



Gaslight News

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

Riverton, N.J. 08077

May - August, 1978

number 10

Mark your calendar now...Monday, May 15, at 8 p.m., Riverton School Meeting date, with "The Story of Toleware" given by Mrs. Louise Ulrich for the program.

While today almost any piece of decorated metal is loosely referred to as "toleware", the word is a derivative of the French "tole" which means "sheet iron", and "tole peinte", meaning "painted iron", which generally refers to early French decorated articles.

In America this form appeared in the 1700s in New England, was soon copied by housewives who liked the touch of color in their homes, and from this, developed the country painting that is purely American.

Colors and patterns identify the areas from which pieces originated. You will enjoy seeing the pieces from Mrs. Ulrich's own collection, and hearing their stories.

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Gaslights.....

On April 17 we learned that Riverton's gas lights were scheduled to be turned off on June 30, that the deadline for filing requests for exemptions was past--but that the PUC would consider one now if it were sent promptly. Within the next 48 hours letters from our own Historical Society, Riverton's Mayor and Borough Council, The Porch Club of Riverton, as well as the appeal from Keith Betten of our county's Cultural & Heritage Commission, were mailed to PUC. No word yet on their final decision.

(see article, next page)

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Romance in Riverton

On April 17 the film, Romance in Riverton, was shown at the Fire House to a limited number of people. We were sorry that not everyone could attend--as you know, this is an old mercury-coated-celluloid film, highly flammable, and this was the factor determining where it could be shown, which also limited space for viewers. With a little luck and a lot of help we would like to have this film copied on film that can be safely used on modern projectors, and by any interested group. We hope to also have some slides made, so that viewers will be able to study more closely the scenes of 50 years ago, and compare them with what we see today. It will take money...(costs being investigated now), and that means work by many people together. We've had one promise of help--more details on that next "News".

We owe a special vote of thanks to Mr. Joe Stow of Moorestown, who, with his father, used to be a projectionist at Palmyra's Broadway Theater. He has taken care of the film and projector, and showed it to us. Also, Mr. Art Waters and Riverton Fire Company for the use of their building, and Riverton School for use of a screen.

The story of the film goes something like this...some time ago a local resident invested rather heavily in the then-budding film industry in Hollywood. His expectations weren't quite realized, and Chambers of Commerce were approached, to have professional films of their communities made (by the right company, of course!). Our town's boosters responded enthusiastically, and a 4000 ft. film was made.

Not only is it interesting to see the scenes and businesses and people of 50 years ago, but also to compare the "professional film" of 1926 with those of today.

Scenes showed heavy traffic--trolleys, trains, and cars--at Main Street, with rotund Officer Miller directing traffic from his booth in the intersection.....Clint Woolston's Star Agency, with the newest models lined up (oh, those cars!)....Dreer's greenhouses....Jos. Robert's Brick Store (and the audience gasped at how big it was)...bicyclists riding on Main Street....Smith's Store....the Post Office (now Freddy's Shoe shop, but back in 1859 it was the Episcopal Parish House)...sodas enjoyed at Chew's Bakery....Steedle's Storage & Furniture, as well as their Philburco Bus Co. in East Riverton....Will K. Bowen repairing furniture...knickered boys on the schoolgrounds, and dumbbell drills for outside physical education....a staged fire at Collins Bld., with Riverton's fire engines hurrying to the rescue--successfully, of course.....and so much more.

Three reels could be shown; the 4th has deteriorated. Trees were so much smaller, many homes were yet to be built. And it was a surprise to realize how many of those places have completely disappeared all ready.

Some notes.....

Are you taking advantage of the free series on Burlington County History sponsored jointly by BCC Library and the Cultural & Heritage Commission? It's not too late to hear them all--but you'll have to hurry.

Moorestown Library: Genealogy (Judith Olsen) May 15
Burl Co. Col Library: Past (Lloyd Griscom) May 16
County Library: Genealogy May 11; Architecture (Keith Betten) May 18
Crosswicks: Architecture, May 10; Folklore (George Atkins) May 17
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Medford Historical Society is holding a Quilt Show at Kirby's Mill on June 3 and 4. Featured will be not only Quilts, but also needlepoint and Fractures. (decorated certificates)
Medford Historical Society is doing a fine job of restoring the Mill, and if you haven't seen it recently, why not now?
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Other Mills in N.J. are Batsto grist & saw Mills; Clinton Mills; Neely's Grist Mill at Washington Crossing Park; Stillwater Mills (operating); Waterloo Village, restored village in Stanhope; Volendam Windmill Museum in Milford; and Smithville Gryst Mill.

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The Cultural & Heritage Comm. is seeking help with their Smithville study--if you have, or know of anyone who may have, photos, letters/diaries, papers, records, tools, machines, furnishings--anything connected with the H.B. Smith Machine Co., the general store, or Hezekiah Smith estate, please contact William Bolger at the Commission's office in Mt. Holly, or call 267-330, ext 228.

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Have you visited the Riverton Library's local history shelves lately? Also, in the reference section, is a wonderful old 5-volume book on South Jersey--A History, with land and town history and also brief biographies of many early local residents.

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Houses tell more than the casual passer-by might think. They reveal traditions, customs, ancestry, and more, and much about the needs and interests of the people who lived in them. Some interesting books to read are Amos Rapport's House Forms & Cultures; Jeffrey Simpson's The American Family: A History in Photographs; and Charles Moore and Gerald Allen's The Place of Houses.

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More on Gas Lights...

Do you remember the old lamplighter? The man who appeared just before dusk, ladder over his shoulder, to light the lights on Riverton's streets?

The first lamplighter was Louis Corner, around 1880, who paid his own subscription for a light with service--and the lights were oil street lamps, then. Then some electric "arc" lights appeared. In 1908 the first gas light appeared. It was an exhibition piece, on Lippincott Avenue, installed at the request of Charles F. Earp. By the end of that year Riverton had 51 of them.

The lamp posts are heavy, cast mainly in North Carolina and average 350 lbs in weight. The crossarm was a ladder rest, and the oldest ones still have these. The burners and globes came in several styles, and ours are "The Victorian".

The gas lights are sturdy and "never wear out", but the mantles are fragile. Baron Auer von Welsbach was an Austrian chemist who made America's first incandescent mantle in the 1890s, which tripled the candlepower of the gas flame. The mantles were woven in England of cotton and other fibers, and coated with mineral compounds. The first burning reduces the woven thread to ash, but the rare earth glows from the heat of the gas burning within the mantle. Improvements were timers, which meant that lamplighters became clock winders once a week; and double, then triple burners which could give higher candlepower without extra cost; and natural gas usage, which simplified installation of fuel lines.

Gas lighting for streets reached a peak in 1914, when there were 300,000 lights on city streets from coast to coast. But by 1935

they had become only a memory in many municipalities.

The Welsbach Company of Philadelphia, maker of the lamps, began to sell off its inventory of gas lamps, when a revival took place, in 1958--for the lights on lawns, patios, and driveways. Before long their sales of gaslamps, posts, burners and parts had surpassed even the 1914 records!

In the 1950s Riverton had some 80 gas street lights, and the public utilities powers-that-be decided to replace them with higher power electric lights. Some went (some of these can be seen on private properties), but when the local Shade Tree Commission found that the big shade trees along the streets had to be removed to make way for the higher electric lights, they protested, and saved the 52 that are left today.

More recently, "progress" and fuel shortages have caused most of the old gas street lights to disappear, across the country. For some reason, their glass globes attract stone-throwers, and the breakage is an expense and a nuisance for the company servicing them. Globes are most often now replaced with a plastic type that resists vandalism, but the general policy at present is to not service the lights at all unless a call is made to Public Service indicating the need for it, since they are expected to be replaced, anyway.

Mr. Robinet Cole (Senior), a lifelong resident of Riverton, was a champion of the gaslight all his life. He was with the Welsbach Corporation for 68 years, retiring in 1968 at age 85. Now he, and his company, have both gone. An Era has ended.

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Don't forget our last meeting of this season on the 15th.....check your copy of "The County Bell" and newspapers for events over the summer...take some trips, read some books, enjoy the summer ahead. And think about what you'd like the Historical Society to be, to do. And how you can help..... And when the next issue of Gaslight News comes your way, be ready to pay your membership dues and to become active in your Historical Society of Riverton.

Betty Hahle,
pres. & editor