

The View from

The Crow's Nest



Newsletter of the Mattapoissett Historical Society

Issue VI

Winter 2007

Mattapoissett Winters in the 1800's

by Seth Mendell

As anyone knows who has lived in Mattapoissett for any length of time, there is no set pattern for our winter weather. Some years will be cold with temperatures below freezing for weeks at a time and other years it is not uncommon for the ground to remain unfrozen all winter. With snow it is the same. There will be winters when four or five storms leave the town buried under several feet of snow and yet some years you hardly need a shovel.

However, in reading the diaries of 150-200 years ago it does seem as though winters were harsher and more consistent in their nature. Freezing temperatures and snow were the call of the day from mid November into March. Homes were heated with fires in the hearth and in stoves using wood from farmer's wood lots and scraps from the



North Street looking north.

shipyards. In the late 1800's coal became available and schooners unloaded their cargo into the coal pocket on middle wharf. Lamps in homes burned whale oil of which there was a plentiful supply.

From the diary of Dr. Thomas Robbins who was the minister of the Mattapoissett Congregational Church from 1832-44 we get an eyewitness account of events and weather. His entries are brief and are as follows:

October 8, 1840, Brig Massachusetts and Brig Deborah sls. (sailed). There is an unusual crop of apples this year.

October 12, In the morning, a fine new ship went off with a fine

(continued on next page)



Wharf scene with coal pocket left and schooner right.

(continued from previous page)

launch. (This was the Acushnet of Herman Melville and Moby Dick fame. She was launched from the Barstow Yard at the foot of Pearl Street.)

October 22, Brig Chase ar. (arrived)

October 26, Last night we had a hard storm of lightning, and thunder, wind, hail, and snow. Very cold. Rode to Wareham, Middleborough, and West Bridgewater. All the way against a hard northwest wind in a chaise.

October 27, Wind has abated, but it is cold. Rode to Middleborough.

October 28, Got ready to set out for home, and it began to rain with strong wind and concluded to stay until tomorrow.

October 29, Steady wet and rainy, with strong south wind. Afternoon set out for home. Was soon stopped by hard rain. Rode again in the wet and got to Mr. Wood's in the south part of Middleborough.



Water Street looking east.



Church Street looking east with Christian Church (Historical Society/ Museum) 2nd buiding on left. Note trolley tracks in street.

October 30, Forenoon a steady hard rain. Afternoon the long storm passed off, and I came home. At evening went into a meeting at the Baptist meeting House (present Historical Museum).

November 10, Last night a violent storm of wind and rain. At evening went into our singing school.

November 11 Wet and rainy.

November 12 Hard rain all day. We have very low tides. Mr. P. Crosby has lost his only son suddenly.

November 18, It snowed steadily all day. In one house the whole family are sick.

As these excerpts from Dr. Robbin's diary suggest, the harbor was busy with vessels going and coming. Of course, at times there would be too much ice with the water frozen out into the bay. For the most part, however, ship activity continued as usual. It is interesting to note that Herman Melville sailed out of Fairhaven aboard the whaler

(continued on page 4)

Songs of The Sea by Katherine Gaudet

Visitors were treated to a trip around the world at the Mattapoisett Historical Society, 5 Church St. in Mattapoisett, MA on Saturday, October 20th as Friends Academy music teachers, Vi Taylor and Jim Bean taught families about the SouthCoast whaling history and the tradition of sea chanteys. From the *Bark Gay Head* which chronicles a ship built in Mattapoisett and crewed by area men to *John Kanaka*, another chantey, participants sang and reenacted life on board the ship.



Everyone sang *South Australia* as volunteers used ropes to simulate hoisting the sails. Using shakers and drums, children accompanied *Essequibo River* and *Santianno*. Along the way, terms such as duff (pudding), cooper (barrel maker), flukes (tail of the whale) and land sharks (unscrupulous people) were explained in context of the songs that were sung.

A hula called *E Pele* was performed by the whole group while singing the Hawaiian lyrics. The song describes how Pele, goddess of the volcano, erupts. Volunteers played traditional Hawaiian instruments such as an ipu or large, hollow gourd and bamboo sticks called pu illi. Vi Taylor attended a teacher institute on Molokai, Hawaii through the New Bedford Whaling Museum's ECHO program (Education through Cultural and Historical Organizations) where she learned about Hawaii's connection to the New Bedford whaling history.

At the program's end, everyone was invited to try their luck playing the nose flute, ipu gourd, the drums and shakers. Vi Taylor and Jim Bean value the idea of children learning about history through music as a means of passing on culture.

Annual Appeal Reminder

(continued from page 2)

Acushnet on January 3, 1841. Many whaling voyages started in the winter as the destination was the Pacific and it was desirable to round Cape Horn (South America) during the summer months in the southern hemisphere.

Men worked in the shipyards when weather permitted, but many went south on “Live Oaking” voyages. To keep the shipyards supplied with timber for the construction of ships, men sailed on schooners and sloops to the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida to cut live oak for the framing and long leaf yellow pine for the planking of ships. Native timber was cut from wood lots in Rochester and Lakeville and hauled to the Harbor front in ox drawn sledges. Great quantities of cordwood were also cut and brought to the wharves for export to buyers on the Vineyard and Nantucket.



Carol Mendell's house on Pearl Street and her three children November 28, 1898. (Carol Mendell was the author's Grandfather's (Charles Mendell Sr.) first wife.

house and covered with sawdust and hay until summer when the ice was sold.

Dr. Robbins diary continues:

December 5, It snowed most of the day.

December 6, The snowstorm continued through the day.

December 7, Heavy body of snow on the ground. It is bad walking.

December 8, Walked to Pine Islands and visited a school.

December 11, Visited repeatedly a young woman very sick. Visited the sick and others.



Ice harvesting - Mahoney Ice House

Another activity in the winter months was the cutting and harvesting of ice from the many ponds throughout the region. The surface of the ice was scored in the design of a large grid and then the blocks cut out with long saws with a double handle at one end so the blade could be pushed down and then pulled up. The blocks were stored in an ice



Water Street looking east.



Cannon Street looking north.

December 12, The sick young woman died last night. (Brig Mattapoisett ar.)

December 17, Last night we had quite a snowstorm. Bad walking. Visited the afflicted.

December 18, Rode to the Neck and visited a school. Suffered much with the cold. Visited Mrs. Howland, one of our most exemplary Christians, apparently near death. Thermometer 15.

December 19, Thermometer 13. Visited the sick. There seems to be little abatement of our epidemic.

December 20, Thermometer 15 ..Funeral of Miss Barstow. Baptised a child at home, very sick.

December 21, Thermometer 16, Attended the affected funeral of Mrs. Howland .aged thirty-six. Visited the sick.

December 22, Snowy day. Visited afflicted families. Two children lie dead. At evening went into our singing school.

December 23, Thermometer about 13. Attended the funeral of a child. Visited the sick.

December 25, Thermometer at 2. A funeral of a child was attended by the Universalist. Thermometer a bed-time zero. We have an account of the birth of an English princess, heir apparent. (Queen Victoria)

December 26, Therometer 9. Snowstorm most of the day. (David Rogers died)

December 27, Stormy most of the day. Snow is much increased.

December 28, Thermometer 13. Visited the sick. Attended the funeral of Mr. Rogers.

In spite of the harsh weather and illness people went on about their business. Families gathered around the kitchen stove or the fire in the hearth. Church services and functions were attended and children went to school. My grandfather used to tell of walking the entire length of River Road when he was a young boy in the late 1860's from his father's farm on the river below the herring weir to Jenney's corner (Acushnet Road) to the one room school there. He remembered the tears running down his face from the cold north wind that blew the snow in clouds around him as he trudged along with his lunch pail and slate. There were dances and meetings in Eaton Hall next to Leonard Hammond's Plymouth county House (Tavern) on the waterfront. When the weather permitted there were skating parties on Tub Mill Pond and along the river, and most likely, wherever there were a group of boys, a snow ball fight. Boys would also catch a ride on the back of the horse drawn snowplows that cleared



Purchased by the town about 1900, this sidewalk plow was used until the 1940's. Horse-drawn, the driver stood with reins around his neck and by turning the wheel, which pulled the plow in or out, he would widen or narrow the plow path.

the sidewalks and streets. I know about riding on the back of the sidewalk plow as I did just that the winter of 1943/44. The plow is now in the Carriage House, along with ice cutting tools donated by the Brownell family.

This description of winters long ago in Mattapoissett reminds me of the poem by Robert Frost, "Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening":

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.



Under horse and carriage.

*Can you identify this object
with brass clamps and
hinges?*



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Something Fishy? Program for Children

by Katherine Gaudet

On Saturday, February 9, 2008 from 2-4 pm. at the Mattapoisett Historical Society on Church Street, Friends Academy's Upper Division art teacher, Wendy Goldsmith, will offer a workshop for children ages 8 - 13. She will teach students about the art of Gyotaku, a technique used by Japanese fishermen to record the size and species of a trophy fish they had caught. The fisherman would hire an artist to make a print from the actual fish as proof of the fish's size for special contests.

During the workshop, Wendy will use traditional techniques to make several "sea worthy" projects using this fish printing technique. Students will be able to print on T-shirts, tote bags, a quilt square to create an underwater scene as well as the traditional fish prints.

Please call Bette Roberts at the Museum at 508-758-2844 to reserve your child(ren)'s spot at this exciting event. Those who attend are asked to bring a t-shirt that they would like to imprint.



Curator's Corner

By Bette Roberts

I LIKED BEST...

This fall, all of the third grades from Center School made visits to the Museum and Carriage House. Over four days in October, the museum was alive with the sounds of young voices eagerly looking for items in a scavenger hunt, The most puzzling item on the list was a "niddy nody." Here are some comments from the "thank you" letters received:

"I learned that day that "historical stuff" is fun."

"I loved finding the niddy nody. I liked it because I never knew it existed."

"I learned that the biggest thing in the museum was the water wagon. I hope I can come back in the summer."

"I learned that there are a lot of amazing things in Mattapoisett."



MATTAPoisETT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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81 1/2 Fairhaven Road, Mattapoissett 508-758-3641

In honor of Mattapoissett's 150th Birthday enjoy a 15% discount off the framing of this print from Rogers Gallery

5 Church Street, Mattapoissett 508-758-2844
Mattapoissett Historical Museum

Shrinkwrapped for \$20.00 Unwrapped \$15.00
11" x 22.5" Mattapoissett Lithograph by Larry Van Alstyne



Great gift idea!

