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The ECHO

The Newsletter of the
Essex Community Historical Society
Essex and Essex Junction, Vermont
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3 Browns River Road
Essex Jct., Vermont 05452
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Find a link to the Historical Society
Web site at www.essex.org

President's Message

At the 14th annual meeting on October 4, 2005 I outlined some goals after I was re-elected as president of our historical society.

I would like to state them again as well as add a few more. However, I need to make it clear that the board has not had an opportunity to discuss them. So in the end, they may be eliminated, revised or accepted as legitimate goals for our organization.

- I feel the historical society needs to look into finding a new space for our museum. Our collection continues to grow and we have no more physical space to exhibit our collection. We are currently using other sites in the community to display some of our collection.
- We need to start organizing for our 250th birthday as a community in 2013. The celebration will be in seven short years. Essex was chartered on June 7th, 1763.
- The collection needs to be entered into a data base so we can determine a value of the total collection for insurance purposes. Some data entry has begun and the collection is insured. We need help with the data entry.
- We need to increase our membership and our public relations with all facets of the community. Currently our membership is less than 1% of the population of Essex. Good public relations can help us achieve our goals.
- Research needs to continue. Our history needs to be documented, as well as the things that make us unique as a community. We already have over 40 years of Essex history to write and record to bring us up-to-date. This probably will require another book.

So there you are! Where we end up is anyone's guess. How these goals will shape the future direction of our society is yet to be determined. If you have an opinion, let a board member know. Thanks!!!

*Respectfully Submitted,
George R.W. Clapp*

The Vermont Toy Farm

Essex, Vermont

By George Clapp

The one thing I really enjoy about the historical society is the fact that you never know from one day to the next what might happen. A recent example was when Carlos Van Orden from Kansas contacted the society to return five Dolly-Grams that Western Union used to sell to its customers. A customer would purchase a Dolly-Gram, which was a doll carrying a message, to give to a friend, family member or a loved one, for a special occasion. The Dolly-Grams were manufactured in Essex Center by the Vermont Toy Farm, located on Chapin Road. The business operated from the mid 1950s to 1983.

- What did the Vermont Toy Farm make?
- Who owned the Vermont Toy Farm?
- Who worked there?
- Where did they sell their products?
- Why was its presence so inconspicuous in our community?

The Baron Josef and Baroness Ilse von Schenk were the owners of the Vermont Toy Farm, Inc. They came to the United States in 1932 from Austria. They started off as wallpaper designers for a firm in New York City, but decided what they really wanted to do was to design and create European inspired Christmas decorations. The Schenk Studio was established in New York City and had family ties in Austria.

The von Schenks decided to leave the city and settle in the country, especially somewhere that reminded them of Austria. They wanted to create a business that relied on home workers, rather than full time employees. So they moved their operations to Hancock, Vermont. The cottage industry quickly out grew its space and the location was very difficult to get to during the winter months. The next move was to Essex about 1956. This location was rural, flat and easy to get to. The location had a large barn, house, and



Featherhead Doll Christmas ornament



(L. to R.) Toni Estus, Gary Estus and George Clapp

several out buildings.

The von Schenks purchased the farm and transformed the barn into a factory that would produce dolls, as well as Christmas decorations. The operation had 15 workers on site and 100 to 150 home sewers in Chittenden, Franklin and Grand Isle Counties. Relatives would come from Austria during the warm months to help design the new creations for the upcoming Christmas season.

The Baron and Baroness decided that the teddy bear market was saturated, so they focused on different products. Their products were made of cloth and usually required some silk screening. One unusual item was lobsters that came in three sizes. The lobsters were sold to small souvenir shops all along the northeastern coast for the tourist season. Another item, according to home sewer Lenore Whitten, was penguins.

At Christmas the Starsweepers line was always available. These dolls had featherheads. Yellow canary feathers were used to replicate hair. Josef hand painted on all the faces. The dolls all had the same face. An angel line was also available in three sizes. The

smallest was to be hung from the tree, while the larger ones were used as table centerpieces.

When Carlos Van Orden, representing Western Union, came to Vermont to present the Essex Community Historical Society with the Dolly-Grams, two former employees of the Vermont Toy Farm joined us. This provided us with a starting point for our research. Who were these quiet workers? How many were there? Would they agree to do an interview? Would they have any toys from the Vermont Toy Farm?

Eva Clough and I met with the employees who attended the meeting and put an article in the *Essex Reporter* seeking more information about the Vermont Toy Farm. We asked

that other former employees contact us for an interview. The phone started to ring and with each person we interviewed more names of fellow employees were shared with us.

Phyllis Cooley of Jericho worked in the Vermont Toy Farm office for about three years as a bookkeeper. Phyllis suggested we talk to Toni Estus, who lives in Milton. Phyllis said that Toni was a floor supervisor and would be very knowledgeable about the whole operation.

Phyllis' suggestion was correct, Toni knew a great deal about the Vermont Toy Farm. Toni started off as a truck driver but eventually became the floor supervisor. She said the Vermont Toy Farm made several of their own products for retail sale and would subcontract with other companies. Some companies needed help to get their own products out on time, while others needed special help and the expertise of the Vermont Toy Farm, Inc. (e.g. – Dolly-Grams for Western Union, Feather Head Dolls for the Pond's Cold Cream Co.)

Stores that purchased items from the Vermont Toy Farm were Macy's, Saks Fifth Ave., and Sun Glow Corporation, all from New York City. Stores from Washington, D.C. were the Hecht Company, Lord & Taylor, and Woodward & Lothrop.

Toni introduced us to her son, Gary Estus. Gary started working at the Vermont Toy Farm when he was 16 years old. By the time he left the company Gary was doing or could do almost any job in the facility. When the von Schenks sold their business Gary purchased most of the equipment and started his own business. Gary's main jobs were cutting the cloth and doing the silk screening.

We also met with Marge (Fields) Glaze and Thelma Griggs at the Essex V.F.W. Post. Marge's dad, Harvey Tyler, and her oldest son, Michael Fields, both worked at the Vermont Toy Farm. Michael drove a van filled with finished items to Pittsfield, Massachusetts nearly every Saturday. Marge validated much of the information we already had. Thelma shared with us the various items that were made at the Vermont Toy Farm; pillows, Dolly-Grams, anchors, lobsters, music boxes, clowns, lover dolls and much, much more.

Mary Masterson, from Essex, called for an interview. She said that her brother had worked for the Vermont Toy Farm. He too was a driver. Harold Farnsworth drove the company's products to the Boston area for about five years. Her mom, Margret Farnsworth, was a home worker. Mary can remember her mother gluing black feet on the Dolly-Grams back in the sixties.



Gary Estus displays a fabric cutter used in the production of cloth toys.

Beverly McCuin of Essex came to the museum for her interview. Beverly had worked for the Vermont Toy Farm for about 13 years; six of those years were at home. Her duties were that of a clerk typist. She typed up orders and did billing. She worked at the Vermont Toy Factory full time after all her children started school. Beverly has her own collection of Toy Farm products and is sharing them for our display at the Vermont History Expo 2006, on June 24 and 25, at the Tunbridge World's Fair Grounds.

Lillian Wimble was a home sewer and took great pride in her work. She worked for about 10 years. On many occasions her seven children helped her complete her work on time. When Lillian applied for the job, she was asked what she had for a sewing machine. With pride she said all her work was done on a trestle sewing machine. She quickly got the message that the trestle

sewing machine probably wasn't fast enough. Lillian went out and purchased a new electric sewing machine. With her speed and accuracy she soon was relied on for rush orders. She said she would pick up twelve dozen units and have them completed and back the following day. Each and every doll was inspected before she left.

Eva and I were impressed by the positive comments made by the former employees. They all liked and respected the von Schenks. They were also very grateful for the opportunity to have a job and work at home. Many of the employees were given dolls or other products as holiday gifts. For the most part the manufacturing plant was a very quiet operation with few community members ever realizing what went on inside. Ilse von Schenk was a very private person.

Most of the high quality fabrics were purchased from New York City. The left over fabric scraps were put to good use. The community would gather up the scraps and made some very interesting and beautiful quilts out of them. Eva and I visited Anne O'Grady, from Essex, and saw some attractive quilts made by her mother and grandmother.

I would like to thank all the individuals who agreed to be interviewed and who shared information about the Vermont Toy Farm. A special thanks to Steven and Peter Schenk, grandsons of Josef and Ilse von Schenk, for providing us with detailed family history.

I would like to thank Eva Clough for her support and help in producing this article. Other local people who worked for the Vermont Toy Farm were: Betty Cross, shipper, Paline Leonard, secretary, Perry Towers, foreman/all around handy-man, Betty Croft—job title unknown and Pearl Howard, stuffer (people said she was so good at her job that she would get to choose which job she wanted to do).

Duck Decoy Carver William Sheldon

by George Clapp

Last February 12, 2005, I attended a "Sportsman's Auction" at Duane Merrill's Auction House. Two Essex decoy carvers had decoys up for auction.

Phillip Gregory's decoy was a large Canada goose that sold for \$325.00. The other was a William Sheldon decoy that sold for \$105.00. Our historical society was interested for two reasons. These decoys were made by two men from our community and the historical society has nothing in our collection regarding hunting, fishing or sports in general.

Finally, on December 15, 2005 Eva Clough and I had the opportunity to talk with William "Bill" Sheldon. Bill's family has lived in Essex for several years. He lived in the town and now lives in the village. When entering the Sheldon house we could easily view duck decoys, duck hunting pictures on the walls, and we were greeted by a beautiful black lab, named Sam.

Bill, while hunting with friends off of Shelburne Point, had a duck decoy wash up into their blind. After retrieving the decoy, the idea of carving their own became a reality. This was the late 1950's and hunting gear was limited and expensive. So Bill and his friend acquired tools and materials so they could accomplish their goal of making their own decoys (e.g.; band saw, planer, draw shaves, jointer, etc.).

Bill proceeded to make templates and design his decoys so they were functional. This is key to understanding why Bill made the kind of decoys he did. First, he had a good source for white cedar. White cedar is not the best wood to carve because it has knots. But Bill was more interested in the fact that white cedar would not rot easily in water.

He designed the body of the duck to be thicker than normal. He felt this would allow it to sit higher in the water. A keel was fastened to the bottom that allowed the string and weight (anchor) to be fastened. A lead weight was also fastened to the bottom of the decoy to keep it upright. Bill then would treat the decoy with a preservative to lengthen the life for the decoy. With the head attached to the body, it was time to paint the decoy. Painting was real basic because



Bill Sheldon and George Clapp hold a decoy blank.



Some of Bill Sheldon's painted decoys with miniatures.

this was a functional piece and not meant to be decorative. Glass eyes were added.

Bill made four different kinds of duck decoys - blacks, blue bills, whistlers and goldeneyes. It was a lot of hard work. Bill said, "If you didn't have fun doing it, you just wouldn't do it." He loved the sport and being with his friends.

Duck hunting is a lot of work, so by surrounding oneself with items that you've made and being in good company was like having "a piece of heaven" as Bill said. In total Bill thought he had made 25 to 30 decoys. When his hunting days were over he gave away many of his decoys and sold others.

Although Bill made functional decoys because they were so practical, he also carved some decoys that were decorative. He carved some that were miniatures, but his favorite was the beautiful black duck decoy. This large decoy has excellent lines and a

beautiful finish. Bill spent several hours applying a detailed and intricate finish. The decorative decoy is now a very practical and functional table lamp.

Oh! Did I mention that it was the historical society that bought the female blue bill in flight duck decoy at the auction? When Bill found out how much we paid, there was a gentle smile on his face.

He is a native Vermonter of 78 years born in Pawlet, Vermont. On occasion Bill actually hunted with Phillip Gregory. Most of the hunting, for almost 17 years, was on the south side of the Sand Bar.

From purchasing the decoy at the auction to interviewing the Sheldon family, Eva and I have had the opportunity to establish another connection with our community. It's our goal to have a display to celebrate and display Bill Sheldon's carvings at the museum.

I would like to thank Eva for taking notes and photographs. We will now try to research Phillip Gregory and his carving career. If anyone reading this article knows who or where we could get information on this topic please call 879-0619.



The Collection Corner

New exhibits. Check out the display of pictures and postcards of Essex Junction in the lobby of the Essex Post Office. This display was put together by Laurie Jordan and Eva Clough.

New Donations/acquisitions. The following items were either donated or acquired: a wooden tamper (used in construction to compact soil); town reports from Mary Willard; a computer printer from DeeDee Israel; a set of five duck decoys made by Phillip Gregory; and one decoy, a blank decoy and three duck heads made by William Sheldon. Liz Merrill donated two custom made tables. The tables use wagon wheels as the table top.

Nine featherhead dolls were donated by Phyllis Cooley, and four featherhead dolls came from Beverly McCuin. These dolls were made at the Vermont Toy Farm, ranged in height from 4-8 inches, and used yellow feathers for the hair. The faces were hand painted by Baron Josef von Schenk.

Robert Bissell donated three photographs; one of a fire department fundraiser, a typing class, and one of Fleming School. Robert Bissell also gave us a follow up booklet to the 1916 Clarion, the high school yearbook.

Thank you to these people.

Essex Community Historical Society Board of Directors 2005-2006

(denotes year of term expiration)

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290 Whitewater Circle
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58 Main Street
878-5887

Polly McEwing (06)
5 Doubleday Lane
879-6862

All addresses are
Essex Junction, VT
05452, except
where noted.

Short Stuff

Please take a close look at your **address label**. The expiration date of your membership is noted. Three stars denote a life membership. You can use the form in this newsletter to update your membership.

We are now **charging for any research** that we do for people who request such assistance. For simple research we suggest a donation of \$10 to the historical society. If the research requires more time, is more detailed, and within our capacity, we will charge \$25 per hour.

Your editors are always looking for **interesting information and photographs** on Essex and Essex Junction history for our newsletter. We can scan original photographs and return them to the owners. Look through your old photographs. We welcome your contributions. Material can be mailed to the Essex Community Historical Society at 3 Browns River Road, Essex Jct., Vermont 05452. Or contact Richard and Lucille Allen at 878-3853.

The board of directors has a policy and fee schedule for the **reproduction of photographs** in the ECHS collection. A copy is available upon request.

Wish list. Mannequins or dress forms so that we can display clothing.

Copies of the *Essex and Essex Junction* by Richard and Lucille Allen can be purchased at Five Corners Antiques, 11 Maple Street, Essex Junction, and All About Hair at 7 Jericho Road in Essex Center. Buying your books at these places also benefits the historical society. Thank you to David and Nancy Booth at Five Corners Antiques and Lisa Russin at All About Hair.

We have several used copies of **Frank Bent's book, *The History of Essex, Vermont*** (copyright 1963) for sale at the museum for \$30 "as is." Most of these copies are missing the maps that came with the book. Contact any board member if you are interested in buying one.

Consider giving a **membership to the historical society as a gift**. Use the enclosed form to do so.

We are looking for people who can **help us catalogue** our burgeoning collection. If you have an hour or more a week that you can spend helping us, please contact any board member.

We are looking for donations of past **copies of town and village reports**.

Upcoming Events

Spring tag sale, Saturday, June 3, 2006 9:00 A.M.-1:00 P.M. at the Grange Hall in Essex Center.

Bring donated items to the Grange Hall Thursday, June 1, at 6:30 P.M. or call 879-0619 and we will pick up your items. Items in good condition, only. No clothes, mattresses, large appliances, computers, books, tires, or plants. Plan to visit the Essex Free Library's Book and Plant Sale on this day as well.

Museum open house, Sunday June 11, 2006 1-4 P.M. Join us in opening the museum and enjoying some entertainment and refreshments. The school house will also be open so you can see the progress with the renovations.

During the summer the museum will be open on Sundays from 1-4:00 P.M.

On the following Thursdays the museum will also be open from 7-8:30 P.M.: June 15, June 22, and June 29. The museum may be open on the other Thursdays throughout the summer. Check for the "open" flag hanging outside the museum.

Vermont History Expo, Saturday, June 24, and Sunday, June 25, 2006 from 10:00 A.M.-5:00 P.M. each day at the Tunbridge World's Fair Grounds. This is an annual event that features exhibits by local Vermont historical societies. Our exhibit will showcase the Vermont Toy Farm that was located in Essex Center. A few of the other events that are a part of this weekend include a parade, auction, historical presentations, living history encampments, draft demonstrations and entertainment.

Board of directors meetings are at 7:00 P.M. on the third Thursday of each month, except December. The meetings are open to the public, so feel free to come. We meet at the museum, except during the winter. Call any board member for up to date information on the next meeting.



Essex Community Historical Society

3 Browns River Road
Essex Jct., Vermont 05452

Membership Form

Please consider becoming a member or renewing your membership at this time.
Or you can pass this on to someone who would like to become a member.

Your dues will help us add to our collection of Essex memorabilia,
maintain the museum, publish the ECHO, and sponsor historical programs.

New member Renewal of membership

Name(s) _____

Mailing Address _____

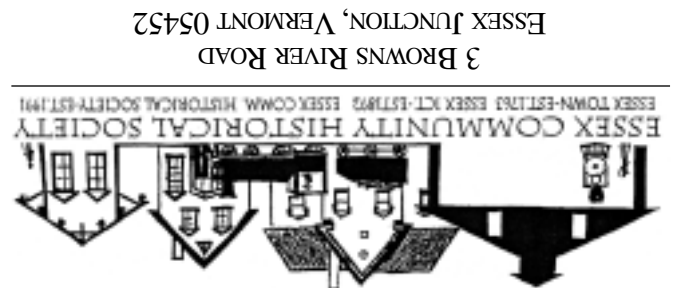
Street _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

- Individual membership \$ 10.00
- Family membership \$ 15.00
- Senior membership (60 and over) \$ 5.00
- Individual-lifetime \$100.00

Make checks payable to the
Essex Community Historical Society.
Thank You.



Calendar of Events

(See inside for more details)

Saturday, June 3, 2006:
Spring tag sale.

Sunday, June 11, 2006:
Museum open house and each Sunday into the fall.

Thursdays, June 15, 22, 29:
Museum open. Possibly open the rest of the Thursdays in the summer and into the fall.

Saturday, June 24, and Sunday, June 25, 2006: Vermont History Expo in Tunbridge. Our display is about the Vermont Toy Farm.

Calling all Members!

The Essex Community Historical Society is looking for help. Would you be willing to give a few hours of your time to be a docent at the museum? We are hoping to open the museum on Thursday evenings this summer from 7-8:30 P.M. as well as the regular Sunday hours, 1-4 P.M. We could use the extra assistance of our members to host at the museum during those times. Please consider helping us in this way. Contact Sherry Norton at 879-7334.