



# The ROOST

Published by the Irvington Historical Society

---

Volume 3

March 1979

Number 1

---

## Johann Stolting - Irvington Hermit

by Robert Indorf

“Do You Remember When? Sunday, March 5, 1972, was a vintage day for Irvington. It was gala. It was fun. It was the day the centennial celebration formally began. Some 4,000 people came to see the displays in the auditorium on the second floor of the Village Hall — the costumes, the photographs, the posters, the furniture, the things of daily living of the past.” Thus wrote Stewart Graff in the lead article of our “Centennial Journal”.

One of the exhibits featured the Irvington Hermit. Stories about him had circulated for many years in the village but how could such a person be portrayed. Imagination and innovation were not lacking in the mind of the memorabilia exhibit chairperson, Barbara Denyer. She persuaded a high school student, Scott McBride, to construct a life-size coffin. When completed it was exhibited with the “sleeping hermit”, Johann Stolting who reputedly had slept in his coffin during the last years of his life. A rubbing of the stone which marks his grave in the Irvington woods was placed beside the coffin.

1972 passed into history with the many never-to-be forgotten gala events. Renewed interest in the history of Irvington culminated in the founding of a historical society and this writer, now village historian, was boning up on local history and determined to locate the hermit's grave.

New Years Day, January 1, 1973 was exceptionally mild. It was sunny, the ground relatively dry with the temperature approaching the sixty degree mark. It was a good day for a walk in the woods with my son Bob, daughter Chris and her two friends, Debbie Allen and Nancy Kohl. Our goal was to find the hermit's grave, the man who according to the tales circulated, had a button machine and made buttons at his place in the woods. Previous attempts by myself to locate the grave had ended in failure, since in error, previous searches had been to the south of the old Harriman Road

parkway-cutoff and much too close to the highway. On this occasion we trampled north through the underbrush along the several rocky ledges parallel to the Saw Mill River Parkway. The traffic noise was quite audible but we were of considerable distance from the highway. Suddenly our search was ended. Surrounded by a low horizontal pipe fence, supported by four granite posts was the hermit's grave! The inscription on the stone read:

JOHANN W. STOLTING,  
NATIVE OF THE ISLE  
HELIGOLAND.  
BORN 1810,  
DIED JAN. 10, 1888.

With a bed of leaves covering the entire area, the grey-granite blended with the surrounding out-croppings and trees. Nature had camouflaged the site well.

We tried to visualize how Stolting had lived on the bluff overlooking the valley below. One report stated that he had lived in a cave. Near the grave site, against the hill was an interesting change in vegetation. It was full of brambles and trees struggling for survival. Closer investigation revealed a collection of stones, perhaps part of a foundation and then the clincher — a pile of red bricks, undoubtedly part of a chimney. We found the site of the hermit's dwelling. "Come over here, quickly," exclaimed one of the girls after slipping and falling on some wet leaves, "I found some buttons!" All of us rushed to view this amazing discovery. Yes, they were a collection of buttons, evidently deposited by one of our four-legged native residents who still inhabit the area.

Although some writings state that Stolting was Austrian, the stone inscription states that he was a native of the isle of Heligoland, an island belonging to Germany and situated in the North Sea some 28 miles from the mainland. Derivation of the island's name is generally accepted as "Heiligeland" or "Holy Land" with its early history shrouded in ancient northern mythology. It was christianized in the 7th century. For its ownership, before and after that date, many sea rovers fought until it finally became a fief of the dukes of Schleswig-Holstein. The island became a Danish possession in 1807, when the English seized and held it until formally ceded to them in 1814. A British possession

until 1890, it was ceded in that year to Germany. It consists of two islets, the main rock island with its red cliffs worn into caves, arches and columns, and a smaller dune island.

Some years ago, the late Allison Albee wrote an article for "The Westchester Historian" His account follows.

### *The Eccentric Circle — Johann Wm. Stolting*

*by Allison Albee*

*Our story begins in far off Heligoland. It is the year 1808. A great storm raged at sea. Loss of life was great. A wreck was washed upon the coast. Aid was impossible. As it broke up, those aboard were drowned one by one. A mother, beautiful even in death, was washed ashore. A tiny baby, the sole survivor of the tragedy, clung to her breast.*

*Raised by the community, the child developed into a beautiful young woman, the joy of the coastal fishermen's huts. Her education was obtained from a retired professor with whose son she fell in love. The son, Johann Stolting left for Amsterdam to further his own education. The girl was pledged to him. Upon his return sometime later, pirates had sacked the community killing the inhabitants and carrying off the girl. In torment, Stolting searched, ultimately finding and wreaking vengeance upon the invaders but the girl was gone. She was never seen again.<sup>1</sup>*

*Deranged, Stolting came to America. His life of solitude in a woodland hut finally became known to the people around him. He earned the name of the "Hermit of Ardsley Park"<sup>2</sup> from the location of his abode. The site today is still undeveloped. The grave alone remains. He is buried in the coffin in which he used to sleep at night. Some time before, he had it made to order and delivered to his hut. The location is just west of the Saw Mill River Parkway at a point between Elmsford and Ardsley. In an interview during the summer of 1936 Mr. Leonard of East Irvington, who remembered Stolting, told the writer: "I remember Stolting 60 years ago. He was a sort of crazy hermit. His cave was between Mountain Road and the reservoir (Irvington). He had a barrel of pennies. He slept in a coffin at night. He always bathed in*

<sup>1</sup> Another account states that Stolting and his sweetheart were together in a boat which capsized and that he blamed himself for her losing her life.

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with the present Ardsley Park; the surrounding area in question belonged for the most part to Cyrus Field who called his estate "Ardsley".

*the river (Sawmill). He walked right in with his clothes on. He never begged. Everybody helped him and brought him things. He loved children and told them stories. He used to swing them around. He had white hair, very straight and a long grey beard. Was always barefoot. Always walked in the center of the road. Was not seen in winter. He is buried on the hill near his cave." In 1956 a Mr. McGuinness of East Irvington advised the coffin was made by John Buckhout<sup>3</sup> of Irvington. Somewhere among our notes is an interview with the man who delivered the coffin. The boys of the present generation go to the site to look for buttons. Stolting had invented a button machine so constructed, according to the story, it would fall apart by pressing a lever, thus preventing strangers from learning its secret. THE YONKERS STATESMAN of March 18, 1887 states: "Long white, well kept locks stream from an uncovered head, be it winter or summer his feet are bare and his garments consist of a cotton shirt waist, and a pair of blue denim pantaloons buttoned to his shirt." He died January 10, 1888. Someone in Irvington must have his picture.<sup>4</sup>*

In the Spring of 1976 and again in 1977, the Irvington Historical Society made their "Pilgrimage to the Hermit's Grave".<sup>5</sup> It was an opportunity to hike through the vast undeveloped woodlands behind the Irvington reservoir. At the gravesite we renewed our historical acquaintance with the Irvington Hermit. In the warm spring air, the bread and cheese were refreshing and with a glass of wine we toasted to the memory of Johann Stolting - Irvington Hermit.

---

<sup>3</sup> Other writings state that he designed his own coffin and that it was built by a Mr. Acker.

<sup>4</sup> To date, no known picture of the hermit exists. Anyone interested in further research might find additional information in the old Yonkers Statesman or other local newspapers circa 1888. German records for Heligoland failed to turn up any reference to a Johann Wilhelm Stolting.

<sup>5</sup> Genuine buttons were found on the Society's recent hike.

## Recollections and Notes — 1928-1937

by Margaret Hook Buxton\*

### Neighbors

When Sister Simpson and I got dressed in our "Big Lady" clothes we often visited selected neighbors. We liked the Darville sisters who were my father's tenants in a house across from Waterbury's and Mrs. Tynan who lived in the little cottage of grey, natural wood shingles beside Natalie's house, under the great oak.

The Darville sisters were handsome slender women, both single and well educated. One was sweet, the other tart. Ruth used to imagine things with us and Marian mowed the lawn and told us practical health hints. They became good freinds of my mother and grandmother.

Mrs. Tynan was a tall, womanly blonde with beautiful cheek bones and soft smokey blue eyes. She took a great fancy to Sis and once gave her a very subtle flounced chiffon gown of perriwinkle blue which must have matched Mrs. Tynan's eyes. It was a very romantic, dream-like gown, and one we admired almost as much as Sister's orange taffetta evening dress with rhinestone straps from the thrift shop.

Mrs. Tynan had a little boy with golden curls and blue eyes who was just starting to walk. Her husband was a tall, handsome man with a neat blond mustache and friendly blue eyes. I recall he wore a black overcoat and black derby. While we were away from Irvington the second time we heard that Mrs. Tynan had put her head in the oven and there was an explosion in the kitchen. It was the first suicide in my experience, quite horrifying. She had been so beautiful and it had seemed so pleasant and happy in the grey cottage. The grownups said Mrs. Tynan had tried unsuccessfully for a part in a Broadway play.

The house next door to us was occupied by Anne Schreiber, a commercial photographer. Miss Schreiber was a large, quite heavy lady, very cordial and possessed of the loud, husky voice. Her nose was aquiline, eyes grey-green and her greying hair was held back

\*The first part of her manuscript, entitled "Spiro Park", appeared in the March, 1977 and June, 1977 issues of the publication. Margaret Hook lived at 54 Station Road.

with combs. She was a very heavy smoker and had her house filled with parrots, birds and cockatus. Between our houses, her side of the garden fence was lined with tall sunflowers and she often gathered their seeds for the birds. There was a green parrot named Oscar who shouted a lot and an untrustworthy, white cockatu which I think was "Cookie". Miss Schreiber used to hold a seed between her lips and the birds would daintily feed in this fashion.

Miss Schreiber had a scotch couple to help with cooking and housework, John and Bella Nelson, whose syllables added much richness to the raucous cries of the aviary. We could hear Bella singing "In the Gloaming" out the kitchen window as she did the dishes, in an exquisite voice. There were also photographic assistants as Miss Schreiber did all her own printing and developing in her basement.

The neighborhood children were models for Miss Schreiber and countless times we gathered in fields and under trees, blinded by her reflectors, large foil covered sheets of plywood which increased the sunshine on every side. For Miss Schreiber we sat around real campfires, around breakfast tables with bowls of cornflakes, hung from trees, sat in swings and gazed reflectively into fish pools.

Earlier Miss Schreiber had used a little model who became a movie star named Anita Louise. When Anita first went into pictures she visited Miss Schreiber. All the neighborhood girls were called to Miss Schreibers that day and we took turns standing with Anita Louise on the front porch, posing for pictures. Anita soon after was to appear in "Midsummer Night's Dream". She had gently waved silvery blond hair, brown eyes with a sweet expression, a large benevolent smile with lovely teeth. A confection. She wore a black dress with long sleeves, lacey white collar and cuffs. She smelled of a marvelous perfume and posed with her arm around our shoulders in a gentle hug. She was the woman we all wanted to be. I was totally enchanted. Miss Schreiber gave us all copies of our own poses. My pictures of Anita were lovely but the child with her has straight hair, freckles, and one suspects that the ragged edges of new front teeth are concealed behind a constricted upper lip.

We were all intrigued by Anne Schreiber and charmed by this glamorous moment. It might have been an effort to improve public relations. Sometimes we had posed in bed with thermometers in our mouths but our mothers were very cautious. While we had been gone, Bubby DeLustro's older sister, Carmella, a very sweet girl who always said hello to us when she walked by and lived on Willow Street, had died soon after posing in a coffin for one of Miss Schreiber's pictures.

Beyond Ann Morgan's house on Woodbine Road was an estate we had never seen. One day we discovered that a small, red-haired

man who attended our church, St. Paul's Methodist, was the caretaker of this estate. His name was Matt Woycik and his son Roy was in my class at school. Sometimes Matt visited with Ann's parents. Somehow I secured an invitation to see the estate and Sis was with me.

It was a beautiful day in late August or early September. We climbed the long, low double gate by Ann's driveway, crossed the big, wild field moving toward the red brick mansion we could barely glimpse through the trees.

We found Matt Woycik working in the sunshine, raking and putting small rose red apples into bushel baskets he had stacked on the grass of the small orchard behind the house.

Matt said we could go and see the house which was airing. All the doors and windows were open. The building had been recently built in crisp red brick and appeared to be a perfect Georgian mansion. Matt kept on working and said we could come and play as long as we didn't pick any of the apples. I believe he said the owners wanted them.

It was a very pleasant house, completely empty and as yet unaffected by either sorrow or joy. The sun streamed in on the smooth, unblemished parquetry floors. We wandered through many rooms, opened closets, cupboards, pantries, looked through windows on every side including the deep dormers which must have been in a top floor nursery. We viewed several very clean, modern bathrooms but we were at a loss for a game although it was very exciting to be there. Possibly we'd have been better at imagining we were exploring an empty mansion.

We rang a buzzer for a butler in the dining room and wandered happily but aimlessly through the doors, out, then in. Finally, we came back out to the orchard and standing in view of Matt Woycik, Sis reached up to a small apple tree, picked an apple and put it to her lips. Mr. Woycik was there at once and said in a mild, gentle way that we couldn't play there anymore because of the apple.

### School Days

Our third grade teacher in Irvington, Anna T. Brewer, did more than read aloud the unabridged "Pinocchio". She was a tiny, slender woman with wire rimmed glasses, hazel eyes and a salt and pepper knot of reddish hair. In her quiet, gentle way she explained and taught the things we needed to know.

I came to Miss Brewer's class a bit confused over arithmetic. A second grade teacher in Ohio had not wanted us to take our work books home. However, one day, in utter despair over subtraction, I carried my book home. The next day the teacher said, "I saw you sneak the Arithmetic book home!" She was quite angry. After that mother made up problems for me at home.

Anna T. Brewer patiently worked with us, reviewing addition, subtraction and carried us into the times tables. Multiplication was an endless spreading and increasing of numbers but with Miss Brewer's patience and lots of homework I learned all the tables.

In the third grade we had a special music teacher, Miss Genevieve Peters, who came once a week with a pitch pipe and led us through those awful, lugubrious songs reserved for grade school. I had a good ear for melody but I was baffled by her talk of notes, Do Re Mi which the class seemed to already know. If I had moved my mouth I might have gone unnoticed.

Miss Peters saw me silent in the middle of a group exercise and asked me the name of a note she drew on the blackboard. "I don't know." I replied. Miss Peter's face became very red. "Why don't you know?" she raised her voice in a tone of scalding outrage. "Stand up!"

Why didn't I know? What was wrong with me? In front of 34 pairs of awed eyes and the angry eyes of Miss Peters I felt my body being consumed by flames of fright and shame. "I don't know music!" I sobbed.

At that moment, Miss Brewer, who had been sitting at the back of the room, moved silently to Miss Peters and said softly that I was a new student that year. One of them told me to sit down. After Miss Peters left, Miss Brewer called me to her desk and told me not to worry. There was a girl in the class who knew notes very well, Lilly Jannen, who would teach me what I needed to know. Lilly was from Germany and was an excellent student. Periodically, the Jannens returned to Germany. Lilly had thick blonde braids, blue green eyes and a turned up nose. Before she left, Lilly sat with me before class and very sweetly showed me clefs, sharps, quarter, half and whole notes and their arrangement on the lines, "F A C E" and "E G B D F". "F A C E were black notes between lines. "E G B D F" was "Every good boy deserves fudge" which were notes which sat upon the lines.

Lilly Jannen spent a lot of time helping me. She never returned from the trip to Germany and I don't recall seeing her the following year. I never could instantly read a note but went through with Lilly's formulas. I learned to quickly catch what my fellow students sang and mouthed the Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Dos right along and was never noticed by Miss Peters again. Miss Peters played for our

assemblies and as we marched in and out of the auditorium she played the martial tempos standing up at the piano.

Later when I tried to play these simple notes on the piano I found I had to go over "F A C E" and "E G B D F" in order to correctly play each note. I could never advance beyond the first five notes of "The Irish Washerwoman" and realized I would never read music, much less play in proper tempo. The little black balls that were notes had no message and remained a secret language to be slowly analysed and solved by the Lilly Jannen decoder keys.

**Genesis of the Mental and Moral Improvement Society  
out of which grew  
The Irvington Public Library\***

In December 1869, Edmund Coffin, Jr. conveyed to John E. Williams and Frederick W. Guiteau for the purchase price of \$5,000.00 the property on which the present Town Hall building now stands. Prior to the erection of the Town Hall there were on this property buildings in which Mrs. John E. Williams had sponsored a Free Library for the Mental and Moral Improvement Society.

In 1892, it was deemed wise for the best interest of this Society

*\*Lockwood Collection*

---

*The Roost* is enlivened by personal contributions. All manuscripts will be given careful attention and consideration and will not be returned. They should be typewritten, double spaced. While every effort to insure accuracy is made, the Society cannot assume responsibility for statements made by contributors.

“that a transfer and conveyance of its real estate situated on the corner of Main and “F” Street in the village of Irvington, be made to the village of Irvington for the purpose of continuing a free reading room and library thereon, and with the understanding that said village is to erect upon said property a municipal building within five years from the date of the conveyance, in which there is to be maintained a room for the purposes of such library and free reading room not less than 20' x 30' in size, well ventilated and lighted, thus carrying out the objects of this Society.” Nothing having been done within the specified time, the limit was extended for another five years. Finally, the Village of Irvington accepted the property with the above mentioned stipulations and in 1901 began the erection of the present Town Hall.

On October 17, 1901, Mr. Frederick W. Guiteau, having expressed an interest in a public library, invited several friends to his home and informed them of his desire to make a gift of \$10,000.00 toward founding a library, one-half of which to be used for the purchase of books and one-half as an Endowment Fund. The Village, at a special election on March 18, 1902, accepted the gift by voting that a free public library be established to be called The Guiteau Library, in accordance with University Law. This favorable action on the part of the Village was gratifying to Mr. Guiteau who provided \$5,000.00 for the purchase of books and an initial endowment of \$8,000.00, an increase of \$3,000.00 over his original offer. This amount was subsequently increased by a gift of \$1,000.00 from Mrs. John D. Mairs in 1907. The Reading Room was opened to the public at the time of the dedication of the Town Hall, May 9, 1902, and the formal opening of the Library took place at a public reception on July 2, 1902.

In this connection it is well to note that the cost of the interior decoration and equipment of the Library which amounted to \$10,000.00 was the gift of Mrs. Finley J. Shepard, then Miss Helen M. Gould. Mr. Philip Schuyler, another interested resident, furnished and equipped the Village Trustees' Room and the Library Trustees' Room, Mr. Charles Eddison equipped the Firemen's Room, and Mrs. C.C. Worthington gave the clock in the Town Hall Tower. It therefore becomes evident that the interest in a free reading room and a library for the village of Irvington was the origin of the Town Hall.

The Library grew until in 1913 there were 8,182 volumes on the shelves and the circulation reached 15,945 volumes. In that same year tables and benches were added to accommodate the younger children. This, however, served only for a short period as the main room became too crowded and in 1915 it became necessary to open a separate room for children, which was done by breaking through

the rear wall of the Library to a room formerly used as a class room for the school children. This change brought an appreciable increase in the number of adult readers, and in 1915 the circulation increased to 19,230 and to 22,771 in 1916.

In 1917, The Board of Trustees of the Village fitted up a small room for the storage of our reference magazines. This relieved temporarily the crowded condition in the Library and also made it possible to care for the soldiers' books between shipments.

In 1919, the Library was awarded first prize for excellence of administration and progressive methods, etc. by the State Committee on Scholarship Awards at the State Library Meeting.

In 1923, a splendid collection of some 1500 volumes from the library of Dr. Carroll Dunham was presented to the Library. In order to care for these books, extensive shelving was installed in the Library Trustees' Room, which also in 1930, became the repository of all the French and German collection in the Library as well as for the large collection of books from the bequest of Henry E. Gregory received in 1937.

Also in 1923, a Village election was held and it was voted to change the name of the Library to the Irvington Public Library, Guiteau Foundation, the Charter for which was amended by the Board of Regents of the State of New York in September.

The following year, 1924, Mrs. William K. Furse gave \$1,000.00 to be known as The Charles Eddison Memorial Fund.

In 1927, Mrs. Edwin H. Mairs gave \$1,000.00 in memory of her husband.

In the same year Mr. Henry E. Gregory added \$200.00.

In 1931, Miss Ethel Wentworth Hurst left a bequest of \$100.00.

In 1937, Mrs. Mary Mairs Calvert left a bequest of \$1,500.00 and in the same year Mr. Henry Gregory left by will another \$5,000.00 and Miss Alice J. Walker left a bequest of \$2,500.00 to establish the William Walker Endowment Fund.

The increased endowment attests to the growth and increasing importance of the Library in the life of the community, which is reflected by the fact that when the library was organized in 1902, the population was 2300, and in 1938, with a population of 3067, the library added the largest number of new members making a total registration of 1712 active borrowers, or 55% of the population, the circulation reaching a total of 29,870, and a book stock of 14,822 volumes.

Since we cannot take care of any more books in the library, and it is necessary to continually add new books, at this juncture the need for space becomes acute, and we must, therefore, continue to shelve the books less frequently called for, in the Library Trustees' Room, although these books are in the card catalogue.

In 1938 and 1939, it became necessary to have the English classes of the High School come to the Library for instruction in the use of Reference books, periodical guides and the card catalogue. The classes number between 23 and 33 pupils and tax the seating capacity of our reading room which at most accomodates only 28.

The windowsills of the Library are crowded with books for the accomodation of the Social Science and History classes of the High School, who need their books in special collections, making it a difficult problem in ventilating the rooms and caring for the books in stormy weather.

That the Irvington Public Library is worthy of due consideration is indicated by the rating of the Board of Regents of The University of The State of New York for villages between 3,000 and 4,000 population.

In 1930 our rating was 140.87%

In 1932 our rating was 143.01%

In 1935 our rating was 138.01%

In 1938 our rating was 139.63%

(A rating of 100% or over shows highly satisfactory service.)

(A rating of 50 to 75% shows fair to good service.)

Our Library is open 48 hours per week. The State Report reveals that the average hours per week for villages of our population is 29 hours per week.

---

*The Roost* is the official publication of the Irvington Historical Society, Box One, Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y. 10533 and is available with membership: individual — \$4; family (husband and wife) — \$6; contributing — \$10; sustaining — \$50; life — \$100. Officers and members of the board: John Irwin, president; Adele Warnock, vice-president; Norita Carlson, secretary; George Kraus, treasurer; Barbara Denyer, Eva Lee, Richard Manney, Frank McRickard, Lewis Shradly, trustees; Robert Indorf, village historian and editor.