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CITY OF LOWELL: The Continuing Adventures of Ellery Thompson



City of Lowell (Hull 8) Passenger Steamer for the Norwich and New York Transportation Co., Length: 322'-4", Beam: 49'-6", Draft: 13' Launched November 21, 1893. Used between New York and the Eastern end of Long Island Sound until approximately 1935.

Ellery Thompson (1899-1986) was born in Mystic and spent his adult life fishing the waters off southern New England. He was an author, a painter and an all-around character. In addition to writing such books as "Draggerman's Haul," Ellery spent much of his later years putting stories from his life down on paper. The Mystic River Historical Society newsletter will publish excerpts from some of Ellery's reminiscences, most written in 1960s and 1970s, looking back on his life. Marion Krepcio of Stonington was entrusted with Ellery's manuscripts and she is generously sharing them with the historical society and allowing society member Marilyn Comrie to edit them for publication in the newsletter.

Ellery was descended from the Thompsons, Denisons and Wilcoxes on his father's side of the family and from the Chapmans, Rathbuns and Packers on his mother's side. This month, Ellery completes his experiences in 1915 as a crewman aboard the City of Lowell, one of the great Sound steamers that once traveled between this area and New York City.

While on the Lowell in late October 1915, absorbing New York assorted atmospheres like a sponge soaking up bilge water, I journeyed each week from our Pier 40 to Pier 14 to pick up my weekly pay of \$8.10 - \$35 a month. The dime I usually spent riding the West Side horse-trolley. It beat walking - that is, after being walked out at seeing the sights of the city.

The pay-master's office was on the Fall River Line Pier 14. So was a tiny navigational school headed by Captain Edward Gear. The Line had given this noted mariner time off from the steamers to teach some of the petty officers things that new laws demanded we should know. Little did I suspect that new navigational laws going into effect in November would put an end to my steamboating until I was over 18, regardless of my nautical knowledge.

continued on page 4



A vintage postcard notes: "Hempstead House on Freeman Street, New London, Connecticut. Built in 1678, fortified against the Indians, and noted for its story of "Pretty Patty Hempstead."

The Hempstead House Program ~ Jan. 26

Please join us at 7:30 pm on January 26th for Sally Ryan's presentation on Joshua Hempstead's family and his intriguing diaries dealing with life in 18th century New London.

Sally became the New London City Historian over a decade ago and is active in New London's historical efforts, including work to save Union Station and studies & preservation of the Antientest Burying Ground. A retired school-teacher, she takes advantage of her background & love of local lore to give historical tours for cruise liner guests and present evening courses on the Joshua Hempstead Diaries.

A question & answer session & refreshments will follow the talk.



from the
PRESIDENT'S DESK

Lou Allyn

I'm taking the opportunity this month to recognize many of the activities of our Board of Directors, Chairmen of various Committees and office staff. Volunteers will be covered later in the Volunteers Month issue.

2006 was an exciting year and marked the conclusion of our major fund drive to raise \$180,000 for major repairs to Portersville Academy plus an addition to our endowment funds. Kudos to the many people who worked to achieve this, and to John Butler, Fund Raising Consultant who guided the process.

John Porter, Building & Grounds Chair, led Early New England Restoration and other contractors to a successful completion of the Portersville Academy repairs. Installation of a vapor barrier underneath the first floor by a crew of volunteers was also accomplished. Currently John is arranging to have the Downes Building roof re-shingled in 2007.

Dorrie Hanna completed her term as President last April (and over 20 years on the Board!) but has remained about as active as ever. She has recently accepted the position of Archives Manager, which is partially funded by grants from the Connecticut Humanities Council. Judy Hicks continues as our Historian and popular lecturer. Louisa Watrous is a Curatorial Assistant working with Dorrie to bring our archival procedures and database "up to snuff".

Vice President Helen Keith is also Chair of the Finance Committee. Helen has been especially helpful bringing myself and other new Officers and Committee Chairmen up to speed. Other members of the Finance Committee were David Evans, Sally Halsey and Spence Leech. Under Dave's guidance the Committee transferred the money in various endowment accounts to a basket of Vanguard mutual funds. During 2006 our total investment grew from a market value of \$177,778 to \$194,309.

Sally is also Marketing Committee Chair. She is the source of the press releases which inform the local community of our activities and led the project to produce our new brochure. Sales of the DVD "Mystic An American Adventure" topped \$3,000 for the year; a second production run for 500 units was made in May.

Spence stepped forward last spring to serve as Treasurer, which allowed me to accept the Presidency. Unfortunately he since resigned.

Cindy Allyn, took over Membership from Margot Greener mid year and has been working with Betty O'Donnell on membership renewals and recruiting new members. In December, Constant Contact, an email service was started as another way to create lines of communication between the Society and its members. There are over 140 active participants at this point.

Margot Greener, Hospitality, provided new pin-on name tags and delightful refreshments at the monthly member meetings.

Paul Ingle, Program, arranged for a stimulating speaker at each meeting, with an especially large turnout for Bill Peterson. An additional topic of interest at each meeting was a "show and tell" item presented by either a member or the Curatorial Committee.

Tim Evers and his pedicab were active in Mystic last summer and even seen on Bank Street during the New London Historic Waterfront District Fall Food Stroll. Tim is also on the Building & Grounds Committee.

Karin Havrilla, Education and Outreach, arranged for over 300 grammar school students to attend classes in our 19th century schoolroom and go on local historical walking tours. She recently resigned also.

Recording Secretary Betty Ann Reiter faithfully and accurately recorded and issued the minutes of meetings of the Board of Directors. Corresponding Secretary Kit Werner, wrote many thank you notes and other letters over the year to our many contributors and volunteers. Kit is also on the Curatorial Committee.

Joyce Everett continued organizing bus tours much enjoyed by members and guests: to Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware in the spring and Vermont for Fall Foliage. A trip to Virginia is in the works for April 2007. Joyce also organized our Second Annual Appraisal Day which was enjoyed by many.

Jennifer Pryor is the publisher of our newsletter, The Portersville Press. She collects articles and information from all of us and puts it all together in an informative package.

continued

*The Newsletter of the Mystic River Historical Society
is published monthly, September through May,
with a combined issue for November and December,
by the Mystic River Historical Society
Box 245 Mystic, CT 06355*

Stephanie Thorp maintains our website www.mystichistory.org and chairs the Information Technology Committee. Thanks to a grant from SBC in November 2005 we were able to purchase a new Dell laptop and two desktop computers. Committee member Barry Thorp installed the hardware and software and the wireless network which interconnects all three and a printer. Barry also manages the membership database.

Emily Perkins continued as our ever cheerful office receptionist and secretary.

Best wishes and good health to all in the New Year.

Lou Allyn

Make a Resolution to Join the MRHS Crew!

Mystic River Historical Society offers a wide variety of opportunities for those who are willing and able to contribute their time and energy.

Committees include

- Buildings
- Grounds
- Membership
- Hospitality
- Finance
- Public Relations
- Outreach & Education
- Program
- Newsletter

(editorial; advertising; distribution; content development)

- Curatorial
- Long Term Planning

Specific volunteer effort that is currently being sought:

- Genealogical research
- Historical research
- Processing of items into the archives
- Stitching of hand puppets for school outreach programs
- Construction of small wooden toy kits for school outreach programs
- Docents for Portersville Academy
- Transcription of handwritten documents
- Character interpreters for school outreach programs

To learn more, please contact info@mystichistory.org.

Preservation Efforts at the DOWNES BUILDING

-Dorrie Hanna

The MRHS owns a real treasure trove of material that tells the story of our Mystic community through books, documents, photographs and artifacts. Our goal at the Downes Building is not only to make this material readily available to researchers, but perhaps more importantly, to preserve it for future generations. Maintaining acceptable climatic conditions in the building is key. A constant temperature of no higher than 70 degrees and a constant relative humidity of no more than 50% are our goals.

Thanks to the generosity of Dan and Mary Fuller we have been able to purchase a continuously recording hydrothermograph and a sling psychomotor, two sophisticated measuring devices that will help us measure temperature and humidity over time. Lou Allyn is taking readings from these devices and keeping a log of the results. He reports: "The temperature for December ran between 68 and 70 degrees and RH between 30 and 44%. Because of the mild weather our heating and humidification system has yet to show its capabilities." What we learn will help us choose the best new climate control system for our needs when the time comes to replace our existing unit. That unit is original to the Downes Building and so is over 20 years old. Newer technology may help us achieve better conditions for the preservation of our collections. In addition, Lou will be taking readings over at Portersville Academy. We are hopeful that, in the future, conditions in that building can be improved and the items which are located there will be better protected.

Our shiny new hydrothermograph



"City of Lowell" from the Pages of History with...
ELLERY THOMPSON, *continued from p. 1*



When Captain Gear told me I needed some instruction on how to lay in a long splice, first pilot Captain Howell of the City of Lowell volunteered for the job. Even he had great admiration for Captain Ed Gear, who seemed to be a pilot's pilot, who would soon take the Fall River Line's steamer

Plymouth through the newly opened Cape Cod Canal.

Years would pass before I fully realized how privileged I was to have known many of the great Sound Pilots who took humanity-loaded steamboats through treacherous and often fogbound waters between New York City and ports in New England. My late friend, Roger Williams McAdams, called these navigational masters "Salts of the Sound." They were indeed.

To see a nightly parade of passenger steamboats strung out along Long Island Sound, lit up like glittering cathedrals, tooting salutes to steamers going in the opposite direction, left their mark upon me and thousands of others. The traveling public today, in this madhouse of speed and confusion, will never know the comfort and security of moving in and out of New England by "floating hotels," guided by pilot house men who were masters at their trade, and with all due credit to engineers, oilers, firemen, crew and cooks.

The freight deck of the Lowell on Sunday in New York required a night watchman, and one week, I was elected for the job. Me, 16, half scared out of my wits, cramped up among countless boxes and crates of freight, wondering if river or shore pirates might board us, slit my throat, and loot the ship. But nothing happened.

Entertainment was far different in 1915. No television, no radio, no talking pictures. But motion pictures without color were my best bet. My best entertainment day while serving on The Lowell was on an October Sunday when the motion picture "Carmen," with opera star Geraldine Farrar, opened at the Strand Theater near Times Square.

After viewing the former prima donna in "Carmen," I rushed down to The Academy of Music on Fourteenth Street, near Union Square, to see sultry Theda Bara in a competitive version of "Carmen," a picture less artistic than the one at the Strand, but with more bouncy action.

Wandering around New York, I enjoyed mingling with crowds along Sixth Avenue – the push carts of fruits, vegetables, popcorn, neck-ties and about anything you might name. Even the old Washington fruit and vegetable market was enlightening.

Sailing in and out of the city, each day we passed under the unfinished Hell Gate bridge, the open space between the two spans extending out from shore got smaller. Then, one morning the two arching sections were joined. It gave me quite a thrill. I had seen man conquer a devilish of race-tide waters. Other bridges were to follow. I was seeing New York City grow up.

I now doubt that any young man of my time before World War I and the popular age of aircrafts, automobiles and motorcycles experienced few thrills comparable to either steering a large sound steamer toward the congested waterways around New York City, or of fishing a small dagger off Block Island in fog and boxed in by a speeding steamboat and a spouting whale.

All too soon, as the chill of autumn increased, the Congress of the United States ended by steam-boating career by passing a navigational law barring young men under 18 from petty officerships or passenger-carrying coastal steamboats.

I'll never forget my final eastbound trip as bow watchman on the City of Lowell, of how the queenly Priscilla passed us off Stratford Shoal Light, just as I relieved Billie Foss at the wheel. Captain Howell had the front window. Minutes later, with the Lowell's quartermaster feeding his face in the officer's mess room, the binnacle light went out, leaving the compass in darkness. In some panic, I hollered to Captain Howell, "What do I do?" The first pilot remained calm. "Ellery, do you see that low-down evening star ahead? Hold her right on course by steering for it. I'll see about the binnacle light. It'll only take me a minute to fetch a flash and battery from my stateroom." During the next few minutes, a 16-year-old boy navigated the 325-foot City of Lowell, all alone in the pilothouse with 200 passengers sleeping down below, with me steering by a star.

Then the crisis was over. But another soon presented itself – fog, just as Billie Foss returned. I finished out the trip on the bow, leaning over the capstan, lulled half asleep by the hypnotic influence of fog and the steady beating of the Lowell's twin screws.

Wild thoughts run through a fellow's mind out on the bow in fog. Any head-on collision might spell his doom. Yet the perils of the Sound did not keep me from dozing.

continued

continued from p. 4

Perhaps the roaring of our whistle helped keep me from falling dead asleep leaning over the captstan. Suddenly the fog lifted off Bartletts and we caught sight of a schooner being towed in by a Scott tug stern-first to save her from sinking. A steamer had chopped off her clipper bow.

We docked at 1:30 a.m., a half hour behind schedule. Minutes later, I turned in for my last snooze in the boat deck quartermaster's stateroom on one of the most famous steamboats in New England history.

My last breakfast on The Lowell – I mean as a member of her crew – had some sad moments. Second pilot Dick Hetherington laughed. “Ellery, eat hearty and give The Lowell a good name.” I sure did – fruit and cereal, three scrambled eggs and bacon, buttered toast and two of the Lowell's famous tea biscuits, coffee with half cream and a piece of apple pie.

Ah, but I wasn't through yet. It was Saturday and the pilothouse had to be cleaned, brass shined, and ship talk discussed.

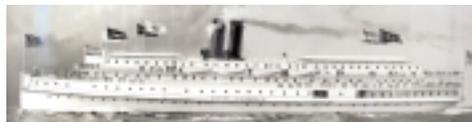
Captain Pettigrew and the others wished me well after the pilothouse brass had been shined like never before.

I rushed ashore and to my father's boat unloading fish with the help of a landlubber. “Fishing boats, here I come!” I cried.

And later, after crossing to Groton on the old side-wheeler Governor Winthrop, I was welcomed home on Granite Street like a man home from a four-year whaling expedition.

My younger brother Morris fired one question. “El, did you get a chance to lower your lifeboat?”

“No, Morris, and thank God and Captain Pettigrew for that.”



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November 2006 Meeting Minutes

Margot Greener and Betty Anne Reiter

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society met at the Mystic Chamber of Commerce on Monday, November 20, 2006. Those present were Lou Allyn, Tim Evers, Margot Greener, Sally Halsey, Karen Havrilla, Paul Ingle, Helen Keith, Betty O'Donnell, John Porter, and Stephanie Thorp.

President Allyn announced that Judy Hicks is resigning as Assistant Curator. Spencer Leech is resigning as Treasurer and from the Finance Committee.

There was a discussion about Annual Reports for the end of the year, after which it was decided to have short summaries. Allyn also asked if there had ever been consideration of signage for MRHS on the corner of High Street to better direct interest. Keith indicated it had been researched & found to be challenging to get signs. The brown signs indicate a tourist attraction. Halsey mentioned previous denials due to the fact that MRHS is not open daily. Allyn then appointed everyone on the Board to the Nominating Committee. He wants everyone to come with three suggested names for the January meeting as many slots need to be filled. A motion was made and passed that all current committees, except Strategic Planning are Standing Committees.



Allyn made the Treasurer's report for Leech indicating positive checking and investment balances with a nominal net YTD income YTD gain versus a budgeted loss for the year, with income from newsletter advertising and DVD sales. The report was accepted.

For the pedicab, Evers gave 7 rides for approximately 14 people at the New London Stroll. He made \$10.00. There was a discussion about having the pedicab involved with the cruise ships when they come to New London. Courtney Moore told Lou she would have an advertisement about the pedicab in the Discovery Guide.

Porter reported for Buildings & Grounds that roof inspections have been completed. The PVA roof has another 5-10 years of life left, however the chimney flashing does need repair. The Downes Building roof needs to be replaced. Estimates are being obtained to fix the flashing now and replace the Downes Building roof in the spring. The finance committee has approved \$500 for the repairs. The Downes Building also needs external painting and the shutters to be replaced. This will happen next spring. Estimates for this work are being solicited.

Porter has not heard from Committee Chairs who regarding a request for a list of volunteer needs to be used to create a volunteer section for the website.

The Nature Center successfully auctioned the safe at their fund raising event ~ we are awaiting its removal.

In Curatorial, Allyn spoke for Hanna: A task list has been posted with various staff and volunteers suggested to accomplish the work. Hopefully the safe will be removed on Wednesday, November 22. The space previously taken up by the safe will be utilized to improve the storage of items that are 'in progress'. Some supplies have been ordered. A couple of new donations have been received since last month. Work continues on sending out thank you letters and deeds of gift. A substantial number of items previously in our possession but not cataloged have been added to PastPerfect. Some existing entries have been expanded to improve search capabilities. Approximately half a dozen research requests and queries are being worked on at the moment, with a visit scheduled by one researcher by special appointment on Monday afternoon. The Curatorial Committee needs to meet, but with the holidays fast approaching that may not happen until after the first of the year.

For Education & Outreach, Havrilla noted that the committee is in the process of restructuring the various education programs. 1st grade will stay pretty much the same and 3rd through 5th grade will have walking tours. All programs will have a classroom component. All of the classes will work on paper quilts. They will all have a toy boat kit to bring home with them. One or more volunteers are needed to make the hulls and to do the classroom presentation. Havrilla is also going to check to see if the middle schools and high schools in the area have our video.

The article about the Members' Craft Show sparked some interest. There were suggestions to sponsor a Craft Show early next summer; the possibility that it might be juried and have a children's section with advertisement through schools; and possibly that the Art Center have kids enter their work. A nominal entrance fee and a Friday & Saturday single-weekend run were also suggested.

In Finance, Keith stated that four members of the Finance Committee (Lou Allyn, David Evans, Dorrie Hanna & Helen Keith) met on November 9th to complete the MRHS Operating Budget. The budget format was simplified by keeping a separate accounting for the CHC Grant - including in the Operating Budget only that amount for which the Society is responsible. The Special Bus Tour events' accounting is also being kept separately with only the net profit or loss indicated as a line item. Memorial and Matching Gifts will be included in the operating receipts unless the family specifically requests an alternative. We have consolidated all the "printing" and "postage" expenses together within the administrative portion of the budget. Records will be kept so that the expens-

es for such things as the Newsletter or Membership can be easily broken out and applied to particular accounts.

At the last Board meeting, Dorrie Hanna requested that the MRHS co-sponsor with the Library the cost of transferring the microfiche newspapers to CDs. The Finance Committee recommends that we match the Library's cash portion of this expense in the amount \$700.00. A motion was made and passed to donate \$700.00 to the Mystic & Noank Library for this project.

Dan and Mary Fuller are donating \$700.00 for a hygrothermometer which will record temperature and relative humidity several times a day, and a sling psychrometer for calibration of the instrument. When this device has been operating for a month or so we will know how well the present HVAC system is maintaining the archivally proper levels of temperature and relative humidity. If our present system is not operating efficiently we will then investigate what system(s) will best provide the proper heat and humidity levels to protect our collections.

At the present time we have more than \$30,000.00 in our Money Market Account and also more than \$55,000.00 in Short Term Investments. We need to know how much will be needed to replace the shutters and to paint and re-roof the Downes Building as well as the cost to replace or upgrade the HVAC system. At that point we will be able to transfer some of the liquid funds back into longer-term investments while still leaving sufficient money to meet the required Downes Building restoration work.

For Hospitality, Greener has spoken with Jamie McGee about having a movie for the kids upstairs to keep the noise level down during Friday's meeting.

In IT, (Thorp) The website has been updated. Stephanie would like the Board to discuss who we are targeting on the website. She feels it should not be much bigger.

For Marketing and PR, Halsey reported on the Fine Living Expo held on Sunday, November 19, at the Marriott. We sold our old-fashioned toys, books, and videos. It was very well attended.

In Membership, Allyn noted that there was limited response from 2005 non-renewals to the questionnaire about why they did not renew. 14 names will now be dropped from the mailing list. 82 people attended the October meeting.

Constant Contact Mail was initiated with an emailing to 128 subscribers. A second mailing for the Fine Living Expo went to 134 subscribers.

In New Business, Allyn went over the budget. A motion was made and passed to accept the budget.

There was a discussion about programs that have been aired on TV. Paul said a friend saw his presentation on the Fish Family. If we had canned presentations we could accommodate groups like Elderhostel.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 p.m. The next meeting is January 8, 2007 due to the Martin Luther King holiday.

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CALENDAR NOTABLES

General Meeting & Hempstead House Program
Friday, January 26th

Join us for a meeting and talk by Sally Ryan about the Joshua Hempstead Diaries & period life in New London.

General Meeting & Avery Point Lighthouse Program
Friday, February 23rd

Join us for a meeting and presentation by Jim Streeter about the renovation of the Avery Point Lighthouse.

Appraisal Day

March 2007

Mark your calendar for this favorite annual event!

Member Arts & Crafts Show

June 2007

Plan now to showcase & admire the talents of MRHS members!



NEWSLETTER PATRONS

Many thanks to the patrons below for their support throughout the seasons:

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January is here, with eyes that keenly glow,
A frost-mailed warrior
striding a shadowy steed of snow.

~ Edgar Fawcett (1847-1904)

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