



Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

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A LONG AND FRUITFUL LIFE

THE MEMORIES OF ANN McNEILL

Ann McNeill (nee McDonough) has enjoyed a long, happy life. She was raised in Highlands, having been born there in 1896 when that borough was still part of Middletown Township.

Ann maintained an independent home until 1992 when changing needs suggested relocation to King James Care Center (nursing home). She has been occupied much of the past three years writing poetry and assembling her thoughtful recollections of earlier and simpler, but pleasant times.

Ann's memories have been preserved in a handwritten book. They were written at the urging of Peg Jordan, her cousin, and the Society's vice president. Peg not only enjoyed hearing about people with whom she has family ties, but knew the accounts of the old days had a broader historical value.

Ann McNeill was born in 1896 in a large house built in 1856 by her grandfather, James McGarry, Sr., on Navesink Avenue, better known today as Highway 36. Their neighborhood was called Irishtown for the expected reason. The north-south streets, Miller Street, and Valley Avenue, were called "lanes". One traveled either "up or down the lane". Their hillside locales leave no doubt which way was up. Peak Street was called Pig Alley as a number of residents raised them. "Folks on the hill above were known as goat hillers."

Raising and preparing food occupied much of daily life then. "Grandma kept one or two cows. They supplied milk and butter until finally they were sold to the butcher." The Flemings built a house across the street and at one time kept a grocery store in one room. "Before my time and before butcher stores in the Highlands, a butcher with a horse and wagon came by and supplied my family with meat."

"Everything on our place was for food", including apple, cherry, and pear trees as well as plants bearing gooseberries, currants, and raspberries. The family raised chickens and ducks, with the birds leaving by the back gate each morning, spending the day on the hill, before returning at night (apparently unmolested by dogs).

The family kept a garden, but also ordered winter vegetables from a local farmer. They were stored in one section of the cellar and they included potatoes by the barrel, turnips, carrots, cabbage, and pumpkin.



Ann McNeill (with thanks to
The Two River Times)

Not all foods were raised or obtained locally. Ann and her aunt traveled by steamer twice yearly to a New York merchant, Callahan and Kemp, for supplies. An order typically consisted of flour by the barrel, sugar by the half-barrel, a half tub of butter, sides of bacon, large tins of coffee and tea, and ten pounds of broken cookies. (Editor's note - and this was long before the modern dietary discovery, that broken cookies have fewer calories than whole cookies!). One notified the local express man of an expected boat shipment and he delivered to the house. Butter was stored in the cold cellar which could preserve it for quite a while.

Nurturing the mind and spirit were important in the McDonough household. Ann recalls being told of early worship practices in Highlands. Roman Catholics were once too few for their own church. Priests traveled from Newark via Red Bank on Saturdays, stayed overnight, and celebrated mass

in the McGarry house the next morning. "Mother made the communion bread from flour and water baked between flat irons. Later something like a waffle iron came into use. It had one big circle in the center for a large wafer for the priest and smaller ones around it. The chalice was kept in the corner cupboard until St. Agnes Church in Atlantic Highlands was built". The group met in the school on Peak Street after their number became too great for the house.

Highlands had its own church in time. "Catholics had a very hard time back then. "Half built churches were destroyed and materials stolen." The land on which Our Lady of Perpetual Help was built had been owned by an anti-Catholic who would not sell to the church. Ann believes her uncle, James McGarry, assisted in the purchase of the property, and its re-sale to the church.¹

Ann's secondary education was at Atlantic Highlands High School, the only one on the eastern bay shore. It received students from Middletown Township and Highlands. Ann entered with a class of sixty freshman in 1910. The next year Middletown students were schooled in temporary quarters in the former Andrews Hotel in Navesink while Leonardo High School was under construction. The school and hotel were within lengthy walking distance. The lunch break was a generous hour and one-half, which permitted social mixing between the schools. Ann was valedictorian of her graduating class of six at Atlantic Highlands.

Ann received her collegiate education at Trenton Normal School. In-state schooling was quite unlike today's commuting experience as most students went home only at Christmas and Easter. Travel for Ann was a four trolley trip with transfers at Campbell's Junction, South Amboy, and Trenton Junction for the Fast Line into the city. Contact with home was via the mail for both laundry and edible goodies.

Graduation brought more reminders of the blatant and open discrimination of the time. Ann recounts two experiences. "Just before graduation, a man from Palisades Park came to college looking for a teacher. He liked my credentials and offered me a job. I accepted. He was passing the contract across the table to me (with his finger still on it) when he asked me what my religion was. Proudly I told him I was a Catholic. 'Ah, yes', he said as he drew the contract back, 'You will hear from us'." She never did.

"Later I was interviewed by the Pleasant Valley Board of Education. They hired me and I received a contract. However, they had forgotten to ask what my religion was. A few days later I received a request to return the contract. They assured me I would not be comfortable in a community with a different religion."

Ann received a number of positions and taught with distinction at Carteret, Atlantic Highlands, Newark, and Rahway. Departure from Atlantic Highlands stemmed from a different constraint, reaching the salary maximum in only seven years. The teachers job in Newark was at a considerable advance in salary and involved instructing retarded children from a poor area. Ann loved her teaching career, acknowledging the difficulty of the Newark spot. She later served on the New Jersey Board of Education.

There was opportunity for her in the old days. Some was youthful exuberance, such as racing for the old Highlands - Sea

Bright Bridge as it was about to open and riding on the swinging draw. Sport of opportunity also arose, such as frost fishing on crisp, fall nights. The youngsters would gather together, wearing boots and head for the beach with the burlap bags. Bluefish would drive smaller whittings to the beach where they could be readily scooped up. Ann acknowledges this is the only fishing she ever did.

Tourists and vacationers transformed Highlands in the summer. They were attracted to a multitude of hotels, tourist courts and varied places of entertainment. Little of it remains today. Ann recalls the early appeal of Barney Creighton's dance hall, built on the Bay Avenue river bank and extended over the water. Adjacent was a row of small snack and souvenir stands. The dance hall itself was enclosed in glass, affording the dancers a fine view of the river. Ann recalls, "The front wall was about four feet high. Not too high for us children to press our noses against the glass and watch the dancers glide around the floor. Of course, we dreamed of the day when we, too, would be big enough to join the dancers. When that time came, the dance hall had vanished and only the memories were left."



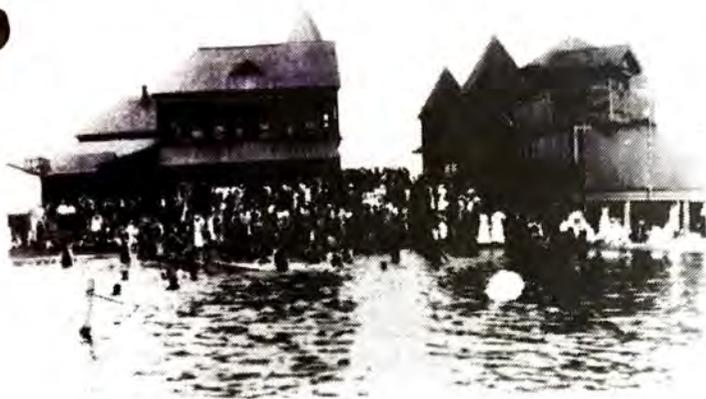
Bamboo Garden "It was a dress-up place..."

The beach was, perhaps, Highland's greatest appeal. It was the first destination of children and afforded varied entertainment opportunities for teenagers. One of the finest was the complex owned and operated by Bill Sandless. The Bamboo Garden was a highlight. Ann recalls: "It was a large, one-story building with a palm tree growing in the center. The space around the tree was a dance floor. Tables and chairs were arranged around the edge of the room. There, young people could stay for an entire evening eating ice cream, drinking sodas, and dancing. It was a dress-up place and we always wore our nicest clothes and were on our best behavior."

Most of Ann McNeill's memories match her personality, warm and cheerful. However, she also recollects some aspects of the old days that were not good, such as keeping warm in winter. They had three stoves for warmth, including a large kitchen stove and two tall, thin ones in the dining room and parlor. These two were taken down each spring and stored in the summer kitchen. Coal was stored in the cellar and short pieces of wood in the barn. The wood had to be split with an ax, "hard work for a woman". One unexpected source of wood reflected a dark side of life in the 1920s.

Highlands and most of the bayshore was a hot bed of rum

running during the Prohibition Era. Ann recalls a time when a raid was anticipated, two young men arrived at their back door



Both ocean and river bathing were available

Canada (via automobile) to procure liquor".

The clarity of Ann's recollections is obvious to all now. In response to a remark about her great memory., Ann replied, "I thank the Lord every day for that. All I have to do is close my eyes and I can be anywhere, any time, and any age.

Ann is comfortable with the passing of time, thankful, and, perhaps, surprised that the Lord has given her such a lengthy span. We close with her November, 1991 work, "Ann's Soliloquy, or, Talking to Myself".

For an Enjoyable Afternoon or an Evening Outing take a Trolley Ride to

Highland Beach

and visit the

Bamboo Garden

of William Sandlass.

THE BAMBOO GARDEN

has one of the finest dancing floors to be found anywhere and good music is in attendance

The best of order is maintained at all times

The admission is ten cents, which entitles you to a whole evening of dancing, but even if you do not dance it is worth ten cents to have a cool, comfortable place to sit and watch others enjoy themselves.

Refreshments on Sale

Both surf and still water bathing—the finest in the land.



The first OLPH Church, a c.1905 post card

¹ Monmouth County deed records provide the following history of the Church's land. Julia C. Wikoff sold to Thomas Swift lots 36 and 57 and parts of lots 37 and 56 on the map of the Schenk estate beginning at Navesink Avenue and Miller Street on March 18, 1887. The deed was recorded March 23, 1887 in Book 416, page 179.

Thomas Swift sold the same land to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church on March 22, 1887 for the same \$700 he paid, a transaction recorded March 28, 1887 in Book 415, page 390. There is no apparent explanation why a later transaction was recorded in the prior deed book. A title searcher noted that the recorders of deeds did not necessarily enter them in the deed books in the same order they were recorded. Thus, an earlier deed that was placed on the bottom of a pile of deeds to be entered, could have remained there for a while if the recorder worked from the top of the pile.

Julia C. Wikoff then sold parts of lots 37, 56, and 57 on March 30, 1887 to the Church, with the deed recorded April 1, 1887 in Book 415, page 432. Would she have refused to sell directly to the church earlier, but relented only after the Swift sale? Why did the sale include part of lot 57, when that lot was sold in its entirety to Swift twelve days earlier? Was there a title dispute or question?

The church had earlier purchased land close to the water from J. J. F. O'Connor. This March 8, 1884 transaction was recorded in Book, 376, page 369. The property had been owned by the Jackson Club. The church sold that property to Thomas Swift on September 24, 1887, the deed recorded April 23, 1887 in Book 423, page 317.

Why did the church re-locate prior to construction? Perhaps they had second thoughts about safety on the water or sought to be closer to their Irishtown congregation. Both factors would appear to have been of influence.



The McGarry, later McNeill house
Valley & Navesink Aves, Highlands

with an offer of wood. They soon returned with a load of liquor boxes which they broke up and stacked in the barn.

Ann recalls community involvement, "Young members stored liquor in cellars". She also remembers the equal employment opportunities of bootlegging, "Some women ran to

Ann's Soliloquy

or

Talking to Myself

Open your eyes
Throw the covers back.
This isn't the time
To hit the sack
It's a time
To be up and doing.
Remember when
You lived by time
When you woke
To the clock's loud chime
Dashed out of bed
Dressed, ate and ran
Out the door?
In spite of rain or snow or sleet
Another work day you must meet
To keep the mill wheel turning
You've done your best
You've earned your rest
Old age is the best time
Of life 'tis said
So go ahead--
Make a face at the clock
And turn over in bed.

November '91

Editors Note: The origin of this article was the aforementioned book and a June 18, 1993 interview with Ann McNeill. The quotes stem from the book or interview.

Randall Gabrielan

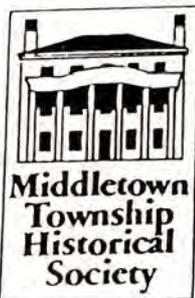
ANN'S MATERNAL GRANDFATHER

JAMES MCGARRY.

On Saturday at about noon occurred the death of James McGarry, an old resident of the Highlands of Navesok, at the ripe age of 75 years. He had been ailing since last July and succumbed to the debility of old age. He was a native of County Sligo, Ireland, but removed here in his young manhood, more than fifty years ago. He was employed by the late ex-Sheriff Jos. I. Thompson and Benj. Harts-horn for many years, and was universally respected. He became a naturalized citizen as soon as eligible, always voting the Democratic ticket. Even during his last sickness he ventured to ride to the polls last November to help the party to which he had been loyal for a lifetime. He leaves a widow, Ann Hayes McGarry, to whom he was wedded 45 years ago. Two daughters, Margaret, living at home, and Mrs. James McDonough, and one son, James W. McGarry of the same place, also mourn his death.

Funeral services were held at the R. C. Church of Our Lady on Tuesday, Nov. 19, at 10 o'clock, Rev. Thos. A. Roche officiating. Interment was made at Mt. Olivet cemetery. The pall bearers were Messrs. John Horn, John Dronau, Thomas Grady, Jeremiah Sheehan, Peter Rafferty and Patrick Coughlan.

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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 include
following year.