



# Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

VOL. IV NO. 2

APRIL, 1988

## Henry Murphy Remembers

Michael Henry Murphy spent most of his life at his family's Thompson Avenue home. His town was a source of pride and object of esteem during a varied career of reaching for the elusive financial brass ring. Henry was not famous, but he left memories. His rambling biography contains interesting vignettes of the early decades of the century. Some provide insight into important events, people and places.

Henry was born October 18, 1899 in Jersey City, birth place of so many later day Middletownites. His earliest local account is about his grandfather's farm. The Charles Lester Smith place was on Thompson Avenue, near today's Lester Place and Smith Place, in the part of old Port Monmouth alternatively known now as East Keansburg or North Middletown. Most of his sixty-five acres was cultivated, but five acres were kept as meadow for salt hay and several wooded acres included chestnut trees, persimmons and berry bushes. Various fruits and vegetables were raised, most for sale. Some farm work became an adventure, such as beach trips for gathering horseshoe crabs, or "horsefeet" as they were then known locally. These ancient creatures were stranded by the tides by the thousands during their late spring mating season. They were used as fertilizer and a temporary change of diet for hogs and chickens. As fertilizer, they were placed around young orchard trees, grape vines and corn hills, with the shells then split open with a spade or other sharp-edged tool. The crab gathering was a fun trip for the horses, too, as they were taken for a lengthy swim.

Farm humor included an elaborate joke on young Henry. A local suggested to him that coins "planted" in the ground would yield a bumper crop in only a few days. The gullible youngster complied and was observed from a distance burying coins. His tormentor later dug them up, but returned them to a disappointed boy who unsuccessfully tried to "harvest" his crop. He let Henry in on the joke only then. Henry observed much later that the game established a life-long pattern of planting financial seeds which disappeared.

The Murphys became bay shore residents in 1906 by buying about eighteen acres from James Thompson. They adjoined Smith's western boundary, south of Thompson Avenue. A house was built around the existing structure. The gas installation gives a glimpse into a then developing utility and a family view. Henry's family references are few; this one was occasioned by tragedy. Lighting and cooking gas was made in the house by a machine using calcium carbide and water. The Murphys saw several successful operations in nearby areas and bought a machine that worked well for a while. A worker observed during start-up procedures on November 17, 1906 an escaping liquid and called Mrs. Murphy to the scene. She came, followed by daughter Mary, to a cellar filling with gas. An explosion ensued, burning the three Murphys, the worker and a maid. The maid died later that day. The Murphys recovered, after varying stays in the hospital. Mary's health was fragile afterwards and her succumbing to pneumonia and measles a year later was attributed, in part, to impaired resistance. Only much later was the cause discovered to be a blockage by insects in the gas relief ventilator.

Henry had an admitted dislike for school. He attended four of them starting with the one-room Harmony school at the corner of Harmony Avenue and Harmony Road. Unhappy memories focus on ridicule when Henry's offer to read turned

continued on page 2

## A Guide of Kings Highway from Marlpit Hall to the Hendrickson-Morford House

A visit to the exhibition "Middletown's Historic Highway" can be enhanced by a tour along the road. An auto trip guided by these notes is enjoyable, but travel on foot is better. It is only .8 of a mile between Marlpit Hall and the Hendrickson-Morford House. The odd building numbers are on the north side, the even on the south. If your trip begins at Marlpit Hall, you will be traveling east and the odd numbers will be on your left.

N.B. Most of the buildings listed are private residences.

Please respect the occupants' privacy by observing the properties from the street.

137 Kings Highway-Marlpit Hall- The northern section was built c.1686 by James Grover, Jr. John Taylor built a major Georgian style addition c.1750. The house was moved about 50 feet in a 1919 road re-alignment, saving one of the most important houses in the Township. It remained in the Taylor family until the 1930 death of Mary Holmes Taylor. Mrs. J. Amory Haskell purchased Marlpit Hall in 1935. She gave it to the Monmouth County Historical Association in 1936, which operates the building as a house museum. Open to the public from May-October.

127 Kings Highway-Orchard Home- A c.1850 Taylor Italianate house. An expansive two story hall with an open staircase and marble fireplaces make the interior as attractive as the high-styled exterior. Its hill once overlooked Conover Farm.

Curve in roadway- Prior to the 1919 re-alignment, lower Red Hill Road was part of Kings Highway. A distinct turn to the north in place of the curve placed one on the Keyport Road.

123 Kings Highway-Middletown Reformed Church- This Gothic Revival church was built in 1836 and re-modeled in 1880.

114 Kings Highway-former Reformed Church parsonage- This Italianate house was built in 1873. A press account in 1874 noted its beneficial effect on the street's character.

5 Conover Street-Blacksmith Shop-c.1825 The location is named for General William S. Truex. However, documentation associating with the shop is inadequate. Truex was a relative of the owner, John Casler, who ran the shop for much of the 19th century. Several smiths occupied the shop in turn in the decades around 1900. It was sold by Elizabeth Casler in 1921.

109 Kings Highway-A two part building with the older section dating from c.1720. The Greek Revival front part was added c.1830, with the porch a likely 20th century addition. This was the home of blacksmith Casler.

28 The (Lenape) Trail-Locustwood-The street was once the path to Charles Hendrickson's Greek Revival masterpiece. It was built in 1832, with a wing added in 1842. A major restoration was made in 1986-7. A vast farm once surrounded Locustwood.

92 Kings Highway-Christ Church- The Gothic Revival build-



ing was erected in 1835. However, the church dates from 1702 when it and Christ Church, Shrewsbury were founded as a single parish. The two separated in 1854. A blockhouse was on the site in the late 17th century and an earlier church from c.1750.

82 Kings Highway-Dr. Taylor House- The western main section is a c.1750 Georgian design, disguised by its mid-19th century Gothic Revival center gable with vergeboard. Named for Dr. Edward Taylor, a leading citizen, physician and resident here for many years in the 19th century.

78 Kings Highway- The 1930 Dutch Colonial Revival was an important modern building in its first forty years. It was built as a telephone switching facility with home for the agent in charge. The design was an effort to harmonize a business building with its historic area. The building later housed the Township library until 1971.

69 Kings Highway-Old First Church- The Baptist Church was established here in 1668, the oldest in New Jersey. This Greek Revival building dates from 1832, with later alterations. It was originally the First Baptist Church, before a 1963 merger with the United Church of Christ. The adjoining school structure was formerly the Womens Christian Temperance Union building. It was moved from Church Street.

65 Kings Highway-the William Murray House- A Revolutionary era farmhouse named for the son of slain patriot Joseph Murray, William bought the farm in 1815. The building was moved from near the street and was owned by New York lawyer Charles Coudert in the late 19th century.

61 Kings Highway-the Richard Hartshorne House- The yellow house on the east side of New Monmouth Road was built c. 1670 by this early settler who also owned Sandy Hook and a vast tract near Locust. It is likely the oldest house in the Township. The interior features an unusual Dutch two room fireplace.

53 Kings Highway-the Franklin Academy- The first school in Middletown village was a private academy built in 1836. It was later a Township school for 51 years beginning in 1851. The building later housed the Township's library and was converted to a private home in 1950.

Presbyterian Burying Ground-corner Kings Court- A late 17th century cemetery for a church no longer extant in Middletown. Bownes and other early settlers are buried here.

46 Kings Highway-the Pink House- A Georgian Revival house built in 1908 by Emile French. The informal local name is for the color of the apparently darkening tiles. Its fire-resistive construction features a steel frame and concrete floors.

35 Kings Highway-the Hendrickson-Morford House- The pre-revolutionary section is covered by alterations. The 1830 plaque may date a major expansion in the Italianate style, a typical practice then. The Hendricksons once had a large farm on the highway. Charles H. Morford bought the house around mid 19th century and his son's estate sold it in 1931. Generals Clinton and Lord Cornwallis are reported to have stopped for a meal here while moving from the Monmouth battlefield to the hills overlooking the bay.



out to be a recitation of the alphabet. No one had told Henry that the alphabet was not "reading". A good memory, however, started him on a life-long love of books. Henry started the second grade at the new Belford school, with attendance there permitted by the trolley. He was skipped to the third. Later study at Red Bank and Leonardo may not have produced a scholar, but left Henry with the endurance to leave a 200,000 work manuscript.

Business would be Henry's calling. An early instance was passive, but no more successful than his own efforts later. Henry's father purchased shares in the Monmouth Steamboat Company, organized to purchase the Steamship William V. Wilson, named for an earlier investor, the estimable Baptist clergyman. The vessel was built around 1875, but it was no longer competitive twenty-five years later. It was enlarged in 1900 by insertion of a fifteen foot section in its middle. Its 1901 season was its poorest ever, with low freight rates for its farmer-shareholders of some compensation. The Wilson lost most of its fish shipping business in 1902 and proved too slow for passenger service in 1904. The boat was nearly totally destroyed by fire in June 1907 with the cause undermined.

James Carroll built and operated a hotel near the steamship's wharf. He was eulogized as generous to his fellow man in need, but the local troubles of his hotel with tavern leaves an impression of unsavoryness. Young Henry overheard Carroll say to his father after the fire, "Mike, I buried the New Jersey Southern and now I guess I've buried the steamboat". Henry did not recount his father's explanation. A failing enterprise with a fire without known cause which destroys business records, are two key elements of many incendiary fires. The failure of the New Jersey Southern is a better documented case, with Mr. Carroll's involvement neither known or likely crucial. However, his steamship burying remark strengthens your editor's previously held suspicions, although not conclusively, that the fire was set.

Henry recalled two other youthful business ventures. Both have disappeared, one abruptly, the other over time. His grandfather Smith sold the brightest, longest-lasting Christmas greens in the area. Pine was shipped from Maine by boxcar and fashioned into wreaths by numerous locals. They were returned to the Smith place and dyed in a steaming process using German analine dyes. Drying took three or four days. They were packed for shipment to New York, by steamer prior to 1906 and later by rail. A business of about twenty years duration ended in 1914. The war halted the supply of dye and no acceptable substitute could be found.

A key local crop was asparagus. Henry would ride a cart specially built for transit through the asparagus fields, but admitted the horse knew more about the job than he, needing very little directing with the reins. His words tell it best: "With the coming of April the asparagus beds began cutting the 'grass' as it was always called. As the 'grass' was cut and laid in small bunches on top of the rows a man followed a horse drawn cart, picked the bunches up, and placed them in boxes with heavy square-meshed wire bottoms, which made it possible for the boxes to be dipped in a tank of water thus washing off any sand on the spears." Asparagus was waning in Henry's youth. It succumbed to labor costs higher than other crops and regions. Asparagus is a perennial, annually producing edible shoots. Thus, their fields had to be plowed under to end them, and they were.

Henry took temporary war-time employment. His experience at Keyport's Aeromarine Plane and Motor Company reveals workplace conditions. He inspected a previously graded spruce that was undergoing rigorous government scrutiny before use in airplane manufacture. Tight standards resulted in many rejects and large weekly bon-fires of same in a nearby meadow. His noteworthy memory, though, involved chemical exposure, better told in Henry's words: "Here after about two months I became a victim of 'dope'. Dope was the name mechanics gave to a particular type of lacquer applied hot to the linen covering to wings and fuselage. It made the linen waterproof and tough and shrank it taut as a drum head. But it made my hands between the fingers a collection of raw, bleeding meat. My contact with this laquer was merely its fumes which on occasion permeated the entire plant. Very few men could work in the dope department any length of time despite the use of various protective devices."



Henry next worked as a checker in the T.A. Gillespie Loading Company munitions plant at Morgan. He best remembers it for being home at 5:30 October 5, 1918 when an enormous explosion took a terrible toll. It inspired his seeking office work, but a local business venture next captures our attention.

Scientists have long tried to harden copper. Henry joined forces with a local carpenter with a love for the bottle and a penchant for amateur metallurgy, one Charles "Block" Ludlow. Henry became his "go-fer". Other claims for hardening copper surfaced in the 1920s. The potential value of a discovery was great, but the likelihood small. However, Henry was able to convince Anaconda's experimental engineer at Perth Amboy to finance Ludlow in view of a modest \$300. budget. Henry supplied clay and yellow pine for fuel. They built a makeshift furnace. In time, Ludlow's unscientific methods produced promising results. However, the cost of commercial development would likely exceed its value and Anaconda lost interest. Henry recalled that Ludlow lost key experiment papers at a Keansburg bar, which were in no short supply during prohibition. Henry read of General Electric's progress with an analogous method some years later. He hoped Ludlow's projections would become practicable as Henry took pride at being on the periphery of this ambitious, if dubious, experiment on the bay shore.

Henry laid pipe for the Ideal Beach Water Company in 1929-30. Further prospects with them did not develop and the sale of the company forced the family's selling of their 2% interest. He took a job in New York City. Henry's next venture would be a "too little-too late" scheme with color photography in 1933. Henry sought a backer to bail out the Color Film Corporation, which had a three-color printing process. He called on Howard Borden, a son of M.C.D. Borden. The elder Borden was a cotton converter, or manufacturer. His firm, M.C.D. Borden & Co., had its headquarters in New York City, while Mr. Borden built one of the finest estates in Rumson. He also owned one of the fastest yachts in the area and took pleasure in demonstrating its speed by the dangerous practice of sailing in elongated ovals around the Sandy Hook steamers. The sailing game ceased, probably after Coast Guard order. Son Howard, a brigadier in the National Guard and often addressed as "general" occupied the estate. Business was difficult. Howard admired Henry's pictures, was interested in color photography and admitted to having spent much on it in better times. Timing and the state of his business did not only forbid an investment, but Howard tried to "sell" Henry. He told him that his mill had bid on a large contract with no prospect of profit, seeking the business only to keep the mill running. The general was a polo player and had a fine stable of horses. He sought to give one to Henry or his brother, to find it a good home. The general also wished to sell his amphibian airplane. It cost \$ 35,000, was little used and Henry was offered a \$ 500. commission if he could find a buyer for \$2,500. There was no photography investment and the general sought homes elsewhere for the horses. Hard times had found Rumson.

Michael Henry Murphy ended his memoirs by complaining that "planning ain't worth a damn", citing several examples of plans of the famous gone amiss. It would not be like Henry to seek successful planners. His business was not fruitful and he, like many, preferred to look elsewhere for the blame. He was skilled with carpentry, read extensively and left a lengthy example of his writing prowess. His career, even if not successful, left several glimpses of local early twentieth century life that merit long remembering. (RC)

Editors note: This article was taken from an unpublished manuscript in the custody of Barbara Eigenrauch, to whom we extend our thanks for permission to access. Observations about the "W.V. Wilson" are from the Red Bank Register of the time.

## Middletown Quiz

43. Where did Prince Eric of Sunbeam reign?
44. How long was there alive, a child of a Middletownite who lived during George Washington's presidency?
45. What are the former names of these Chapel Hill area streets: Stillwell Rd., Portland Rd. and Browns Lane?
46. For whom was Stoutwood Park named?

## The Old Days - Sans Sentiment

An article in a county weekly on retailing began "It is fashionable to call up the 'good old times' and under-rate everything of modern origin... There are plenty of persons blindly enough attached to everything that is old, to induce an absurd and unreasonable clinging to the stupidities and inconveniences of the past, as well as to its nobler features." When? It is in the Monmouth Democrat of May 12, 1859. The writer's wrath was directed against the "old" country store with some vehemence. We quote: "Take Village and Country Stores, for instance: The little and dingy holes in which were piled away every description of goods, one on the top of the other, jars of stuff between pieces of calico, heaps of muslin on the top of barrels of sugar, earthen ware filled with papers of pins and rolls of ribbon stuck away between the mouldboard and landside of a plow-fine dry goods exposed to the air of a grocery, and all unsheltered from the discoloration of time and the soiling of flies and other insects - everything lying in an undistinguishable jumble and muss, so that no one could find what he wanted, or, finding it was almost sure to find it ruined. All these dingy and disorderly holes, we say, are fast disappearing, and giving place to modern convenience and modern neatness" The exhibit room of "Middletown's Historic Highway" includes a corner representative of a country store. Thus, we are not country store bashing. Our installation has no date of interpretation, but is intended to reflect the charm of a slow-paced world when shopping was an adventure. The foregoing should remind any "good old days" spokesperson to keep in mind "how old" and "good for whom". Let us take for granted the reporter's contention that retailing took a turn for the better around 1860. Let us presume that a comfortable homey presence was maintained into the early decades of this century and that these qualities have virtually disappeared. What does this mean?

Change is inevitable. It is true with retailing and likely every aspect of life. A large modern supermarket of thirty years ago is now obsolescent. The obsolescence will impair pricing, convenience, profits and, perhaps, all three. Even today's vast stores may fill only a corner of their successors. Forerunners exist. One in Texas combines a supermarket with a discount store, spreads over five acres and is called a hypermarket. The store building is 220,000 square feet, large enough for five football fields.

Old-time country stores still exist in rural areas, especially in places well-traveled by tourists. Country store trade publications advise the would-be shopkeeper that retailing economics require prices higher than the competition. Thus, the retailer will have to appeal to the shopper's search for atmosphere or for person-to-person contact. The charm has a price. Capture the charm in the Society's exhibit. However, when shopping, realize the limited value of charm and the inevitability of change.

★★★★

## New Members

Wesley V. Banse, Sr.	-	Manasquan
Edmund L. Carey, Sr.	-	Monmouth Beach
Robert & Barbara Eigenrauch	-	Chapel Hill
Michael S. Fedosh	-	Middletown
Robert J. Jaros	-	Middletown
Kenneth & Cheryl Keene	-	Navesink
Edward Kondek	-	Middletown
Albert J. Loux	-	Leonardo
Stuart & Evelyn Nachtman	-	Middletown
D. Michael Polizzi*	-	?
Scott A. Shaulis	-	Somerset, Pa.
Michael J. Steinhorn	-	Rumson
Muriel Thompson*	-	Leonardo

\* Sustaining members



## Wanted: An Oracle

"The Oracle of the Highlands of Navesink" was a promotional magazine published by the real estate interests developing Water Witch Park and Highland Beach. Alec Finch generously provided Vol.1, No.4, the September 1895 issue, for copying. It is insightful to a pivotal real estate venture. Water Witch Club, now known as Monmouth Hills, was a forerunner of the large country estates built later on Navesink River Road. Its development is even related to the modest homes of the bay shore as both summer mansion and bungalow bridged the transformation of Middletown Township from an agrarian to a year-round residential town.

There are at least three other issues. The September number announced an intention to publish in the winter. The "Oracle" is not held by major libraries. Copies are likely in local hands with owners unaware of their historical importance. The Society would like to learn the whereabouts of other issues and copy them. We thank Mr. Finch for his assistance. Call Randy Gabrielan, 671-2645.



## Meeting Notice

The May meeting is on the 23rd (the 4th Monday!) at 8:00 at the museum. It will feature a showing of the videotape of Kings Highway made by John St. Peter's honors class at Thorne Middle School. Their modest effort deserves high praise as an example of willingness to do something new and meritorious in local history. The Society thanks Mr. St. Peter for a copy of the tape. June's is the 27th.



## Monmouth Patent - Part II

"The Monmouth Patent Part II" is the title of the second collection of newspaper columns by Mary Ann Kiernan. Main subjects are old Middletown families including the Taylors, Hendricksons and Morfords. Others include notables from the surrounding area. A key selection criterion was pleasing a regional newspaper readership rather than a focus on a single town or theme.

The book consists of extensive quotations from local histories and reminiscences of older residents, many descendants of area pioneer families. Its strength is in the latter. Several interviews produced interesting recollections and previously unpublished photographs that enhance the area's written record. Its weaknesses include a breezy informality for a newspaper audience and a number of factual errors, such as reference to the mariner who "sailed the Delaware River between Virginia and New York". The author justifies the title by claiming liberal literary license to write about the area under the name of its key settlement document. She should realize by now that the Monmouth Patent was not an agreement between Indians and twelve Englishmen, but a grant by Governor Richard Nicolls.

The book is printed on a high-quality matte paper, par-

4 ticular effective for the illustrations. It is a pleasant addition to the Society's library and we thank Ms Kiernan and the Voice for our copy. Available at the Voice office.



## Doing Local History: History by Committee

Most local history is probably produced by dedicated, methodical individuals who assume command of often vast subjects. Your editor believes this process will likely continue. However, a suggestion at a recent local historians conference that committees could produce history stimulated thought. We are in the midst of an excellent possibility, the Raritan bay shore. All of Monmouth's bay shore was once part of Middletown Township. The first political division occurred in 1848 when Middletown was divided nearly in half, with the western part becoming Raritan (now Hazlet) Township.

Several municipalities were formed from them later. Bay shore development is much in the public eye now. A new regulatory authority is contemplated, while a museum plans a bay shore exhibition. A thorough understanding of its historical background is vital. The press can take a five year look back, a historically meaningless span that can measure only surface matters such as construction and real estate prices. The historical perspective will span over 150 years, to the time when steam navigation was dawning and road systems were planned. The division of Middletown probably stemmed from a growing business community along Matawan Creek outgrowing rule from Middletown village. There is little or no readily available material on the political origin of the split. There is no better time than now, which later generations may see as a critical juncture, to research the issue. The proposal's scope benefit from the contributions of researchers from the several bay shore municipalities. Are there interest or participants out there? Editor Randy Gabrielan 671-2645 will collect suggestions and seek advice.



## Quiz Answers

43. On Dr. Armand Hammer's Shadow Isle Farm in River Plaza. He was a prize bull, claimed by the farm in 1952 as "generally regarded as the greatest sire alive..."
44. At least until December 30, 1950 when Uretta Field died. She was born February 1, 1872, the daughter of Joseph "Uncle Josie" Field, who was born September 26, 1792.
45. Lighthouse Road, Old Womans Hill Road and Maxsons Lane.
46. John W. Stout, Jr., who inherited his father's farm, and George Woods, Jr. They formed a horse farm partnership.

P.O. BOX 434  
MIDDLETOWN, NJ 07748  
PHONE: 291-8739 during museum hours.  
EDITOR: RANDALL GABRIELAN

DEDICATED TO RESEARCHING, COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING THE HISTORY OF MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP.

Museum: In the main building at Croydon Hall on Leonardville Rd. between Chamone and Bellevue Aves. in the township's Leonardo section. Open Saturdays & Sundays.

Meetings: 8:00 PM at the museum, generally on the fourth Monday with occasional exceptions for major holidays.

Donations of historical materials: Please see a museum guide or write to the Society.



MEMBERSHIP DUES  
PER CALENDAR YR.

Individual — \$5.00  
Family — \$10.00

Dues for new members  
joining after Oct. 1 in-  
clude following year.