



The Roost

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IRVINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SPRING 2009

IRVINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Letter from the President



Dear Members:

After a long winter, isn't the spring so welcome? As always, this has been a busy season at the Historical Society. Our new Exhibit "Frocks Frills and Furbelows," open since February, is just fabulous. We have had many visitors, and everyone loves it. It will run until the end of July, so don't miss it. Our March program, "Fields of Cyrus" presented by Dr. Eugene Weise, was a big success - very well attended, and so informative.

Some wonderful events are planned for the spring. On Thursday, April 16th, at 7:00 PM at the High School, we are sponsoring "Tomorrow's Historians," a symposium showcasing exceptional history papers by Irvington students. Presenters will receive from the Society the "Peter Oley Historian's Award" for excellence in research and presentation. This award honors the Society's Historian who is often in our thoughts.

Our author lecture series features a very special guest to kick off our Hudson Fulton Quadricentennial Celebration. Author Russell Shorto will discuss his bestselling book Island at the Center of the World, an epic story of Dutch Manhattan and the forgotten colony that shaped America on Thursday, April 23, at 7:30 pm in the Main St. School Auditorium. A book signing follows the lecture.

On Sunday May 17th at St. Barnabas, Carolyn Stifel will conduct a walking tour and lecture, "The Stained Glass Windows in the Church of St. Barnabas." A book signing follows the tour.

Get your cameras clicking for our annual Photo Contest, and stay tuned - we are busy planning a host of summer and fall activities to celebrate the Quadricentennial and Irvington's history. Check our website, www.irvingtonhistoricalsociety.org, for more information on the events mentioned above. Thank you for your membership and support. If you haven't renewed, there's still time!

Andy Lyons

*President of the Board of Trustees
Irvington Historical Society*

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Programs at the Children's Workshop



Meet Ben Franklin



Learning Sign Language



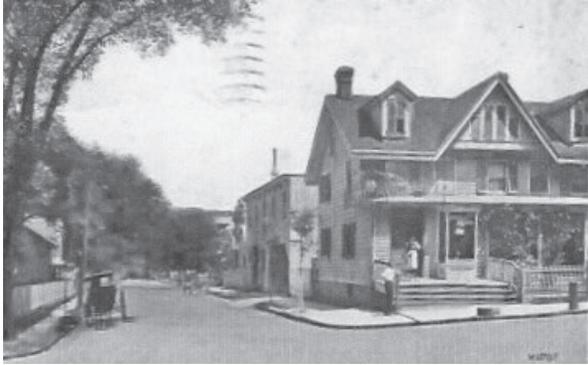
Hearts and Flowers for Valentine's Day



An Irvington Childhood

By Dorothy Wood Wetjen

I was born in Irvington on April 11, 1914. My grandmother, Margaret Duff Kiernan, was born in Abbotsford in 1855. My grandfather, Michael Kiernan, his parents, brothers and sisters came from Ireland in either 1862 or 1863.



Abbotsford c. 1920, a hamlet of modest homes for workers on the great estates, was mapped out in 1850 and developed shortly after.

To me growing up in Irvington was like growing up in heaven. We lived on East Clinton Avenue, a dead end street with a beautiful brook crossing it at the end. Surrounding it were open fields and private estates. The fields and woods in our area were owned by Miss Ella Wendell who used to walk in them everyday accompanied by her maid and small poodle, Toby.



Ella Wendell and her dog Toby on their Irvington Estate, now known as the Murray Griffen Estate

We were allowed the freedom of the fields and orchards, whether to wander and explore, fish in the pond, wade in the brooks, play hide and seek, or play ball with cow cakes for bases.

In the winter, we could sleigh ride, ski, toboggan on the steep hill to the left of East Clinton Avenue. Day and night the air was filled with happy shouts and laughter. When it was cold enough we could skate on Wendell's small pond or Beltzhoover's (later Halsey's) large one. When we wanted to go further afield we would go to the top of the hill on West Clinton Avenue and sleigh ride to the bottom, rolling off the sleigh before we hit the fence at the railroad tracks. It was a very long walk back up to the top of the hill and on a rare occasion some kind soul would let us hook on to their car bumper and pull us up. It all ended when the village started sanding the roads.

Sometimes we'd climb a tall hill to gaze in awe at the exotic birds housed in large cages on an adjoining estate belonging to a Mr. Daniel G. Reid. Later on it was owned by a Mr. George Washington Hill, maker of Lucky Strike cigarettes. He had a swimming pool installed with gold figures set in the tiles. The estate also had a large clock tower that chimed every fifteen minutes. Eventually it was silenced. It disturbed some of the neighbors! Later the estate belonged to a yeshiva and I understand it is now made up of many beautiful homes.

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The Reid Estate with its clock tower is now the site of Richmond Hill.

cleared the large stones from the brook and dammed it up so we had our own small swimming pool. It was spring fed and wonderful.

Only one prob-

Continued on page 4

An Irvington Childhood, continued

lem - once a week, on garbage collection day, a resident would wash the maggots out of his garbage cans in our pool so we would have to take our dam apart and let the stream flow through and then back to square one. When we were old enough, we too could go to the river.

Just before the brook there were posts set in the ground, yards apart, with pipes running through holes set near the top. I believe they were to keep cars from going into the brook. For us kids they were a terrific form of exercise. We became very proficient at doing tricks on them. Sometimes we fell and shed a few tears but we always went back for more.

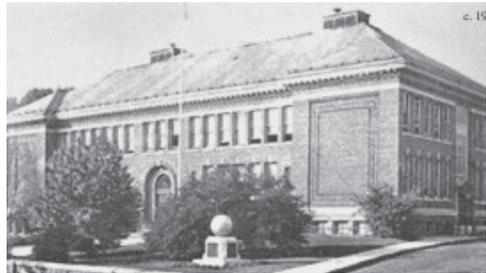
On summer nights the kids on our street and adjoining estates would gather on East Clinton Avenue, sit on the curb stones, tell stories, learn to spit between our teeth, or whistle between our fingers, play games – just have fun. Just before dark, everyone would go home. In our home we would talk awhile, then read until bedtime. Lots of nights we'd just sit on the front porch and talk until bedtime.

When we started to school our lives changed a bit. First it was a long walk for short legs. At first someone would take us, then it was up to us. Broadway, or the Albany Post Road, was narrow and there weren't many cars, and occasionally a horse and buggy. It was a nice walk past beautiful estates. A few times I was scared. The Reid Estate had large iron gates opening on the Post Road. Sometimes when I was on my way to school two Great Danes would come to the gates and watch until I went past. They never barked at me or attempted to come beyond the gates so I gradually lost my fear of them. Now and then a coachman from a neighboring estate would stop and give me a ride to school. It was OK because all the people in the area knew each other.

I enjoyed school, met many new people my age and made some lifelong friends. I was athletic and took part in as many events as possible; plays and musicals too. High school years were most enjoyable. There were many football, basketball, and baseball games as well as track meets.

Socially there were lots of dances – sock hops and formals – always with live bands. In between times there were house parties. Any excuse would do,

surprise or birthday. Surprise parties were rarely a surprise. We'd roll up the rugs and dance to the music on the Victrola. As boys grew taller they would crack their heads on the chandelier so mother had it removed! I only wish I had paid more attention to the serious side of school. I was the last of my side of the family and was forever getting "Your uncle did this" – "Your brother did that" – so all I did was enough to get by! Stubborn? You bet.



**Irvington High School in Dot Wetjen's time.
Now the Main Street School**

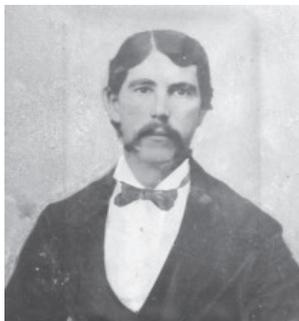
I can't recall what kind of clothes we wore to school but I do remember the exquisite formals Mom made us. She was very talented. I wish we had pictures. One white silk jersey dress I loved, we shortened to below knee length and I wore it for my wedding dress in 1942. I also remember Easter outfits she made us. The dresses were of flowered silk. She bought lengths of fine wool, one light green and one pale blue, to match colors in the dress silk and made straight coats and lined them with some of the dress material. Hat frames and trimmings came from the garment district in New York. Of course new white gloves were added to the allover picture. All of this was accomplished after work, at night and on weekends. Wonder woman? Yup!

I'm not sure what most of the people did for a living but I knew there were some carpenters, gardeners, estate superintendents, cowmen, firemen, taxi owner, blacksmith, etc. I remember names like Finn, Costello, Mack, Lundy, Huston, Lynch, McCarl, Mosher, Duff, Kiernan, Koster, McGovern, Gleason, Oliver, McAdoo, and many more. Further afield there were names like DuPont, Cyrus Field, Brown,

Continued on page 5

An Irvington Childhood, continued

Hamilton, Stern, Mairs, Beltzhoover, Whitehouse, Benjamin, Jaffray, Schuyler, Walker, DeTalleyrand, Rutter, Washington Irving, Harriman, Dows – most long before my time but often mentioned by “old timers.” Grandpa, a carpenter, built the cupola that was added to the Octagon house built by the Armour family.



Dot Wetjen's grandfather, Michael Kiernan, was a well known builder at the time. He built a number of the homes in Abbotsford.

The house we lived in was a happy one, warm in the winter, cool in the summer and full of love year round. It was the home of my Grandparents and we lived with them. Originally, it was the home of Louis C. Tiffany and was situated in the village of Irvington. Grandpa moved it down the Aqueduct on rollers to its present location. Another house, the Duff's, had already been moved back in the property to make room for it. Both houses are still there. Our home was, and still is, a lovely home.



18 East Clinton Avenue, Dot Wetjen's home.

At one time my Grandfather kept fighting cocks in the attic. He would train or exercise them on a pool table. Fights were, presumably, in a special ring

with a grass rug floor. We were not allowed up there when there was any activity going on. Occasionally, my sister would be sent up to feed and water them. They were kept immaculately clean and there was never an odor. I was still very young when Grandpa got rid of them.



Two photos showing the interior of the Wetjen house, one showing the mantle in the dining room, the other, an original bronze statue with light fixture in the entry hall.

The cellar was dark and cobwebby – a dirt floor – root cellar – 2 coal bins and young trees for uprights. There was a coal furnace and coal hot water heater. The house also had two fireplaces - one in my grandparents' bedroom and one in the living room. I always felt there was one in the dining room before the house was moved because there was a lovely mantle there.

My grandmother had a woman come to help her every Monday. She helped with the laundry, ironing, dusting, and carpet cleaning. As I remember hearing she lived in the woods back of East Irvington, in a shack. She would walk through the woods and be at our house about six in the morning. When she was finished her work she would walk through the woods back home. She was a tiny woman and her white hair was very thin. The few strands she had were pulled to the top of her head and secured with a single hairpin. She came once after Gram died and then we never saw her again. No one knew what became of her. Her people were said to be squatters - perhaps they moved on. We missed her.

My mother worked in New York so when my grandmother died my sister took over the job of running the house. I was supposed to help her. We were

Continued on page 6

An Irvington Childhood, continued

young and made mistakes. We had a washing machine made out of wooden staves bound by metal bands. It had a handle on one side that activated the inside plunger. The wringer was also hand operated. When it was first filled with water it leaked until the staves swelled. Then the floor had to be mopped until dry. Still it was an improvement over the washboard!

My grandfather was very understanding. He never even said a word when we goofed. He even offered my sister a dollar if she'd wash his bedroom curtains! It was the first time we realized the curtains had to be washed - and then put on those dratted curtain stretchers that had nails on them! How we hated spring and fall housecleaning when all the curtains had to be done. It was a big house!

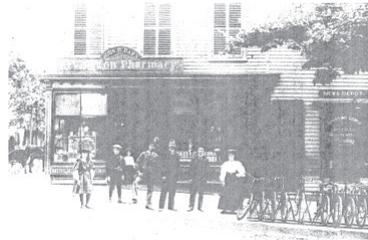
On Sundays Mom used to take us to visit relatives, usually one of her sisters, so we had lots of cousins to play with. Some of the best times were spent with our cousins who lived on the Whitehouse estate, the Larches. One of our favorite pastimes when the elders were having tea was to go into the barn and climb the ladder to the loft where the hay was kept. There we'd locate a long rope on a pulley that was used to pull the hay into the loft. We used to take the rope, go to the back of the loft, turn and start running to the front, jump out the door and let go of the rope, landing on the haystack below. We never got caught, and never got hurt.



Dorothy Wetjen's cousins, the Irwins, who lived on the Whitehouse Estate, the Larches.

I remember Main Street well. There was Petrie's meat market with sawdust on the floor and Buckley and Rabin's grocery store on the corner of Main and Broadway. Miss Nellie McBride was the cashier. There was also Abercrombie's, a paint

store, Wistrand's tailor shop, Lord and Burnham's, and Barr's drug store.



Barr's Pharmacy on the corner of Main and Cottenet Street. Now the site of TraLaLa.

I also remember a peddler named Jake. He carried his wares in a large pack on his back. My Gram always bought from him - needles, threads, pins, lace and yard goods. In return when he caught me and my friends sliding down the side of the aqueduct over the tunnel he always told on us. I never did get away with much!

In those days, a ferry used to run between the foot of Main Street and Piermont. When we were older, and had any money, we would take the ferry, wander around Piermont and then go home. It was fun. When my husband was discharged from the Air Force after World War II we decided to live in Irvington. It was still beautiful and an easy commute to New York City. We settled in my grandparents' home, owned by my mother, sister and me, and raised our children there. They, too, had happy childhoods and to this day have wonderful memories of growing up in Irvington. Sadly we had to leave the area when my husband's health dictated the need of a warmer climate.

I still miss it but know I could never shovel snow like I used to. When I think of my childhood and growing up years, I smile. I smile a lot!



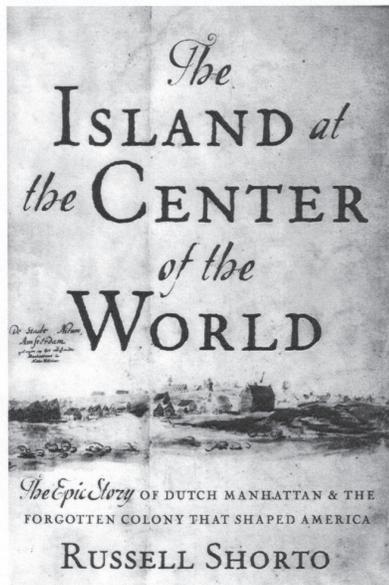
Dorothy Wood Wetjen, shown above, currently resides in Venice, Florida. She will be 95 years old this month.

In Celebration of the 2009 Quadricentennial,

The Irvington Historical Society
is pleased to invite you to

An Evening with bestselling author

RUSSELL SHORTO



Thursday, April 23

7:30PM at the
Main Street School
Auditorium

*"A masterpiece of storytelling, and
first-rate intellectual history."
--The Wall Street Journal*

*"Astonishing...A book that will
permanently alter the way we regard
our collective past."
-- The New York Times*

*"As Russell Shorto demonstrates in
this mesmerizing volume, the story we
don't know is even more fascinating
than the one we do..."
-- The New York Post*

Book signing will follow his lecture.

Members of the Irvington Historical Society and students are free. A suggested
donation from Non-members is **\$5 per person**.

Refreshments will be served after the program
www.irvingtonhistoricalsociety.org

Curator's Corner

By Barbara Sciulli



Fashion is a tyrannical mistress compelling people to submit to the most inconvenient and unimaginable things for fashion's sake. She pinches our feet in tight shoes, or chokes us with tight neckerchief, or squeezes the breath out of the body by tight lacing. Godey's Ladies Book, 1860

The fashions in our current exhibit represent a small sample from the Irvington Historical Society collection, much of which was generously donated by Barbara Denyer - the result of her enthusiastic hunting and gathering over many years. We could ask for no better foundation on which to build our collection.

The décor that sets the background for the exhibit is Victorian: plush, crowded, lacy, shiny and mirrored. The accents are supplied by flora and fauna, insects, birds, nests, bark, reptiles, minerals, feathers, shells, and other natural curiosities used in those times.

The fashions date from 1760-2009. The oldest garment is a brown, floral brocade bodice circa 1760. Lined with homespun linen, it is hand stitched with brown cotton thread. Our latest garment is a pumpkin-colored silk satin, bias cut ruched front frock worn while performing in concerts in the 21st century.

Precisely dating the garments, hats, and accessories is a challenge. Clues are contained in a garment's silhouette, materials, and construction techniques. Pictures, photos, and various reference sources provide helpful information. But confusion is inevitable due to commonly practiced recycling or restoring of clothing done over the years. Provenance ac-

companying donations is always helpful; for example, "Worn by Grandmother Mary Jones at her graduation June 3, 1919" is detailed and specific. A contrasting case, "My husband's great-aunt's engagement dress" is somewhat less helpful.

Mounting the fragile gowns, designed to wear over well-corseted bodies, requires great care. Silk shatters easily; other fabrics may be hardier, but they all also split, fade, or stain over time. Each garment requires an accommodation to fool the eye. Our newest tool involves blow-up mannequins that are slowly inflated to fit perfectly without straining the seams.

In 1818, John Keats told us, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever; its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness..."¹ Perhaps the poet understood that the object needs to be stored and maintained properly to justify "forever". These faded beauties are now out of their boxes for us to admire. Please enjoy them while, for a short time, they bask again in the light.

¹John Keats, *Endymion*, 1818



On Saturday, March 28th, the Historical Society honored its curator, Barbara Sciulli, and celebrated her current exhibit “Frocks, Frills, Furbelows.” At a champagne reception, Society members, friends and family took a moment to thank Barbara for her hard work and dedication to the Society.



Historical Society's Pie Baking Contest



Nice work if you can get it — judging the pie contest.



Good
Enough
To Eat!



Joan Lobdell with Linda and Hope Fourie
(Youth Third Place Winner)



Amy Sherwood's (at left)
1796 Heirloom Apple Pie
tied for First Place with Jesse
Ewing's Pumpkin Praline Pie.
In the Youth Division, Allie
Merrill-Lovett took the Blue
Ribbon with her Treacle Tart.



And Honorable Mention to all!

The Irvington Historical Society Needs Your Help!

We need docent volunteers to welcome visitors to the McVickar House on Thursday and Saturday afternoons from 1 to 4 pm. Docents serve in pairs greeting visitors, answering questions, and showing the exhibit. If you would like to sign up or need more information, please call Veronica Gedrich at 591-9595. Even one afternoon a month would help!

Upcoming Events at the Historical Society

The Irvington Historical Society and Irvington High School Social Studies Department invite you to a very special happening:

Tomorrow's Historians
A Symposium Showcasing Exceptional
Research by Irvington Students

Thursday, April 16, 2009 at 7 p.m.
Irvington High School—Campus Presentation Room

The Stained Glass Windows
In the Church of St. Barnabas

A walking tour and lecture by church historian and Irvington resident, Carolyn Stifel author of The Church of St. Barnabas Of Irvington, New York, Its History and Windows

Sunday May 17, 2009 at 2PM
Book signing follows tour

Save the Date!
Irvington Historical Society House Tour
Saturday, October 3, 2009

The Roost

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THIRD ANNUAL PHOTO CONTEST

FACES AND PLACES: DAILY LIFE IN IRVINGTON

This year's theme invites photos that best capture the unique character of our historic village and the people who live, work and play here. The competition is open to residents and non-residents with no age restriction. This year, however, awards will be given in two categories: under 18 and 18 and above. Photographers may submit up to three unmatted photos taken within the last three years. Photos must be no smaller than 5x7 or larger than 8x10, color or black and white. **The submission deadline is August 1, 2009.** The photos will be displayed at the History Center during September. Prints of the winning photo will be sold by the society. Contest rules and forms will be available on the website, www.irvingtonhistoricalsociety.org.

GET THE PICTURE?