is more challenging. Most need some repairs--and Mr. White has become expert in restoring them to working condition.

Slides will illustrate many designs of Anniversary Clocks, and several working clocks will also be on display.

Updates, etc.:

The October Columbus Day program was a delightful one. The Essay Contest winners read their papers, and were presented with certificates and \$10. Those receiving Honorable Mention received certificates. The News Weekly published pictures of both groups.

1st place: 5th grade: Jennifer Gizzi
6th grade: Erik Colonna
7th grade: Leah Veneziano
8th grade: Krista Pohl

Honorable Mention:

5th grade: 1st, Carly Brand; 2nd, (tied) Rosemary Vento
Kelly Anderson
6th grade: Danny Jones
7th grade: Danice Christmas
8th grade: (none awarded)

Board - Nov 23 - 8pm
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Report from "The Historic Riverton Nomination Committee"

The Committee, consisting of six residents appointed by Borough Council to seek inclusion of (all or a part of) Riverton on the National Register of Historic Places, is chaired by Dan Campbell. Other members are Keith Betten, Mort Traugott, Jim Johnson, Frank Siefert, and Louise Allen.

They incorporated as a non-profit group, allowing them to seek grants and to also collect tax-deductable donations from the public. They have received a State Grant of \$2200, and have engaged George Thomas, of CLIO in Philadelphia to prepare a Nomination. He has visited the area, mapped out the area in Riverton to be included (it is not the same as the local "historic district", nor does it include the entire town), and has taken the photographs he wants to include.

The remaining budget for the project is about \$12,000, and the Committee seeks donations to realize this sum.

Will YOU Help?

Letters have been received from the Burlington County Historical Society and the League of Historical Societies of New Jersey asking the help of our members in preserving the New Jersey Historical Commission. This Commission was established 25 years ago, and sponsors educational seminars, provides expertise and speakers and programs to local societies, schools, etc. It also provided funds, via grants, to NJ schools to enable teachers to help future generations understand the value to be found in studying/preserving the past, and also supported a variety of publications.

Recent budget cuts have eliminated the Grants program, has reduced the Commission's staff from 13 to just 5, and imperils New Jersey's historic preservation.

Please let our government representatives know that we are much concerned over the reduction in the Historical Commission's budget. Letters may be sent to your local representatives, and to Sec. of State Daniel J. Dalton, Sept of State CN300, The State House, Trenton 08625; to Assemblyman Rodney P. Frelinghuysen, Chairman, Assembly Appropriations Committee, Park Square Bld Room 312, 10 Park Place, Morristown 07960, and to Gov. Jim Florio, Office of the Governor, 125 W. State St., Trenton 08625.

Reminders, Tours, and Other Things...

Please note that this Newsletter gives info about the next TWO programs. Before the Holiday activities take over, mark your new calendar NOW for the January meeting. Program Chairman Frank Wagenknight has planned some fine programs for us this year, and you won't want to miss them.

Notepaper (\$3.50 a box, 15 triple-fold notes/envelopes) and the tape, Romance of Riverton (\$17.95), 1926 b/w silent film about Riverton, both make good gifts! Library and Victorian Thymes have notepaper; call 82906315 or 786-8660 for tapes.

Holiday tours:

Riverton Library House Tour, Saturday December 5, 5-10 pm. Tickets: Library, \$8.00
NJ Historical Commission 8th Ann. Conference, The European Age of Exploration and the Delaware Valley, 1600-1750. Saturday, December 5, at Museum Auditorium 205 W. State Street, Trenton. \$12. or \$7 without box lunch; \$10 sr cits, Programs 9:30 am to about 3 p.m. Pre reg: chks Treasurer, St of NJ, to Ann. Conf., NJ Hist. Comm/Dept of State, CN305, Trenton 08625-0305.

Burlington County Historical Soc., Corson Poley Center, 10 am-4 pm. Free, but pre-registration required. First in the series of Burlington County's Contribution to NJ Art History: The Portrait Tradition. (phone 386-4773)

Wheaton Village, in Millville, has a fabulous glass collection. Between Nov. 27-Jan.3 it will be especially beautiful, with decorations from early 19th century to the present time. A nice time to visit a special place...

Winterthur also has special holiday programs: the annual Yuletide Tour began last week and continues through Jan 3. It includes 20 rooms decorated in a theme from Holidays past, including St. Lucia Day, Hanukah, Pa-German, George Washington's White House Room, and more. Adm. for tour, \$9, run g. half hour, beginning 10 am. Phone 302-888-4600 or 800-448-3883 for reservations.

Imagine your editor's surprise to find our small town of Riverton the scene of some action in the recently published book by Louis Charbonneau, called "Stalk"!!! The California writer honeymooned in Pennsylvania in 1984, then later made several visits to Philadelphia, and on one of these joined the Friends of Independence National Historical Park tour to Riverton via boat, landing at the Yacht Club, lunching at Porch Club, noting the gas-lights, using the map to find his way around! And he used that experience to set the scene of a 12-page sequence in this suspense novel.

Yesterday.....

Pumpkins were new to American colonists, who soon learned how to grow and use them from the Indians. Thanksgiving today traditionally includes a pumpkin pie for dinner, which replaced the pumpkin pudding. To try an adapted version of a pudding, select an unblemished pumpkin, scoop it out, leaving about $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick shell. Mix together 2 well beaten eggs, 2 C cooked pumpkin, $\frac{3}{4}$ C sugar, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt, 1 tsp each of cinnamon and ginger, $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp cloves, 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ C light cream, and 1 tsp vanilla. Set shell into shallow baking pan with 1" water, fill with pudding, bake 15 min. at 375° and 45 min. more at 350°. Cool to lukewarm before removing shell to serving dish, as it is fragile after baking. Alternative: bake pudding, then spoon into uncooked shell before serving.

The football game grew to be another Thanksgiving Day tradition. In 1939 the PHS stadium was dedicated at noon on that day, followed by the (then) traditional game with Riverside. Usually the game was earlier. In 1948 the local ministerium sought a change, having church services at 10 a.m. and the traditional game in early afternoon, so that residents could attend both. It was successful, for that year the offerings, used for relief of children, by Church World Services, more than doubled that of the previous year.

If we were to turn back the clock of time to a Christmas when Riverton was very new, it would reveal a marked contrast with today's decorations and ads. Little notice was taken of the day, work went on as usual, and other than the accepted church services, customs we enjoy today were not widely practiced.

Historians tend to credit 19th century author Charles Dickens (1812-1870) with keeping the custom of celebrating Christmas alive. The Christmas Carol, written in 1843, was a protest against the evils of an industrial society, and the misery of the poor. He believed that the root of injustice was greed, and that generosity and kindness were antidotes for misery; that Christmas was a good time to encourage and celebrate our more positive feelings. When some protested that celebrations were frivolous, he countered by saying that the joys and sharing were especially appropriate for the children, since it was a time when Jesus himself was a child.

Dickens' Pickwick Papers and Christmas Carol were introduced to America in 1868, just two years before his death, and were soon popular, becoming firmly established as a part of our Christmas traditions.

Dickens had a friend, J. C. Horsley, who was an artist, who drew some pretty cards for Dickens to send to some friends, one Christmas. They were eagerly received, and grew popular, and the Christmas Card became another tradition we follow today. The subjects have changed--earliest ones depicted social reforms, scarcely resembling those we see today. But the changing times are reflected in their styles: in the early 1900s Santa in an aeroplane predicted changes in transportation emerging; a lady driving a car filled with presents noted more changes. In the 1920s roses and mistletoe were popular themes, and war years produced patriotic illustrations. In the 1960s the space age added another dimension, and in the 1880s a trend to return to more traditional themes began, with Santas, religious themes, and reproductions of the Old Masters.

Christmas carols are a joyous part of the Holidays--but were once labeled pagan, and banned from the churches. Carolers, who loved singing them, took to the streets and sang, giving rise to another Christmas custom.

Christmas trees, popular in Germany, were introduced to England by Prince Albert, and gradually were accepted there, and in America. Early trees were decorated with lighted candles (and prudent families kept pails of water nearby for emergencies) and just a few objects. Homemade decorations predominated, for glass ornaments were expensive.

The earliest ornaments were made in the small German village of Lauscha, and the earliest of these were heavy glass balls that were hung from the ceiling or a doorway. Then others were made in the shapes of fruits, vegetables, angels, clowns, birds, and others. The finest ornaments were made between 1890 and WW I, and had a patina not found in later ones. After WW II Japan became the leading producer of ornaments.

Greens for decorations can be traced back to pagan times, when people believed that sprites living in the evergreens made the sounds heard in the branches. They thought it unwise to bring the greens into the house before Christmas Eve, before the presence of the Christ Child would prevent the spirits from causing mischief in the household. Although Christianity and knowledge quieted these fears, the custom of decorating on Christmas Eve continued for many years.

Clear candies in the forms of toys, animals, snowmen, fish, santas, and trains are another Christmas holiday pleasure. The earliest ones were colored only yellow or red, and were made in heavy cast iron molds, many of them made in Philadelphia. These old molds were stamped with the maker's name, and have become collectors' items. A very few confectioners still make these traditional candies, in the old way, with old molds, but most that we see are imitations--smaller, with less detail, in various colors.

Herbs play a part in Holiday customs, too, and one of the most popular is rosemary. In the past the long stems were tied with ribbons to posts etc., for decorations. It was also used for sachets, for potpourri, or in cooking. A pinch of rosemary added to dumplings, breads, soups--even the batter for upside-down cakes--makes them special.

Early gifts were simple, and most often made by the giver. Handkerchiefs, pen wipers, cushions, dolls and small chairs for children, were some of these. Fruits and confections were always welcome gifts, and pachisi and backgammon were popular board games. By 1920 more elaborate gifts were being advertised--books, phonographs, cedar chests, special candies and bonbon dishes, rocking horses, shoo-flys, skates, and tea sets.

Churches, clubs, families began to have parties and celebrations for the Christmas Holidays. In 1880 the recently formed Presbyterian Sunday School celebrated the season on New Year's Day, with addresses, singing, recitations, and distribution of presents consisting of fruits and confectionary.

By 1947 Porch Club's Christmas Tea was already a tradition. That year music was supplied by the Club's Treble Clef, under the direction of Mrs. Cornelius DeBoe, and was accompanied by Mrs. Robert Morrison on the piano. Tableaux were presented, directed by the Art department. Past presidents and charter members presided over the tea table.

Shortly after Christmas of 1915 golfers were made happy when the Country Club purchased an additional 5½ acres of land and prepared to enlarge the 9 hole course to 18.

However you choose to celebrate the approaching Holidays, may they be happy ones, rich in love, kindness, and peace.

bbh

