



ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ESSEX TOWN-EST.1763 ESSEX JCT.-EST1892 ESSEX COMM. HISTORICAL SOCIETY-EST.1991

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The ECHO

The Newsletter of the Essex
Community Historical Society
Essex and Essex Junction, Vermont

Published twice a year,
spring and fall.

Fall 2001 Vol 18



Edited by Richard and Lucille Allen

Layout by Tracey Brown and the
students of the Printing/Computer
Graphics Department at the
Center for Technology Essex
Printing by Village Copy and Print
of Essex Jct.

Essex Community Historical Society
3 Browns River Road
Essex Jct., Vermont 05452
Internet address:
www.essex.org/esxhs/esxhsindex.htm

A Message from the President

The Essex Community Historical Society celebrated its 10th anniversary on October 2nd. Can you believe we're 10 years old? Past presidents were in attendance to help us celebrate the event. The Essex Children's Choir sang and Judy Dow presented on Abenaki history and culture. Refreshments and conversation rounded out the fantastic evening.

Harriet Powell would be very proud of us and our accomplishments. As an educator and the unofficial town historian Harriet was determined to have a museum, especially for the children of Essex. We have certainly met that goal. We also have made connections all around our great nation, and over the years we have engaged children and adults in various activities and presentations.

The board of directors will be losing two members this fall, Janet Wood and Eva Clough. Eva has served our organization with tremendous loyalty and energy over these past years. She has served as treasurer for a majority of those years. A past board member will be joining us once again, Barbara Mudgett-Russell.

Our participation in the Vermont History Expo 2001 held in Tunbridge in June was very successful. Approximately 200 people stopped in to view our display on the "Fairs of Essex."

On October 13th, with the cooperation of the Champlain Valley Water District, we had the water tower at Fort Ethan Allen opened for fall color viewing. About 137 visitors climbed the stairs. We

believe there is strong support to preserve the tower for future generations.

On October 29th, Sharon Atterbury told us the story of Elizabeth Akin, formerly of Cavendish, Vermont. Dressed in 19th century clothing, Atterbury narrated Elizabeth's story of her life during the Civil War. The Akin family lived in Vermont and later relocated to Illinois.

We will have our holiday sing-a-long on the Common on Friday, December 7th at 6:30 p.m. We will gather at the Essex Elementary School parking lot and walk to the Common with our candles. The evening will start with the lighting of the tree, followed by caroling and refreshments at the Elementary School. In light of what happened to our country on September 11th, I hope we can bring in the holiday season together.

We are working on the restoration of the 1805 schoolhouse and our hope is to have it open next fall. We have replaced the roof and cleaned out the inside. If you have or know someone who may have old barn boards, beams, or windows, please contact us. It's an exciting project that the community will enjoy for years to come.

Remember all our meetings are open to the public and if you have any suggestions for programs please contact a board member.

Respectfully,
George Clapp,
President

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In Search of
Susie Wilson

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Events

IN SEARCH OF SUSIE WILSON

By
JENNIFER GOULART

(I'm sure that we have all heard the rumors about Susie Wilson. Perhaps this article will put them to rest. Jennifer Goulart wrote this while in Tim Brookes' writing class at UVM. Tim passed it to Vince Feeney who passed it along to me. It interested me because, in addition to clearing up the Susie Wilson question, it shows the process of research in a very subjective way. We all owe thanks to Ms. Goulart for her persistence. Ronald Salomon, editor of the Chittenden County Historical Society Bulletin)

I began my internship with Professor Brookes working on a book about commuting. The book concerned his commute from Essex, Vermont to Burlington, Vermont. Among the many topics of research, ranging from pyrotechnic processes in granite blasting to the nature of barn color schemes in Vermont was a very local task, concerning a local road named after a woman called Susie Wilson. The question: Who was Susie Wilson?

The rumor was that Susie Wilson had been a prostitute during the time that Fort Ethan Allen was operating as a military base. It seemed that every resident of Essex was familiar with the story or some variation of it and some say she was a madam, and that the house was a brothel. I was optimistic that I would find something to support this piece of folklore. It seemed like an easy enough question to answer, since the road was named for her and it had been done fairly recently. I had no idea what a huge project this would become.

I knew from Professor Brookes' earlier inquiries that Susie's name was not one that I could easily find in a book of Vermont history. That avenue had proven futile even before my quest began. With a list of suggested contacts, a vague article published in the *Burlington Free Press* in 1994, and a folktale suspicion about her notoriety, I began my search for Susie Wilson.

The *Burlington Free Press* article stated that she had cooked, washed, and baby-sat for the officers at Fort Ethan Allen, the military installation

that abuts what I would later learn to be the former location of her house. The article also explained that she had migrated from Ireland at age seventeen, had married and been widowed, then moved to the house that once stood on the corner of her namesake road. It gave her age at death as eighty-six, meaning that she had lived in Essex until her death in 1966. There was also a quote from Susie's stepdaughter-in-law attributing the honor of the road name to the fact that the bus stop, a social hub, was in front of her house.

Also quoted in the article was a man named Charlie Petrie, from Essex, who, according to the newspaper, described the surrounding neighborhood as run-down, where landowners had difficulty selling their property. Perhaps for no reason other than the fact that he had lived in the area with Susie, and that he is still alive, I called on Charlie Petrie. I actually called him several times, but he never returned a single call. I found out why months later.

I decided to scan the *Burlington Free Press* for Susie's obituary in hopes of learning more about her family and anything that might offer a new lead, another contact. Unfortunately, the computerized index only goes as far back as 1980, and the card catalog index is incomplete, with a thirty-year gap in the middle. The librarian at the University of Vermont's Department of Special Collections explained that people take on the task of indexing for graduate credit, and that it obviously does not stir much interest. Indexing is too costly for the newspaper to finance, so it has never been finished. Of course, the time that Wilson's obituary would have run falls within the span of the forgotten years, so I had to dig through the card catalog, hoping that a more current article might tell the Susie Wilson story. I found nothing.

The obvious next move was to call the Essex Town offices and ask if anyone there remembered why the road was named for Wilson, or even where her house may have stood. I spoke with Dennis Lutz, in Public Works; I spoke with Edith Tag in the Town Clerk's Office; I spoke with many of the town record keepers, most of whom remembered the folklore, but none of whom could direct me to any evidence that the story was true. This was probably the most

important lesson I learned throughout my research. History is selective. Common and "important" themes, such as elections, wars, and religious movements are studied and written about, recorded and analyzed. However, other subjects in our social history, this inquiry, for example, are left to be forgotten. History dismisses them for their "irrelevance" and they fade. The irony is that these sorts of colorful histories, those often deemed unworthy of study or recording, are the very essence of our culture. It is the Susie Wilsons of the world who shape our towns and our neighborhoods, who make up the character of at-home America. Yet, we dedicate so little time to remembering their stories and to preventing them from becoming the endangered elements of our history.

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One Tuesday in the late fall I headed to the Cherry Street bus terminal and mapped the route to Essex. Although Essex is only ten or fifteen minutes away by car, the bus trip takes over an hour. For starters, the 10:10 bus was there on time, lined up against the sidewalk, but it was not moving. The bus drivers were all present, standing on the street, chatting, until 10:25. Secondly, the bus stops for nearly a half-hour at the Essex Amtrak station to pick up passengers. The problem? There are no passengers. The train station is only open from 7:00 to 10:30 a.m. and then again from about 5:30 to 6:00 p.m. Why the bus stops at the Amtrak station at all on its 10:00 run to Essex may be more of a mystery than Susie Wilson herself. Never mind my realization upon leaving the Amtrak station that the train depot is less than a block away from the Town offices, and I could have walked there thirty minutes prior.

At this point I must draw attention to a crucial piece of information in my "Search for Susie Wilson." This fact, upon which all further inquiry depends, is that there are two separate, but neighboring municipalities in Vermont that call themselves "Essex." They are, respectively, Essex Town and Essex (Junction) Village. The Town offices are located above the police station. I headed up the stairs to the Assessor's office and met Edith Tag. She helped me to find a map of Susie Wilson Road and I located the approximate area where Susie's house may have stood. The lot currently belongs to a

woman named Cavanaugh. This was a start. I went to the vault and started pulling out deeds. The files were complete and I was able to trace the deeds back from current ownership to Susie, and gained some insight about her home and her life. The chronology of ownership of the parcel looks like this.

- Albert Crandall to Mary Cavanaugh (daughter) 1986
- A. J. Crandall to Albert and Margaret Crandall 1975
 - Gilbert Hendry to A. J. Crandall 1961
 - Clovis LeValley to Gilbert Hendry 1945
- William McNassar to Clovis and Ella LeValley 1935
- M. C. and Susanna Wilson to William McNassar 1922
 - Theresa Dickenson to Susannah Wilson 1916

The information on the deed told me when the Wilsons owned the house on Susie Wilson Road. I also knew from whom they had bought it, when they lived there, and that there was a Mr. Wilson, somebody known as M. C. I did not know what the M. C. stood for, but I had more information than I had when I started.

By the time this chronology was completed, my sinuses were full of dust. I was ravenously hungry, and I had another hour-and-a-half bus ride back to Burlington to look forward to.

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The next leg of my study brought me to the library to do some more conventional and extremely tedious research. UVM has United States Census Reports for Vermont on microfilm. I grabbed the 1920 report for Chittenden County and scanned for Essex, then for the name Wilson. Many of the names were illegible and worn with time, but I was able to find Susanna and her husband, Merrit. *Ah ha, that's what the M. in M. C. stood for.* According to the census report, the couple lived on what was then called Colchester Road. At the time of the report Susie was forty-two and her husband was seventy-one. The census profile showed that she had migrated from Ireland in 1895, that the couple had no children, and that the property had been a farm. This information helped me to make a better outline of Susie Wilson's life. I had a more accurate account of her age, her heritage, her married life, the couple's source of income, and their family size - two, husband and wife. Prior to reading

this report, I had only the *Free Press* article to rely on for hearsay details of the woman's life.

Having learned the former name of the road, I returned to the library's electronic card catalog in search of police reports, fort documents, and court minutes, hoping to find out about activities on the old Colchester Road. I learned that UVM is in possession of Fort Ethan Allen court records, as well as some U. S. Immigration Service records. These files are in the stacks at the Research Annex. But, where is the Research Annex?

I asked the librarian to direct me to this mysterious "other" location. She explained that the Research Annex is another building entirely, located next to the rugby field on Spear Street. The building is only open from 1:30 to 5:00 Monday through Friday, right in the middle of all my classes. The Research Annex would have to wait.

In the meantime I took a suggestion from Tim Brookes and called the Brownell Library in Essex and asked whether they had any records on Susie Wilson. They did not. Penny Pillsbury, the librarian, directed me back to the *Free Press* article, which, I explained to her, did not really tell me anything.

"It's pretty uncommon for a woman to have a road named after her," I explained. "All the article says was that she was a nice person. That doesn't seem to be enough reason to warrant having a road named after you."

"This is Vermont in the 1950s. That really could be enough," she replied and suggested that I contact Susie's great-grandson who works as a janitor at either Fleming or Summit Elementary school.

I tracked down the grandson after stupidly asking at both schools, "Do you have a janitor who is the grandson of Susie Wilson?" This job can be incredibly uncool at times. To my amazement, the folks at the school knew what I was talking about and put me through to Greg Perce. I asked him about his great-grandmother. Greg said, "The person ya should be talk' to is my grandmother, Gladys. She has pictures and stuff of Susie Wilson. I don't know if she'll be wantin' to let any information out, though. 'Cuz I know she's been asked before."

That's what I was afraid of. Considering the nature of the rumor, I assumed that Perce's grand-

mother, Gladys, would be wary of speaking to me about Susie. I did not know how to broach the subject without raising Gladys' suspicions about my motives in the inquiry. This is why I had not started my search with Gladys.

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Desperate, I called Essex Town offices again, and pestered them about road names. Now that I knew that the street was formerly known as Colchester Road, I was hoping to dig through the old town maps and see how the road changed from one year to the next. I would then know what year the name change would have been proposed, and at which Selectboard meeting it would have been put to a vote.

When I asked in Planning and Zoning about how and why the name would have been changed, the person on the line told me, "Well, there's a story," and laughed. He explained that, "the Selectboard chooses the name," which I already knew, and that, "the name of that road probably goes back about a hundred years or so. You should check the names of the Selectboard. If there actually was an action taken, it may be there."

Before hanging up, I realized that the period we were talking about was wrong. If Susie Wilson was alive until a little more than thirty years ago, then the name change would certainly have happened at least more recently than one hundred years ago. I pressed a bit further, hoping that the more current the name change, the more accessible the documents would be. "Wait, she didn't die that long ago," I argued.

He suggested that I call the Vermont Highway Office, at the State House in Montpelier. "They may have some old maps. That'll leave you with a lead, anyway. Talk to the town clerk and find out who was clerk then." With these final suggestions, he signed off.

At his prompting, I called the Town Clerk's Office again. I was told, "That's been Susie Wilson Road as long as I've known it. And we came up in '65." I inquired as to who was town clerk before that and was advised to try calling the Public Works Department. "I don't know if they have anything that old, but you could try." The man on the telephone gave me the number

for Public Works, which I already had, and I called Dennis Lutz - again.

Dennis was extremely patient with me, considering how many times I had called him for help on so many different research subjects. I asked him the same battery of questions about road naming.

He explained the process. "Um, it's a fairly formal process now. A developer will come in and recommend names to the Planning Commission. The Selectboard has to recognize them. The 911 office is involved in the process," he elaborated. "They try not to have similar names, so they don't go to the wrong place in an emergency. The Selectboard asks for suggestions from the townspeople when they make a change."

I asked him whether there were any old maps where I might see the road before and after the change. I hoped to pinpoint the year that the Selectboard would have voted on the subject.

Dennis explained, "The old maps that I have from the state only have the numbers. You could go through Selectboard minutes to see when it happened." This search was out of the question. Without knowing the approximate year that the road got its name, I could be there forever going through pages and pages of meeting notes, randomly searching for her name.

One valuable piece of information that Dennis was able to provide was the 911 lead. This was something I would never have figured out for myself. I called the State House for the number of the 911 main office, perhaps the most comical and frustrating avenue of this inquiry. The man I spoke with explained that, "This office won't be prepared until summer. It doesn't even exist yet."

I told him that I understood that the 911 office is charged with naming roads in Vermont in order to aid in their emergency dispatch, I explained that I was trying to establish whether they were involved in the naming of a particular road.

"But that office doesn't exist yet," he reiterated.

"Yes, but is there a Board responsible for setting up the 911 office?" I asked.

"Oh yes," he replied, finally understanding the question. "I'll put you through upstairs to Tom Davis." Herein lay my frustration. I had to rephrase my question fifteen times before he under-

stood that I was not looking for the phone number for 911! I left a message for Tom Davis and hung up.

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The day finally came when I could go to the Research Annex. I had a class cancelled in the afternoon, so I took my list of articles and headed to the Annex on a Tuesday in the late fall. The Research Annex is a strange place. Hidden behind UVM Police Services and next to some other strange edifice, the door looks like something out of "Gotham City," smoky metal and strangely shaped. The Annex itself is a room full of tables and some randomly scattered boxes. This looked like a busy place. There is an office behind a glass wall at the far end of the room where I headed first for assistance.

The man in the office paged someone named Connie who emerged from a door I had not noticed when I entered the Annex. She photocopied my list of requested materials and slipped through the door, returning with an enormous box of films. It turned out that the three items I had selected: United States immigration records, Fort Ethan Allen police logs, and a series on prostitution and "white slavery" were spread out over some thirty reels of microfilm and with no index. It was just another typical bump on my road to discovery.

I sat down at a loud, clunky microfilm viewer for the better part of the afternoon, annoyed by the crashing sound of the slowly turning reel. This was extremely low-tech equipment, and it became quite a time consuming endeavor. I was also faced with a broken printer, which meant that if I did find anything, it would have to be transferred to the main library for copying, or hand copied - by me.

The first reel contained records of Fort Ethan Allen court proceedings, officers' lists, and day-to-day operations logs (food shipments, shift changes etc.). The dates were a bit early for my purposes, ending in 1910, six years before Susie bought her house on Colchester Road. Still, I was optimistic that I would still get a glimpse of what life was like at the fort and in the neighboring area. I noticed two things in the records:

1. By far, the most prevalent offense on the

base was Absenteeism Without Leave. 2. Everyone was found guilty as charged at Fort Ethan Allen. Having found nothing of use in the Fort records for the target years, and knowing that the Annex would be long closed before I could view the rest of the microfilm, I opted to try my chance at getting a lead from the Annex staff. I decided to press Connie for the missing reels of Fort Ethan Allen records. Perhaps overstepping my rights in the Research Annex, I boldly slipped through the doorway and down the stairs to the vault. A bit ashamed of my intrusive behavior, I shyly asked Connie for the missing reels. Unfortunately, she informed me, UVM does not own them. Desperate to find SOMETHING useful to my purpose at the Annex, I explained my inquiry fully to Connie and what I was looking for and why, what my suspicions were, and my track record to date. Connie led me to the man behind the glass, who offered his own insight into the "Search for Susie Wilson." He told me the same story I had heard repeatedly. Susie Wilson was a prostitute, although many have suggested she was a madam, more likely considering that she was in her forties when she lived on her namesake road.

However, once again the story was told with no confirmation. He directed me to the police logs, not of Essex Town, but of Chittenden County. He explained, "You see, Essex didn't assemble its own police force until a few decades ago. They would have been under county jurisdiction at the time."

Light dawns! No wonder I haven't been able to find any Essex court records, or even evidence that Essex had a courthouse at that time and it didn't. I requested that the box of microfilm be shipped to the main library for later perusal and headed downtown to the courthouse.

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Once I got to the Chittenden County Courthouse, I realized that I had overlooked one small detail. It was Veterans' Day, and although UVM does not recognize it as a holiday, much of the rest of the city has the day off. I would have to come back the next day.

That Wednesday was colder than usual, even for northern Vermont. I bundled up in three layers of flannel and wool, donned a hat and fisherman's mittens and went out. Unable to put my arms

down, I meandered my way down Church Street to the courthouse. Once inside, I encountered The Machine. A sign above me read, "Check Your Firearm," and beyond it stood a large and threatening metal detector. A gentle-faced policeman rose from his desk by the door and welcomed me in with a request that I empty my pockets, one layer of clothing at a time.

Having missed one of the many pockets in my coat, shirt, sweater, pants etc., I set off the alarm in The Machine and had to be "wanded down" by Officer Friendly. I passed the test and headed for the glass office of the people who would help me - I hoped.

I stepped up and told the girl in the box that I was interested in looking at Essex Town records. I explained that I was a student at UVM, that I was good and not evil, that I had passed the weapons check, and that I'd please like to come inside. She answered that Victor is the keeper of all things vaulted, but he had already left the building. Victor is the exclusive holder of the impressive seventy-five-digit password to the enormous vault. I can't even get past the gatekeeper's gatekeeper. "Victor of the Vault" works from 7:00 to 9:00 in the morning and later from 3:00 to 7:00 daily. The courthouse, however is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Therefore although Victor is in the building during those strange, scattered hours, he is inaccessible and unavailable. I left my name and a brief note and headed back to the library to cuddle up with some microfilm.

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I spent many hours of my young life poring over reels of microfilm on prostitution and "white slavery," painstakingly searching for Susie Wilson's name, or the name of any Susie, Susan, Susanne, or Suzette amongst the endless lists of suspected "ladies of the night." I found a few ladies who might have fit the profile, had they been twenty years older and white. I went so far as to scan for the names of Susie's neighbors. The woman she bought her house from as well as the people she later sold it to. I cross-referenced the United States Census Report to see if any of the neighboring homes accepted boarders or kept a lot of hired help or had distant relatives who

might be mentioned in the endless reports, and documents concerning prostitution and "white slavery." I was a one-woman witch-hunt by the time I was through, but never a witch did I find. I was discouraged.

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Sometime soon after my trip to Chittenden County Superior Court, "Victor of the Vault" called me at home. The conversation went like this: (Author's note: The dialect I am using is my attempt to replicate the French-Canadian influenced accent often found in Vermont, of which Victor demonstrates a prime example.) "This is Victor Freeman from Chinin' Couny Superiah Court. I looked up, er, ah, Susie Wilson and I can't fiynd nuthin' in our records. There's no Susie Wilson that ever did nuthin.' Uh, I guess that's it. You kin call us tamarah if ya kin think of enuthin' else we kin help ya with. Niyt."

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The next few weeks of research had me in the basement of the Bailey-Howe Library, in the Special Collections Department. I searched the Essex Town directories on file there for a Susanna Krebsler. I knew that this was her final married name because her stepdaughter-in-law is Gladys Krebsler. I found her there in 1942 at an address on Pearl Street. She no longer appears in the phone book after 1966, suggesting that this was when she died. This information was helpful because I was still in search for her obituary. I took the name Krebsler and searched through a cemetery record book for Essex and actually found a listing for Susanna and Fritz Krebsler's headstone. According to the cemetery log, Susanna Krebsler passed away on March 7, 1966 and her husband, Fritz, preceded her by nearly fourteen years on June 2, 1952.

I went from there to the *Burlington Free Press* microfilm index and found the reel for March of 1966, the month she died, and looked up her obituary. This actually taught me little that I did not already know.

However, once I had obtained her final married name and date of passing, I was able to refer again to the Essex Town directory. I traced back through her life in Essex, discovering not only where she lived for the greater part of her life, but also uncovering some other information that I might otherwise have overlooked.

Essex Community Historical Society
Board of Directors
2001-2002

(denotes year of term expiration)

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18 Sage Circle
879-0619

Diane DiGennaro, Vice President (02)
47 Brigham Hill Road
878-0276

Lucille Allen, Secretary (02)
3 Oakwood Lane
878-3853

David Clough, Treasurer (03)
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203 Main Street
878-5529

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88 Park Street
878-2193
878-2294

Polly Whitcomb (03)
P.O. Box 5154
Essex Jct, VT 05453
878-4479

Suprisingly, Susie Wilson (then Susie Krebsler) was the only Susanna in the town of Essex during her lifetime. I had traced back far enough to have found her last husband, Fritz, listed as a single man, a plumber for the Fort, rooming with a woman named Susanna Drinan. I discovered that Susie had been married after the death of Merrit Wilson and prior to her marriage to Fritz Krebsler. Susie did not like to be alone.

Next, I looked up the name, Drinan. John Drinan, a retired soldier from Fort Ethan Allen, was listed just once, with a wife named Susie. The following year Susanna Drinan, his widow, was listed at his former address. At this point, I had not only discovered the unknown marriage, but also that she had probably met her second husband at the Fort, as she had her third. He apparently died shortly after they were wed, and Susie gained possession of his house, the house her next husband, Fritz Krebsler, roomed in until they married not many years later. I was amazed at how much information I had gleaned from a telephone book.

The unfortunate and suspicious conclusion I drew from my directory search was that there was no listing for Susie when she was the bride of Merrit Wilson, nor was there any trace of her existence prior to her marrying John Drinan. This lack of information disrupted my inquiry because I was unable to tell where she was living during those many years. The Essex Town directory only reaches back to the 1940s, making it impossible to locate her during the years she would have lived in the house on her namesake road.

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As I was unable to find these vital pieces of the Susie Wilson's story - her whereabouts for those many years, her maiden name - I was forced to call Gladys Krebsler. Nervous about calling this woman who I was warned would not speak to me, I was very timid in my inquiry. Before making the call, I sat down with Professor Brookes and constructed a very tame, almost dopey list of questions to initiate the interview. His suggestion that I disprove any notion that I was a local gossip prompted the mild line of questioning. My strategy was, for the most part, to present myself as someone totally unfamiliar with the rumor of Susie's infamy. I was to make it very clear that I was from Massachusetts, and totally

ignorant of Vermont local history, so as to dispel any notion that this interview would do further harm to Susie's image.

It was Gladys who answered the phone. Her voice was soft, drowned out by the loud television in the background, which she excused herself to turn down. I explained my interest in Susie Wilson and anticipated her hanging up on me. She did not.

Gladys was very sweet and seemed pleased to talk about Susie. She told me, "Susie was my husband's stepmother. She owned a house right there on the corner of the road going up Susie Wilson Road. There was a pond behind it," she elaborated. "It used to freeze in the winter and the kids would come and skate. Susie would make cookies and hot cocoa. She never had any kids of her own, but she certainly was good to the children."

I considered the pond for a moment, trying to envision the whereabouts of the house despite my geographically challenged mind. I had seen the deed to the land, but had not grasped what a large piece of property it really was. Land deeds are not easy reading. They are written in the surveyor's tongue. Twenty four and three-quarters yards north to the bridge abutting the tree to the south-southeast of the rock and fourteen degrees left of the line of demarcation, blah, blah, blah. Who but a surveyor could find a pond in that heap of directions!

"So, there's a pond there?" I asked. "That should help me figure out where the house was."

Gladys laughed, "It's not much of a pond now. Just a big mud hole. Her house was on the corner of Pearl Street."

"Was it across the street from Towne Plaza" I asked, "where Ames is?"

"Yes, she said, adding, "that house is gone now."

"Do you remember when they tore down the house?" I asked. She replied with no subtle hint of irony, "When they put the road through." She added, "Susie was living up the road a bit then, with another stepson. That's my brother-in-law."

I returned to my list of questions, trying not to open the family history question just yet.

"She was Irish, wasn't she?" I asked. "Do you know when she came here."

"Well, I know she was very young. She was seventeen, I think. She got married after she came here, in New York." Gladys continued, "She never had any children. She did have a couple of sisters and a brother in New York. She also had a brother here. Do you know Bill Cassell?" she asked. "He was very well known. He was a drummer in the band at the Majestic Theater."

"No, I had never heard of any brother," I replied, solidifying the façade of naivete.

"Oh well, her brother was very popular. He came to Vermont from Ireland and when he got enough money, he would send for one of them," she continued. "He came here first, and Susie came up here after she got married in New York. That husband died, though, and she married a sergeant from the fort, then she married Mr. Wilson, then my father-in-law." (*Hmm, her timeline of husbands is different from what I have.*)

"It's pretty amazing that she had a road named after her," I said, again leaning on the non-threatening question list. "Do you know why," I asked.

"She did catering for the officers' wives at the fort," Gladys explained, "and she babysat for their children. She met my father-in-law there. He was a plumber at the fort, you see." She continued. "They raised chickens and ducks and geese. She used to sell eggs at the fort, because they always liked fresh eggs on Officer's Row. She would bring the eggs there, so they all knew her. She was such a pretty lady. She had a heart as big as all outdoors."

If beaming were audible, I would have heard her glow. Gladys continued, "She used to say, if she had some pennies, she always has some pennies to give. That's how she was." Gladys obviously loved her mother-in-law very much.

"I can imagine why she had a road named after her," I agreed. By Gladys' telling of it there could not have been a more deserving candidate for such an honor.

"We're very proud of that," she exclaimed. "Do you know Kellogg Road? It's named for Rose Kellogg. She and Susie were great friends. Isn't that amazing?" she asked. "Both ladies have a road named for them!"

"Do you know who named the road," I asked.

"It came to being when the buildings went up," she answered. *Susie Wilson Road is now a strip mall.* "Everyone always knew it as Susie Wilson's Road. Can you imagine an ignorant Irish girl, not having much schooling, having a road named after her?"

I agreed that it was truly something remarkable and Gladys added that, "It's pretty impressive. She would be proud." With this, I signed off, with a promise from Gladys that she would be willing to speak to me again.

.....

I had learned a lot from the interview with Gladys, especially about Susie Wilson's family. With Susie's maiden name I had a hunch that I would now be able to put together a rough sketch of her life. In order to do this, however, I realized that I needed to go back to the Essex Town records to try to reconstruct a timeline of her life using the marriage and death records. Starting with the husband who I was sure died in Essex, Merrit Wilson, I estimated the year of death and checked the table of contents for his name (how eerie to consider being found in a death index.) I found him in the pages of the necronomicon of 1926. His name was listed in beautiful cursive at the beginning of the album. I went to the given page and found not only his date and place of death, but also the doctor's summation of the cause of death and the symptoms leading to it. Also listed was his place of birth and the names of his parents, an extra goodie I had forgotten about.

After recording the death information for her husband, I went in search of marriage certificates. I hoped to find out whom and when she married so I could be sure of all of her married names. There was also some uncertainty as to the chronology of her marriages, so I wanted to confirm that information as well.

I found nothing about her second marriage in the Essex records. This may have been due to poor record keeping, or the couple may have been wed before moving to the area. However, having found out that the man was born in the town of Cambridge, Vermont, I was

not totally lost. I could still search that town's records in hopes that they had married there, assuming that folks were not in the habit of moving around much in the time period I was studying.

My next search was also in the marriage certificates album. I was curious as to when she married her third husband. This was where the chronology got fuzzy. No one was quite sure which husband came first, and I did not want such a discrepancy to sabotage my efforts.

I was able to find records of her last marriage, as well as the death certificate for her third husband, which set the timeline straight. The marriage certificate was especially helpful, because it listed Susie's mother's maiden name, her father's name and whether the bride or groom had been divorced. According to this document, this was her fourth marriage, at age forty-seven. She had never been divorced.

I found Susie's own death certificate. This time I was sure of the date, it being more current and reliable. I had actually seen it in her obituary as well as in a cemetery log. I went through the index in search of her name. With her final married name and date of passing, I had little trouble in locating this record. It listed the date and cause of her death, her residence at the time of death, how long she had been there, and where she had resided before that. Now I had an almost complete historical outline of the woman, and a better idea of who she was, based on the events of her life. Susie's timeline looks like this:

1887 Susanna Cassell is born in Ireland.

1895 Susie Cassell moves to New York. Between 1895 and 1916 Susie marries her first husband (Tom?).

Between 1909
and 1916 Bill Cassell moves to Burlington.
 His sister Susie moves to Vermont.
 Susie marries Merrit Wilson, of Cambridge.

1916 Susanna and Merrit Wilson buy their old house/farm on Colchester Road.

1922 Susanna and Merrit Wilson sell their house on Colchester Road.

1926 Merrit Wilson dies.

Between 1926 and 1931 Susanna Wilson marries Sergeant John

Drinan, a retired soldier. They live on Pearl Street.

1932 John Drinan dies.

1933 Fritz Krebsler, a plumber at Fort Ethan Allen, rents rooms from the widow, Susie Drinan.

April 28, 1934 Susanna Drinan marries Frederick (Fritz) Krebsler.

They live in her house on Pearl Street.

June 2, 1952 Fritz Krebsler dies.

March 7, 1966 Susanna Krebsler dies in Waterbury State Hospital. She was an in-patient there, suffering from dementia.

.....

As the semester drew to a close, and it became clear the "Susie Wilson Project" would not be finished, I had a random encounter that would seal off yet another avenue of research. Having coffee with some friends of my roommate, the conversation turned to academics. As we were all scrambling to finish our courses and walk down commencement row, it was more of a "bitch" session, really. I voiced my frustration concerning the standstill in my Susie Wilson quest. One of our coffee guests was, unbeknownst to me, a lifelong Essex resident. Even more surprisingly, the girl I knew only as Andrea announced herself to be Andrea Petrie, granddaughter of the mysterious Charlie Petrie. I finally learned what was keeping Mr. Petrie from returning my calls.

Andrea volunteered to call her grandparents and inquire as to whether they remembered Ms. Wilson, having lived in Essex at the same time as she. Andrea's grandmother remembered my previous phone calls and enlightened me as to why I had never heard back from the couple.

The article in the *Burlington Free Press* that cited Mr. Petrie as a neighbor of the Wilsons, with vivid memories of the rundown neighborhood, was blatantly inaccurate. It seems that when the reporter questioned Charlie about life in Essex during the teens and early twenties, he made it very clear that he had been abroad fighting in World War I and did not return to Essex until later. He never knew Susie Wilson, or the Essex of that period. His pseudo-recollection of Colchester Road was a complete fabrication on

the part of the newspaper. He did not call me back because he was completely disenchanted with the paper, the topic, and the blatant misconstruction of his words. I could finally understand why I had never gotten a response. The paper's tendency to embellish emerged as a recurrent theme in my project.

.....
Still dissatisfied with the results of many months of research, I opted to contact Gladys Krebsler one last time and ask "the question." I would be heading back to Massachusetts, maybe for the rest of my life and was determined to reach some conclusion to my yearlong effort. Gladys remembered me right off and I knew that Prof. Brookes had been right. The neutral tone of our previous conversation had gained me some credibility as an unbiased, benevolent student trying to write a harmless term paper.

I filled Gladys in as to what I had been up to, the deed searching, the interviewing, and the vaults. I had conducted much of this research prior to our first conversation, however I had withheld it in my attempts to appear ignorant of the details. Trying to be diplomatic in the phrasing of my questions, I sought to discredit the rumor from the start. "You know, I've heard some really unpleasant things about Susie, none of which have any proof to back them up," I added. "Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Oh, that story," Gladys replied with not a small bit of hostility. "That newspaper wrote a terrible story about Susie. None of it was A BIT TRUE. Susie had people in New York that wanted to sue those reporters!"

Well, at least she was angry with the paper, and not me. "My goodness, I never heard about any article, just some folklore," I answered truthfully. I really hadn't heard anything about another article.

"Oh yes, a terrible article saying Susie ran a "fancy house" or something. I called that paper and told them to write a new article taking it all back or we'd have a lawyer call them. And they did," she concluded, triumphantly.

"I can certainly understand why," I replied. "I have never found anything that proved the story to be true. I cannot believe they would go and print something they couldn't back up." (*Of course, I could believe it though. This was the second time in the course of one story that the paper had "filled in the blanks" with*

unsubstantiated or blatantly fictional information. No need to tell her that, though.")

"Well," Gladys continued, breaking me from my theorizing about conspiracies, "they wrote a piece apologizing for what they'd said and that was the end of it."

"I have to tell you, Gladys," I said, "I have talked to a lot of people and I have done a lot of digging. The only person who has been able to say they actually knew Susie had nothing but nice things to say about her. That's what I've got to go on."

We ended the call with that and I ended the Susie Wilson project. Never in all the time I worked on this project did I find any evidence to substantiate the local rumor that Susie Wilson, in the words of Gladys Krebsler, "ran a fancy house." The logical answer to the question of why the road got its name is that Susie Wilson's house was the only house on Susie Wilson's Road.

As far as the question of who Susie Wilson was, is concerned, my work has given me a very different view of this woman. From all the research and interviews, the hours, days, and weeks in the library, the vault and the Annex, I was able to construct a portrait of a rather sad life. The Susie who I came to know was hardly the wild criminal of folklore. From what I learned about the mysterious Susanna Wilson of Susie Wilson Road, I can confirm only that she was childless, four times widowed and died in a mental institution while suffering from dementia. The only person whom I encountered who remembered the living Susie Wilson exuded a love for this woman that caused me to judge Susie in a favorable light as an honorable woman.

Although Susie Wilson's history has demonstrated the longevity and tenacity common to rumors, I never uncovered anything that proved that Susie ever lived up to her tainted, perhaps constructed, reputation. It may be there, as the search was never really finished. (I have, at least, a dozen new sources that arose while I was writing this article.) For now, however, all I can truthfully write is, that lack of evidence, or even of witnesses still living who may have known Susie herself, causes me to question the ugly story about her. As for me, I believe that Susie Wilson was just a farm girl who lived on the corner of Susie Wilson Road.

(Editor's note: Does anyone have any ideas about how the rumors started?)

Originally published in the Bulletin of the Chittenden County Historical Society, Winter 2000-2001, Vol. 34, No. 3. We are grateful to Ronald Salomon, editor, for permission to reprint this article.

Essex Community Historical Society
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Essex Jct., Vermont 05452

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Thank You.



We will have our holiday sing-a-long on the Common on Friday, December 7th at 6:30 p.m. We will gather at the Essex Elementary School parking lot and walk to the Common with our candles. The evening will start with the lighting of the tree, followed by caroling and refreshments at the Elementary School.

Upcoming Events