

Yarmouth History Center Newsletter

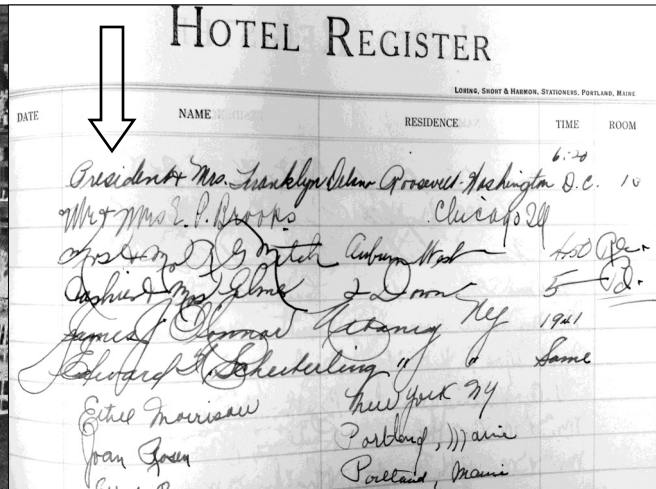
Summer 2021

118 East Elm Street, Yarmouth, Maine

207-846-6259

Inn's Guest Book: Who's Who?

by Katie Worthing, Executive Director



Above Left: A view of the interior of the Westcustogo Inn, guest book on the table at left. **Above Right:** FDR signs in?

The names roll off the page like a curious who's-who of 20th century American culture: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Fred Allen, Joe Louis, Gene Tunney, Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, Myrna Loy, Bette Davis, Gary Merrill, Kenneth Roberts, Robert P. T. Coffin, Margaret Chase Smith. They cover everything from politics to sports to cinema to literature, a motley crew of celebrities and notables with one unlikely thread linking them all together: every one of them has been named in news articles or notes as a customer of Yarmouth's famous Westcustogo Inn. Some certainly seem more likely than others (several had strong ties to Maine), but can we really know for sure if any of these people enjoyed a shore dinner at the local institution? What would it mean if we did?

Our working file on the Inn is filled with news clippings from the 1970s through the early 2000s, the later years of the Inn's operations, detailing the storied history of this long-standing Yarmouth business. It's clear that the later articles rely on the earlier ones for their details about the Inn's clientele; the earlier articles present a mix of oral history, local lore, and unsupported claims about the Inn's history. Through this sequence of newspaper stories, the legend surrounding the Inn has been built up over time, each article relying on the previous one and obscuring the core story just a little more. The Inn's history has become unfocused and fuzzy as a result, almost like the childhood game of "Telephone," where each retelling loses a bit in translation.

For years, I've been curious about the Westcustogo and eager to see it a little more clearly. A recent reassessment of our collection of Westcustogo Inn guest registers has made that quest equally more intriguing and challenging.

First, some background. When was the Inn established? Our newspaper sources put the founding of the Inn around 1920. In his 1971 article for the *Portland Press Herald*, reporter Frank Sleeper suggests an opening date of 1920 under the proprietorship of Ernest Percy (E. P.) Johnson, who purchased and developed the parcel at the corner of Princes Point Road (now the location of Cunningham Security) into a tea room that rapidly expanded into a busy roadside restaurant in subsequent years. Christopher Hyde, in his series of articles for *The Notes* in 1991, first pins the opening year to 1919, but later adjusts it to 1923 after receiving a letter from Kathryn "Kitty" Huggins, one of the first waitresses to work at the Inn. In this case, I think Huggins' memory is spot on. Looking at the deeds, we can see that E. P. Johnson purchased a 2-acre parcel from Azel H. Kingsley in April 1923. A later mortgage deed confirms this date as the first year of operation for the Inn.

It appears that business was brisk and growing during these early years. Johnson took out three mortgages in quick succession during the 1920s, paying off the final one in 1936. Census records and city directories show that the Johnson family maintained

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From the Chair



It is Spring again in Yarmouth, and it is a season like few others as we emerge into the sunshine with eyes blinking after so many long winter months of social distancing! One of my favorite Springtime traditions is pulling the tarp off of our 1974 MGB and getting her spruced up for warm weather drives. My mind has difficulty reconciling this old car as “history,” since I was an adult in the 70s so, I mean, it can’t be old, unless... Which leads me to my next point. The team at the Yarmouth Historical Society is very interested in YOUR Yarmouth photos and memorabilia from the 60s, 70s, and 80s, even though it might not seem like history to you. Please dust off the old albums and boxes and bring in anything that could help teach future generations about this time in our town’s history. From photos of families and businesses to restaurant menus and signs, the History Center is a great place to save those special artifacts that take up space but feel too precious to part with.

The museum and gallery are open from 10am – 4pm Tuesday through Friday and COVID protocols are in line with the State of Maine’s recommendations. As of now masks are optional, and there are no limits on the number of visitors allowed in the museum, so come on over! Also, Sandy the mechanical horse – formerly of Goff’s hardware – is back and ready for riders!

As always, thank you for your support. We’d love to see you when you are in the neighborhood.

Warm regards,
Chuck Murray

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a residence in Portland, though they seemingly lived at the Inn during the summer season along with staff. The Inn would have been easy to reach from Portland by car or trolley, which ran along today’s Route 88 (formerly Route One) and Pleasant Street, with a stop right across from the Inn, until service ended in 1933. We have some lively photos of the Westcustogo serving staff, including Kitty Huggins, enjoying some down time around the Inn property in 1939. The camaraderie, joy, and gentle mischief captured in these photos provide a welcome glimpse into the life of the Inn during Johnson’s tenure as proprietor.

Johnson stayed on as owner until 1943, when the business seemed to fall on hard times. Johnson had defaulted on his most recent mortgage and owed taxes to the Town, misfortunes that eventually led to the sale of the property to James F. Riley and Edward W. Clare in 1946. Aside from a brief stint around 1960 when the Inn was owned and operated by Fred and Doris Webster, proprietors of the Homewood Inn, Riley remained involved with the Inn until 1964. Menus and advertisements from Riley’s

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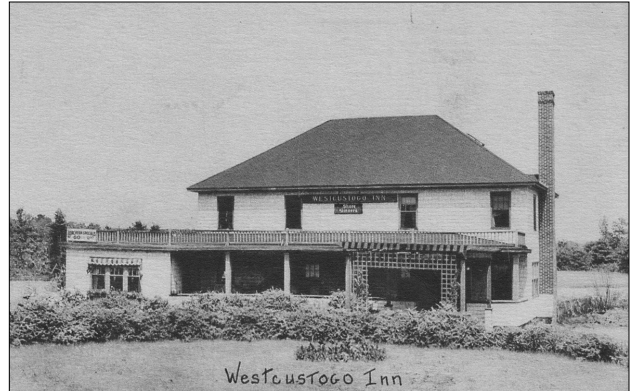
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tenure survive and clearly show him carrying on the tradition of E. P. Johnson in offering the Inn's famous shore dinners, featuring a variety of fresh seafood, sides, and desserts. The \$3.00 Westcustogo Special included the diner's choice of lobster stew, steamed clams, fried clams, or fried scallops along with a broiled lobster, generous sides, dessert, and beverage.

After 1964, the Inn changed hands many times and operated on different business models: it was a catering venue in the late 1960s, reopened for public dining in 1973, went through bankruptcy proceedings in 1985, opened once again for dining in 1986, and continued to serve as a venue and restaurant until 2006.

It's a complicated history, for sure, but let's return to those guest registers, which span the years between the inn's opening in 1923 and 1941, just as Johnson was nearing the end of his tenure at the Inn. When I brought them out of the archives for a closer look, I could see that someone in the past had gone through them and added small bookmarks noting the signatures of various celebrities. I was thrilled! I started gently paging through the first few volumes and, sure enough, there was Eleanor Roosevelt...from Limerick, Maine. And John D. Rockefeller, Calvin Coolidge, Douglass Fairbanks (*sic*). There were so many Clark Gable, Greta Garbo, and J. P. Morgan signatures, too, all in slightly different hands that didn't match authenticated signatures of these people and sometimes even in lowly pencil. And then it dawned on me: these registers were sprinkled liberally with false names and aliases, no doubt added to the registry for fun, or perhaps to obscure an identity.

The more I looked, the more I found: guests coming from places like East Cupcake and South Overshoe. Truly comic names like Mr. and Mrs. Fulla Lobster of Cape Elizabeth and Boob McNutt, which I later learned was a character in a comic strip by Rube Goldberg. Reading through the registers became a highly amusing enterprise, though I couldn't help but wonder if the lists of legendary celebrity guests reported in our news clippings were simply based on these lighthearted lies in the guest book. How could we possibly sift through and find the truth? Were these registers of any real historical value aside from conveying a relatable bit of mischief? After all, who hasn't occasionally entered a fake name or hometown into an unattended guest book?



Above: The Westcustogo Inn, early 20th century.
Below: Photo of the Inn's staff, inscribed on the back of the photograph "The Gang of the Westcustogo Inn 1939."

It did occur to me that perhaps a staff person or associate added the name of a celebrity to the register simply to record their visit to the Westcustogo. That might explain some of the spelling errors and handwriting inconsistencies. I looked for a test



case and found it in an entry for "President and Mrs. Franklyn Delano Roosevelt" (*sic*) on May 30, 1941. The Roosevelts appear frequently on lists of supposed Westcustogo guests. Given the misspelling of Franklin, it was clear to me that he hadn't written this entry himself. But could someone else have recorded his visit on this day in 1941? Thanks to the FDR Presidential Library, Roosevelt's schedule is very easy to check. On May 29, he met with New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and had lunch with Supreme Court Associate Justice Frank Murphy. At 2:20 pm, Roosevelt left for Hyde Park, New York, where he remained all weekend. The diary for May 30 states "At Hyde Park, no appointments." A *New York Times* article from May 30, 1941 confirms that Roosevelt would not receive any visitors at Hyde Park and that he wished to relax there as completely as possible. He was back at work in Washington, DC on June 3. There was no Roosevelt visit to Yarmouth that weekend. Does that mean the Roosevelts never visited the Westcustogo? Not necessarily, but it is tricky to verify.

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In and Around the History Center

Lectures Available Online

The History Center's well attended Spring Lecture Series is coming to a close with the last lecture "Researching Your Old House" scheduled for Tuesday, June 15 at 4pm. This season's lectures were presented on Zoom and attended not only by local viewers but also viewers from all over the U.S., Canada, and from as far away as the United Kingdom and Liberia. The lectures are free and available to all. If you missed our earlier presentations they are available online.

The April lecture is available on the Yarmouth Historical Society's YouTube channel. Ron Romano, historic cemetery expert, and B. Craig Stinson, genealogist, presented "The Hill Family Billboard Monument in Yarmouth: New Discoveries" for our April lecture.

This pair of speakers delved into the fascinating history and recent restoration of the Hill family monument in Yarmouth's Baptist Cemetery. Ron Romano's new research into this unusual "billboard" monument brings new understanding of this type of gravestone in Maine, while Craig Stinson's thorough genealogical and archival research enriches our understanding of the people memorialized on the stone. You will be amazed at the stories this single marker can tell! Link to the Yarmouth Historical Society's YouTube channel by visiting our website: yarmouthmehistory.org.



Above: Spring lectures available for viewing online on Yarmouth Historical Society's YouTube channel.

Also available is the March lecture presented by Curt Martin, independent historian and lecturer, who shared his new research about the role of women in whaling. The recording of "Petticoat Whalers: Women on American Whaleships" is available upon request by emailing the Center at info@yarmouthmehistory.org for the link.

The lecture series is sponsored by the Leon and Lisa Gorman Fund.

Final Spring Lecture — Zoom Event

Tuesday, June 15, 4:00 pm

Researching Your Old House

Margaret Gaertner, historic building consultant

Tips about how to use deeds, census records, historic maps, and other online resources.

Email info@yarmouthmehistory.org to be added to the attendee list.

Stonewall Gallery Exhibit

On view now in the Stonewall Gallery is art by the members of the Seven Artists Collective. The exhibit, *Collectively Composed*, features abstract works that range from bold and vibrant explorations of color, movement, and medium to quiet meditations on form and relationship.

Members of the Collective include Emily Blaschke, Jenny Campbell, Alicia Ines Ethridge, Celeste June Henriquez, Doreen Nardone, Brenda Overstrom, and Donald M. Peterson. The members met during an abstract painting class at Maine College of Art taught by abstract painter and printmaker Michel Droge, who continues to be a mentor and contributor to the group.

Left: Alicia Ines Ethridge's painting *Surrender and Bloom*.

In and Around the History Center

Math Lessons in the Gallery

The History Center recently hosted North Yarmouth Academy's 3rd, 4th, and 6th grade math students and teachers Erika Sahlman and Jessica Smith. The younger grades, escorted by NYA eighth graders, came to the Stonewall Gallery to view the Art Quilts Maine exhibit. What brought the NYA students to the exhibit was the collection of tessellation quilts in the show. These quilts were excellent visual examples of the subject the students had been learning about in class.

The Center welcomed the opportunity to have students back in the building. We are always excited to support teachers who find ways to utilize both the Gallery and Center to supplement the subjects they are teaching in the classroom.



Above: Detail of the tessellation quilt *Headed up Stream* created by Alison Olds.

Ancestral Serendipity

Many young adults are not expecting to experience a serendipitous ancestral moment, but this is exactly what happened to Oregonian Annika Wyman on her first visit to Maine. After finishing her freshman year in Boston, Annika was traveling to Maine to visit her roommate's home in Yarmouth. During the ride to Maine she mentioned that she had a New England connection. Her connection came from her father's family, descendants of the Wyman family of Woburn, Massachusetts. Typically a statement like this would be casually acknowledged but Annika was traveling with Maura Goessling, the Historical Society's Development Director, whose first assignment when she began working for the Society was compiling research for a new member about the Wyman family of North Yarmouth, a family that came from Woburn.

In the mid-1700s Ms. Wyman's ancestor, John Wyman, purchased land in and around Broad Cove. In another twist of fate the Society's collection holds the original deed for John Wyman's purchase of Lot No. 12, a parcel of land next to Francis Wyman's Lot No. 11, that Ms. Wyman was able to view while visiting. In 1760 North Yarmouth was part of the Province of Massachusetts Bay and, as stated in Wyman's deed, the currency at the time was pounds sterling. John Wyman purchased his 100-acre Broad Cove parcel and home lot for 53 pounds, 6 shillings, and 8 pence, equivalent to \$7,733.78 in today's currency.

This past year the History Center has been busy providing research for our members and business members who, as a benefit of their membership, receive an hour of free research. The research we provide not only assists families with genealogy queries but also includes research questions covering subjects like the history of properties, Yarmouth-built vessels, and past industrial, professional and commercial businesses. Our members, especially those who are the stewards of an antique home, are always interested to learn about the people who lived in their homes before them and their place in Yarmouth's history.



Above Top: Annika Wyman viewing John Wyman's 1760 deed at the History Center.

Above: Detail of Proprietor's Map showing the numbered lots.



Stroll Haunted Yarmouth Coming October 2021

Keep your late October weekends open so you don't miss this year's Stroll Haunted Yarmouth. This event, organized by Royal River Community Players, Yarmouth Historical Society, and the Village Improvement Society is working toward having its fourth production return to live performances in the fall.

Last year, like so many other events, the show was presented online with sketches filmed in and around the town of Yarmouth. The show was great fun to watch and presented not only the talent of the actors from the Royal River Community Players but also the artistry of cinematographer Kendall Harnett, who filmed the production, the athleticism of boom operator Deanna Harnett, who ensured the quality of the sound, and the musicianship of Parker Goessling, who performed and recorded all the music for the film.

Why do we think of an October event now?

Because Yarmouth History Center worked on its piece for this upcoming production in early spring. As soon as the snow melted meetings were scheduled at the Baptist Meeting House Cemetery to map out the route for the tour and collect names of those who are laid to rest there, those who may have a story to tell. This is when the research began and profiles for potential characters were compiled.

These profiles are passed to the Royal River Community Players' writers so they can incorporate a bit of history into the fictional sketches they create. The result is always a surprise and never fails to deliver a mix of tragic, humorous, strange, and interesting stories about Yarmouth's history and the lives of those who once lived here.

Look for more information later this summer.

Above: Detail of photograph by Randy Billmeier, used with permission.

Competition for Maine High School Students Offering \$1000 Prize

The 3rd Annual Wellcome Prize, Yarmouth Historical Society's history competition, is open to all high school students in Maine. Students are invited to undertake original historical research about a local history topic related to Cumberland County and create a film or write a research paper about their findings. Entries will be judged on the quality of research and effectiveness of communication.

The three winners will present their work to the public via Zoom in November 2021.



First prize winners will receive \$1000, second prize \$500, and third prize \$250.

Competition details regarding eligibility, timeline, topic, and length of submissions for film or paper can be

found on the Yarmouth History Center's website: yarmouthmehistory.org.

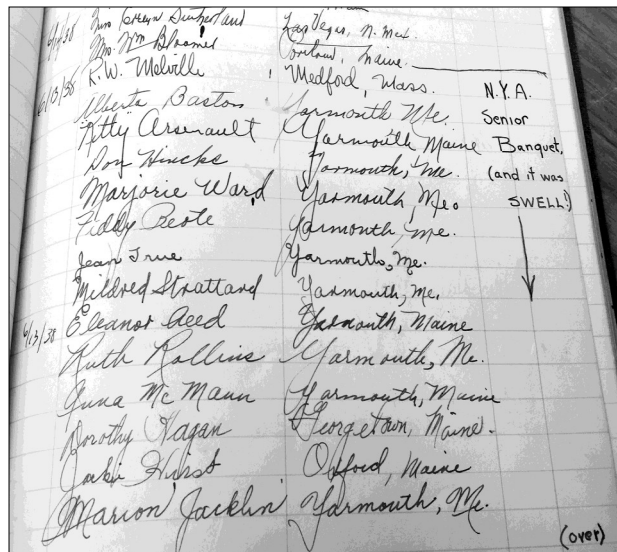
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Another name on the oft-repeated lists of Westcustogo celebrities that caught my attention was Margaret Chase Smith. In his 1973 article, Frank Sleeper states that Smith received a party in her honor at the Inn “the week before...she was elected US senator.” This seemed to have a strong air of plausibility to me, so I did a little more digging. Our run of guest registers only reaches to 1941 and Smith was first elected senator in 1948, so I reached out to colleagues at the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan for help. Their very complete collection of date books and scrapbooks from Chase’s long career yielded fast and satisfying results. A dinner was indeed held for her by the Yarmouth Republican Town Committee at the Westcustogo on November 4, 1965. Tickets for the dinner, which followed cocktail hour and a public reception, were \$5. Finally, a confirmation!

Working through the painstaking process of verifying the celebrity sightings of the Westcustogo, I started to reconsider the meaning and value of this endeavor. It was certainly possible that stars had visited the Inn and opted not to sign in. All of our news clippings and discussions of the Inn tend to focus on the rumored notable diners and, without a doubt, those are the names I initially sought in the guest registers. But what local history is hiding in plain sight among these “celebrity sightings” in the register? What are we missing when we focus only on the famous names? It’s all the stories of area clubs, school groups, business associations, pleasure travelers, and local folks who enjoyed meals at the Inn and left their real names, doodles, and amusing comments in the margins of the register. There are so many more real names than fake ones in these registers. This is where the real life of the restaurant shines through and reveals much about the role the place played in Yarmouth’s social fabric, among both locals and visitors.

Look beyond the funny fake names and mythical celebrities and you’ll see other stories start to take shape: a visit from the Freeport Rifle Club in May 1926, headed by none other than L. L. Bean. The names following his, all written in the same neat handwriting, include familiar local surnames like Soule, Randall, Goldrup, Skillin, Grant, and Libby.

Paging through later years into the 1930s, the wide range of hometowns is fascinating. Guests are not only arriving from all over Maine and New England, but also California, Canada, Spain, and Sweden, among other far flung places. Each entry is a research project unto itself. My eye catches on a group of familiar Yarmouth names. It’s the 1938 North Yarmouth Academy senior class attending their end of year banquet on June 13 (and it was

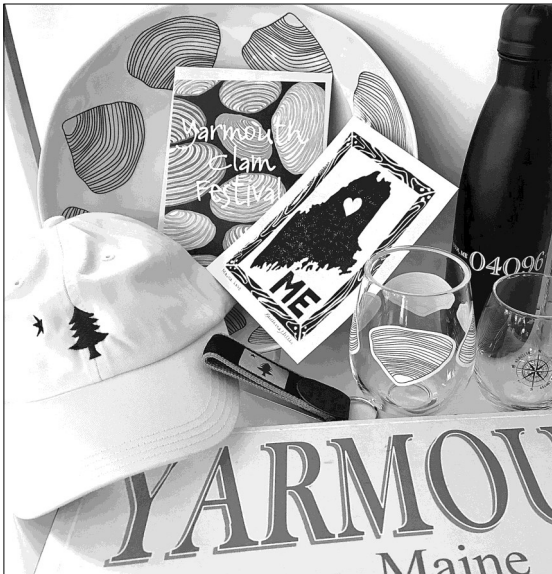


Above: Signatures of the NYA class of 1938.

SWELL, reads the caption). Here are many names that I recognize: Kitty Arsenault, Fiddy Beote, Marion Jacklin, and Mary Estelle Blake, to list just a few. I know this class because Mary Estelle saved her program from graduation, which took place the day after this banquet. It now resides in our collection. I spot Helen Smith’s diminutive signature just below that of Herschel Maxell, her future husband. Helen saved photos of her championship basketball team at NYA as well as a small album of her classmates from their 1934-35 freshman school year, carefully noting each person’s name and adding married names later. In these mementos, both women note the death of classmate Floyd Oliver, who later died during WWII at the age of 23. He had not made it to the banquet.

It’s a poignant list of names, one that immediately feels more alive than the celebrities I had been seeking. Each name a real name, a real person. Through oral histories with Mary Estelle, Helen, and Kitty, we have records of their lives in Yarmouth, in their own voices, preserved in our archives. Photos in our collection show Mary Estelle’s career with the telephone company. Helen’s photos and scrapbook capture local news and daily activities. And here they all are again, leaving their mark in the Westcustogo Inn’s guest register.

Of course it would be fun to know which celebrities really dined at the Inn, but we may never know for sure. Many of them will remain “maybes.” For now, they can step back from the spotlight and allow us to glimpse so many other people who signed their name in the guest registers. Their stories may be a little more local in scope, but they are so much richer in detail thanks to our archives and community.



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