



Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society
Bloomfield, Connecticut November 2019

THE EVOLUTION OF BLOOMFIELD CENTER

WITH RALPH AND LOUISE SCHMOLL

NOVEMBER 6, 2019, 6:00 PM

PROSSER PUBLIC LIBRARY

Come and see Dr. Schmoll's newest video, narrated by Louise Schmoll and focusing on the evolution of the center of Bloomfield.

Using the photo archives of the Wintonbury Historical Society, the Schmolls have created yet another of their expert videos, this one focused on the area surrounding the meeting house that was built following the 1735 formation of Wintonbury Parish in the town of Windsor—the area known today as Bloomfield center.



Bloomfield center in 1936
WHS archives photo

Other Schmoll videos are on Filley Park, the Filley House, the Old Farm School, and the Francis Gillette House. They may be viewed on FaceBook or by clicking links on the Society website, www.bloomfieldcthistory.org.

In this issue: Page 2, Board of Directors Highlights; Page 3, Bruce Bidwell Program and book review; Pages 4-7, The Bloomfield Square Dance Club: A History, Part 2; Page 7, Honor Roll of Docents, WHS October program; Pages 7-8, Bloomfield Memories: Alice Bet-tencourt

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS

The Board met on September 11, with 18 people present, including guest Elizabeth Lane, new director of Bloomfield Public Libraries, who spoke briefly.

The treasurer submitted a report for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2019, which showed a bank balance of \$20,693. Income for the year was \$14,753 to which was added a donation of \$12,515 for the new gardens. Total expenses for the year were \$13,775. The gardens were completed in July. Vanguard investments had a very good year, and Society assets stood at \$290,918 on June 30. There was some discussion of a budget for 2019-20; but, pending receipt of some needed numbers, adoption of the budget was postponed until November's meeting.

The House Committee is planning to replace the ramp at the Gabriel History Center. Doug Barnard reported that a bid of \$15,000 from Regan Construction was the lowest one received. The Board wants to have professional cleaning of our two buildings and has received a price of \$50 per month for the History Center. (The Old Farm School would need cleaning less often.) On the repairs for the Old Farm School, Dick Hughes reported that \$10,800 was needed to hire a contractor and get the process started. The costs, which may amount to \$75,000, will hopefully be covered by grants from the CT Trust for Historic Preservation and other sources. The Board approved taking the \$10,800 from Vanguard funds.

ATTENTION!

The Wintonbury Drummer requests that readers contribute articles, personal reminiscences, book reviews, photographs, etc. Materials for publication in the February issue should be received by January 14, 2020. (Or better yet—do it now!) Send directly to the editor at 14 Julie Lane in Bloomfield or attach to an email. Thank you.

**OUR BUSINESS MEMBERS**

Bloomfield Garage, 986 Park Avenue

Bloomfield Village Pizza, 34 Tunxis Avenue

Executive Financial Services, 19 Cherry Hills Circle

Geissler's Supermarket, 40 Tunxis Avenue

Ginza Japanese Cuisine, 14 Wintonbury Mall

Isaac's Bagel Café, 16-B Mountain Avenue

Pasticceria Italia, 10 Wintonbury Mall

Thai Palace, 18 Wintonbury Mall

Romano and Fetterman, P. C., 55 Woodland Avenue

Sir Speedy Printing, 21 Old Windsor Road

Wade's Farms, 498 Simsbury Road

Windsor Federal Savings, 54 Jerome Avenue

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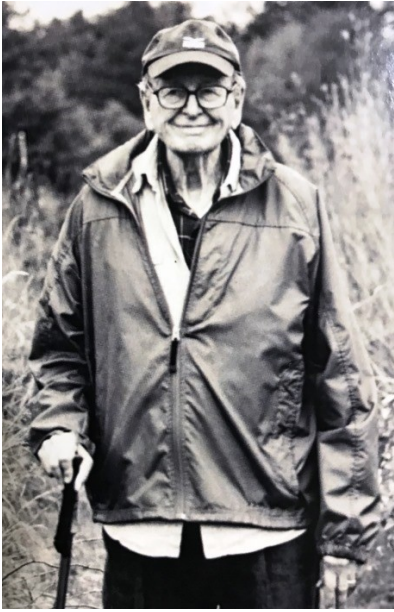
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Bruce Bidwell

Photo from Prosser Library

MR. BIDWELL REMEMBERS BLOOMFIELD

Bruce Bidwell, long-time Society member, has written a book of memoirs and will share his memories at Prosser Library on Friday, November 8, at 1:30 P.M. The audience will hear from a man who has first-hand knowledge of “how it used to be” in Bloomfield. Registration is appreciated at 860-243-9721 or www.prosserlibrary.info.

Bidwell, writing on the library website, says: “My son, Christopher, requested that I write the family history to preserve it for future generations. As I told my personal story, I realized how closely Bidwell family history is interwoven with the history of Connecticut. From my tenth-generation ancestor John Bidwell, who was one of the “proprietors” of Hartford, to the early Backus and Bostwick families who were founders of Norwich and Stratford, the family is well represented in the founding of Connecticut. Generations of Bidwell farmers worked the soil in Wintonbury prior to my grandfather, F.C. Bidwell, who was active in the history of the town.”

AN APPRECIATION OF BRUCE BIDWELL'S MEMOIR

Bruce Bidwell has written a delicious buffet of a book. Bruce's memoir is the main course of *Reflections* and it is presented with side dishes of state and local history, travelogues, biographies, philosophy, and fishing lore. This variety of subjects, spiced with Bruce's enthusiasm and attention to detail, makes *Reflections* great fun to read, and you will learn a lot, too.

Many of Bruce's ancestors were settlers of Connecticut, and he sketches colonial history. The facts come alive when a personal connection is made. This family man introduces many of his extended family, and we get insights into life in the past and present.

For anyone who grew up in this area during the 30s and 40s, there is a generous helping of nostalgia. Old memories will be stirred. Bruce tells of his life in West Hartford, with many trips to Hartford. His cousin's writings about growing up in Bloomfield enrich the book, too. That cousin goes on to tell us of his experiences in the army during World War II.

As we follow Bruce's life, we learn of Loomis, Harvard, the Navy, suburban and urban living. He has a knack for choosing details that enliven his subjects. His curiosity and good nature shine through.

Reflections is a short and very worthwhile book. Copies are available at the Gabriel History Center. All profits go to the Society.

--Libbie Merrow

PHOTOGRAPHER'S RECEPTION: Meet and greet Historical Society member Dennis Hubbs at Prosser, Friday, November 15, 4:00 PM. Hubbs' photographs grace the walls of Prosser's Quiet Study Room on the lower level.

THE BLOOMFIELD SQUARE DANCE CLUB: A HISTORY, PART 2



(In the September *Drummer*, the first twelve years [1960-1972] of the Bloomfield Square Dance Club were described. Here we look at part of the subsequent history of a club which was to function for fifteen more years. Part 3 will conclude the topic in the February issue. While some names are mentioned here, many more could not be because of space limitations. We'd love to hear from former dancers. —R. Pierce)

For the 1972-73 dance season, the Bloomfield Square Dance Club started producing a newsletter containing reports on club events and occasional news of members. Bill Kendall, the first editor, dubbed it the *Circu-Letter* and wrote two or three pages of original, literate and witty prose in each issue. Readers felt he was writing a personal letter to them as part of the square dance family. That it was reproduced in purple and white, the club colors, reflected the technology of the time—the “ditto” or spirit master common in the schoolroom. (Information that follows and any quotations are from the *Circu-Letter*.)

Regular dances were held that year twice a month at the Junior High School, first Saturday and third Wednesday. During the year the price was increased from \$2.50 to \$3.00 per couple to cover increasing expenses. Seven sets (56 people) in November was considered a small attendance. The twenty sets (160 people) that turned out in January was more like it. Yet attendance remained a concern. Only about 25 percent of members were attending each dance on the average, but visitors from other clubs helped boost the numbers on the floor. To begin the 1972-73 season, after the “Farewell to Summer” Dance on Saturday, September 9, new president Frank Johns invited everyone over to his school, Oak Hill School in Hartford, for swimming and fellowship.

The Barnstompers Teen Club again offered lessons. Adult advisors were Jerry and Gloria Kiel, Fred and Doreen Havens, and Bob and Judi McBrair. In January 1973, the Barnstompers graduated about ninety new dancers and promptly took a bus trip to a dance in Andover, Massachusetts.

Club members were very active. Square dance festivals or conventions were held annually, some at the state level, some regional or national, and some even international. Bloomfield's Joe and Lucy Moran were chairs for the 1973 Connecticut Festival in Wallingford. Moreover, the club expected a good delegation to the New England Convention in Pawtucket, Rhode Island and reserved thirty rooms at a Howard Johnson's for \$23.10 (continued —>)

Bloomfield Square Dance Club Presidents

- 1960-61, Walt and Dot Hill
- 1961-62, Dwayne and Becky Rowley
- 1962-63, Jim and Gerry Freehof
- 1963-64, Julian and Florence Perlstein
- 1964-65, Walt and Dot Hill
- 1965-66, Bob and Pat Eden
- 1966-67, Harold and Terry Watkins
- 1967-68, Les and Millie Oxer
- 1968-69, Bill and Kathy Bender
- 1969-70, Art and Janet Swan
- 1970-71, Al and Naomi Shenkman
- 1971-72, Rip and Elsie Nelson
- 1972-73, Frank and Carolyn Johns
- 1973-74, Everett and Flossie Havens
- 1974-75, Frank and Cele Michell
- 1975-76, Don and Scotty Davis
- 1976-77, Bill and Ruthanne Mandelbaum
- 1977-78, Dick and Jean Pierce
- 1978-79, Bill and Ruthanne Mandelbaum
- 1979-80, Dick and Ann Bishop
- 1980-81, Fred and Doreen Havens
- 1981-82, Les and Millie Oxer
- 1982-83, Don and Jane Gorsline
- 1983-84, Ed and Marilyn Thompson
- 1984-85, Al Albano
- 1985-86, Irving and Estelle Spungin
- 1986-87, Bob and Rosalie Fineberg
(resigned as of November 1)

Ed and Barbara Sargalski
(November through rest of season)



per night. A dozen Bloomfield couples even planned to go to Toronto in May for the International Square Dance Convention at McMaster University.

In September 1972, at the invitation of Herman Bercowetz, the club even staged a dance in the Copaco parking lot. This was more for fun and publicity than for serious dancing, but the everyone enjoyed it.

Something new for the club in 1972 was a New Year's Eve Dance held at the Oak Hill School and attended by almost fifty couples.

There were many opportunities to dance. Banner Raids to other clubs were a regular occurrence for Bloomfield square dancers. When a visiting club showed up at your dance with two or more sets, your club would award them a small, felt banner to take home. Clubs typically hung all the banners they had been given on a big display at each of their dances. The 1972-73 year started off with nineteen Bloomfield couples going on a banner raid to the New Britain club. Other destinations were the Farmington Valley club in Simsbury, the Friendly Westerners in Forestville, the Bucks 'n Does in New Britain, and the Greater Hartford club.

A "Fun for Funds" committee made fund-raising enjoyable. At the January 6, 1972 dance: "As part of the evening's entertainment Retie Johnson has agreed to run a 'silent auction.' She asks that each couple attending bring along an item of some value—either real or imagined. During the evening all will have the opportunity to bid on these items by writing their bids on a slip of paper and placing it in the proper receptacle. High bidders will be announced during the refreshment break. Please bring along change to pay for your bids, folks." Another common fundraiser was a "split the pot" drawing, where people bought tickets and one person won half of the proceeds. Ruth Mandelbaum won \$13 this way in 1975.

CALLERS AND CUERS

As dancers gained experience in square dancing, they became personally acquainted with a number of callers. Some callers brought their wives. Jenny Johnstone, for example, usually accompanied her husband Michael. Tom Rinker was known to bring not only his wife, Mary, but their five children to dances (as in 1974). Callers were popular entertainers whom you could see in person and actually talk to.

The Bloomfield club had both visiting callers and a "club caller"—someone who called most of its dances and taught beginner classes. Tom Nichols, the first of these, was well-liked and helped the club to grow in its early years. Joe Prystupa followed him, and Don Atkinson of Ellington took over in 1974. Over time, some dancers began to see the club caller as too ordinary, and attendance at his dances lagged behind attendance when a visitor—especially a well-known one—was calling. Some dancers, of course, were satisfied with the familiar; but others, like so many people, continually looked for something new and more challenging. The Bloomfield club hired many skilled visiting callers. These callers achieved reputations for excellence and attracted crowds wherever they went. For example, Cliff Brodeur of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, whose parents were members of the Windsor club, was able to call smooth, almost thrilling, dances. He called several Bloomfield dances, including the 20th Anniversary Dance in December 1983. The star-status of some callers became a problem which divided dancers and was eventually to weaken the popularity of western-style square dancing because the less-able dancers, unable to keep up with the popular callers, felt left out.

Some dancers, having gained proficiency in square dancing, learned how to round dance (a couples dance that required more skill but also was done to spoken directions). In the early 1970s, Paul and Lillian Zepke taught rounds at the Metacomet School. Lillian manned the turntable and microphone, and Paul helped on the floor as needed. They also had about twenty couples at lessons, although (continued —>)



Heather Klugerman and Susan Pierce at a Barnstompers dance in the early 1980s. (R. Pierce photo)

most were from out of town. Over the years, the club had several round dance cuers. Bob and Ann Kendall were cuers starting in the 1974-75 season. In 1983, Fred Gertner was the club's new cuer. Gene and Barbara McLean took over in 1978. In 1980-81, Ernie and Jan Leemon cued at Friday dances only, and Rita and George Taravella filled in when they couldn't be there. Usually less than half the people at a dance did the rounds, but they did enjoy them a lot.

LESSONS

The club caller was also the club's teacher. Lessons were the vital source of new members for the club. It took a series of about twenty lessons for people to develop their skills and learn enough calls to dance at the graduate level. The club's Membership Chairman had to arrange for all of this to happen and be there every lesson night. Club members, who were called "angels" when they came to lessons, helped the learners by dancing with them. It had to be fun, or the students wouldn't come back.

The club was sponsoring both square and round dance lessons in 1972. Joe Prystupa taught the squares and had more than twenty couples in his class that year. After a few weeks of lessons, a special dance, called a "Beginners Ball," was held for new dancers. Often held in conjunction with the teen club, such dances attracted many people from Bloomfield and other clubs.



Photo from google images

When the number of students in Bloomfield decreased and the club faced a financial loss, a plan was made in 1978 to share lessons with the Windsor Old Towners club. (The Old Towners, being by then a higher-level club, had their own problems giving lessons and integrating new dancers into the club.) By the beginning of lessons in 1978, the Shooting Stars of West Hartford had joined the cooperative lesson series, creating a three-way partnership. Graduates had their choice of which club to join.

"December 4, 1979 was a night of nostalgia for those with long memories. It was the first time in about nine years that there was square dancing at the Vincent School—original home of our club. Concerned about the poor acoustics at the high school, the Executive Committee had asked Bob Baxley and Dick Pierce to find another location. With the willing cooperation of the Board of Education and the YMCA basketball program, we were able to transfer lessons to Vincent effective December 4. The six to eight squares of students and angels are now able to hear much better."

In 1980 the co-op graduation dance attracted 142 people (almost 18 sets) to the Vincent School gym. Six new grads joined the Bloomfield club that year, and the remainder were given associate membership for one year. The Shooting Stars ended their involvement as of the 1983-84 year, but Windsor continued.



Photo from google images

WORKERS

A square dance club faces many of the challenges that are common amongst other nonprofit organizations. There are several jobs that must be done by volunteers if the club is to function and dancers are to have fun. The vice-president's specific task was to schedule callers for the dances in the following year. As mentioned above, the Membership Chair arranged for a teacher, a place to have lessons, an annual free Open House (Fun Night), publicity to attract new dancers, and getting those students out to Beginners Balls. Other chairpersons were responsible for (1) scheduling people to bring refreshments to every dance and clean up afterward, (2) for greeting people at the door and collecting their admission fees, (3) for arranging dates and clubs to visit for banner raids, (4) for attending meetings of the Connecticut Calendar Association and placing our dances on its monthly dance list (5) for getting publicity in the newspapers and (from 1972 on) for editing and distributing a newsletter, (6) for (continued —>)

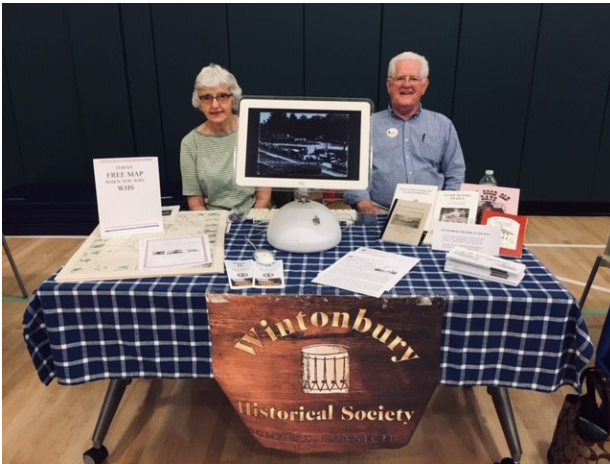


Photo from google images

attending meetings of the state square dance festival committee, and (7) for supervising the teen club. That all these jobs were done and done well for over twenty years is, when you think about it, rather remarkable. When clubs started to fold around the state in the eighties, the reason was typically that not enough people were willing to do all these jobs anymore.

The original by-laws of the Bloomfield club stipulated that “Officers shall not serve in the same capacity for two successive years.” The idea was (and it worked well for a long time) that the couple accepting the nomination for vice-president committed to being vice-president for one year (during which they planned the dance schedule for the following year), then serving as president for one year and past-president for one more year. The same couple, of course, might serve at other times in another office or as committee chairs. During the 27-year history of the club, only two couples served two years as president—and those years were not consecutive. In 1986, with declining membership, the club changed its by-laws to allow consecutive terms, but it didn’t solve the problems. In the last year of the club’s existence, the presidents elected to serve that year resigned early in the fall, and the vice-president couple added the president’s duties to their own for the remainder of the season. It was symptomatic of how hard it was at that time to get workers; and, sure enough, the club folded at the end of that year (1987).

In Part 3, next issue: Community involvement, special events and promotions, badges and fun badges, clothing, membership, non-dance activities, and more on the Barnstompers.



Left: Louise Schmoll and Bill Weissenburger at the annual Senior Expo, September 24, 2019

Janis Langston photo

we  volunteers!

Honor Roll of Docents 2019

Thank you!

Baram, Paula
 Barnard, Diana
 Barnard, Doug
 Beeching, Barbara
 Casner, John
 Dahlgren-Dechand, Judy
 Fox, Cheryl
 Gough, Kevin
 Guilmartin, Homer
 Jones, Paula
 Katz, Tobie
 Langston, Janis
 Mellow, Libbie
 Panke, Nick
 Perreault, Jean
 Pierce, Dick
 Pierce, Jean
 Roones, David
 Roones, Patti
 Schmoll, Louise
 Schmoll, Ralph
 Weissenburger, Bill
 Willoughby, John

WHS PROGRAM A SUCCESS: Author Beth Caruso spoke to an enthusiastic, capacity audience at the Prosser Public Library on Wednesday, October 2. In an illustrated historical talk, she described colonial America’s treatment of witches and the first hanging in Windsor in 1647. Caruso’s novel *One of Windsor: the Untold Story of America’s First Witch Hanging* was for sale. Just out is her second novel, *The Salty Rose: Alchemists, Witches & A Tapper in New Amsterdam*.

(Alice Bettencourt, continued from page 8)
 qualified to work with children on her own. She worked thirty years at Wintonbury, Metacomet, Vincent, Laurel, and Carmen Arace schools; and she looks back on it as a very good experience: friendly people, nice children. Today she still enjoys taking the Senior Center bus to attend the knitting group once a week, where she met Janis Langston and got to talking about old times and how she might share her memories with the Historical Society.



BLOOMFIELD MEMORIES: ALICE BETTENCOURT

Some people are nomads, moving from here to there, looking for a better place to live. Other people are rooted in one town, one community, a place that is home throughout their lives. Such a person is Alice P. Bettencourt of Bloomfield, who has lived and thrived in town for all of her 85 years.

Alice is the subject of an oral history recently recorded by Ralph and Louise Schmoll at the Gabriel History Center. The DVD is available there, along with other oral histories done by the Schmolls. This text is derived from that DVD.

When Alice and her twin sister were born in 1934, her family was living on Prospect Street. Her father had been born in Portugal in 1889 and her mother in the Azores in 1901. They had emigrated to the United States and met each other in Hartford, where they married. They had learned to speak English in classes offered by the Hartford schools. In 1931, when Alice's father took a new job as custodian at St. Thomas Seminary, the couple moved to Bloomfield. They rented for a couple of years, including a year in the 1775 Ellsworth House, 40 Wintonbury Avenue, corner of Woodland, and a year in an apartment over Lagan's garage. They then bought the oldest house (1860) on Prospect Street, or "Cow Hill," as it was called. Alice can remember when there really were cows at a dairy farm on the hilltop and one of her brothers got a job there. She says the hill has been lowered twice since the days when she lived there.

It was a friendly neighborhood, one where you knew everyone on your street. You didn't lock your doors, even at night. Alice babysat for the children of neighbor George Gabriel and his first wife. Her mother walked down the hill to buy groceries at the First National Store (located in what is now Amazing Plaza where Fresenius Kidney Care is). It wasn't much further to the Shopping Bag, the post office, and Park Avenue Pharmacy.

When Alice's father died in 1963, his funeral was the last one held in the old Sacred Heart Church building on Woodland Avenue. When she was young, the whole family would walk to Sacred Heart on Sundays, picking up the railroad track at the intersection of Prospect Street and Park Avenue and walking along the track to Wintonbury Avenue and thence to the church on Woodland. Alice was christened and confirmed at Sacred Heart and then married there. She's still an active member of that faith community.

When Alice and her husband Antonio (who was from the Azores) were married, they lived with her mother on Prospect Street for a year and then built their own home on Forest Lane, where Alice still lives today. Forest Lane was a new development running off Daniel Boulevard. The land had been used as a pig farm, and to get to Blue Hills Avenue, you had to walk through a cow pasture (as Alice's son and four daughters did to get to Wintonbury School). Bull Brothers Construction built a number of houses on Forest Lane, including the Bettencourts'. Moving to Forest Lane meant that Alice attended Christ the King Catholic Church until it was closed in 1963, when she returned to Sacred Heart.

Alice's parents never owned a car. Her father walked to work every day from Prospect Street to the Seminary. Once in a while, neighbor Ted Space would see him walking and give him a ride to work. In 1955 during the hurricane that year, Wash Brook flooded over Cottage Grove Road, and he had to walk all the way around to Bloomfield center to get home.

Alice's husband was a skilled mechanic and worked for Ed-Art Truck Rental until his death. Alice, after her youngest daughter entered kindergarten, volunteered in the elementary schools. The teachers suggested she could get paid for what she did, and she was hired as a paraprofessional. The Board of Education provided a training program, and Alice became an Instructional Assistant, (continued on page 7)



Alice Bettencourt, October 2019

Ralph Schmoll photo