

Essex County Historical Society turns 50 at the

Adirondack History Center Museum

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, March 12, 2004

ELIZABETHTOWN — The Essex County Historical Society will be marking the 50th anniversary of its founding later this month.

“The plan is to celebrate a whole series of events over the next 5 years,” said Adirondack History Center Museum Director Margaret Gibbs.

The first such commemoration will be held next Friday, March 19, with a special program at the museum. Historical Society members have engaged in a little detective work, trying to find as many of the group’s 40 founding members to attend the 50th anniversary gathering. Only two survivors have been located, however: Katherine Cross, of Essex, and Mark Hanna, of Willsboro. Both have been invited to next week’s activities.

Another commemoration of the Essex County Historical Society’s 50th anniversary is currently making its way around the county. The moveable exhibition was researched by librarian Suzy Doolittle and designed by Elaine McGoldrick, both members of the History Center staff. The exhibition tells the stories of all 18 townships in Essex County. It is currently on display at the Whiteface Mountain Ski Center in Wilmington, but will move to Schroon Lake next month as part of Schroon township’s bicentennial cel-

ebration.

The biggest memorial of the Historical Society’s 50th anniversary, however, is the Adirondack History Center itself, for which the society was founded. Since 1955, the Adirondack History Center has developed into an extraordinary small museum, giving Adirondackers and tourists alike a rich taste of what life was like in bygone days in Essex County.

The school of history

The Adirondack History Center is housed in a building that, from 1915

through the early 1950s, was home to the Elizabethtown Central School. Six months after the Essex County Historical Society was formed, the new organization bought the two-story brick building and began renovations for its new life as a museum.

Today the Adirondack History Center has seven exhibit rooms on the first and second floor and a research library as well as an exhibition hall in the huge basement room that was originally the school’s gymnasium. The History Center’s program area is not restricted to the building’s interior, however; three outdoor areas have long been used to describe aspects of natural and cultural development in the Adirondacks, and a fourth outdoor display will open this year.

As a small museum, the Adirondack History Center is first-rate. The restored artifacts on display are attractive in themselves, and they are attractively presented as well. Interpretive plaques placed throughout the museum make it easy for unescorted visitors to clearly and fully understand the stories being told by the artifacts.



The Adirondack History Center Museum makes its home in the former Elizabethtown Central School building.



The Adirondack Room celebrates the High Peaks experience with its lean-to, vintage guideboats, snowshoes and pack baskets.

When you step through the doors on the side of the building and climb the stairs to the front desk, here's what you will find inside the Adirondack History Center:

- On the main floor, one gallery has been set aside as an **ORIENTATION ROOM**, containing a large relief map of Essex County. Lights have been placed where important sites can be found on the map; those lights are illuminated when buttons are pressed on an array at the base of the map. "Kids love pressing those buttons," Gibbs said.

- Across the hall is the **ROSENBERG GALLERY**, a room set aside for special exhibits. Two years ago, this gallery played host to Amy Godine's exhibition, "Dreaming of Timbuctoo," about the attempt to establish a free African-American colony in North Elba in the mid-19th century. Last year's special exhibit was "Forgotten Household Arts." This year, the Rosenberg Gallery exhibition will focus on the iron-

mining operations that drove the settlement of Essex County in the early 1800s, from North Elba and Newcomb to Moriah and Au Sable Forks.

- On the other side of the main floor are the **AGRICULTURE ROOM** and the **ADIRONDACK ROOM**, the latter being probably the most popular gallery in the museum with young guests, Director Gibbs said.

The centerpiece of the Adirondack Room is an authentic lean-to, built in place especially for the museum, complete with typical Adirondack camping gear. Displayed alongside the log shelter are a beautifully restored wooden canoe and Adirondack guideboat. On the walls are two tributes to regional pioneers, one to surveyor Verplanck Colvin, the other to famous backwoods guides like John Cheney, Old Mountain Phelps and Bill Nye.

But the artifact in the Adirondack Room that evidently draws the most attention from the museum's young

visitors is Cobble Hill Bill, the stuffed remains of a small bear that was kept as a pet at Elizabethtown's Windsor Hotel. After Bill was killed during an escape attempt, his heart-broken owner had him stuffed. Bill eventually found his way to the museum, where kids have petted his snout so much over the years that all the hair there has been worn off.

- Upstairs, in addition to the **BREWSTER LIBRARY** for historical research, are three more exhibition galleries. The **DOLL ROOM** is dedicated to the Ladd Collection of historic American and Asian dolls, gathered by Wadhams summer resident Frances Virginia Stevens Ladd during her travels around the world in the first half of the 20th century.

- The full name of the **COMMUNITY ROOM**, across the hall from the Doll Room, is "Ties that Bind: Making Adirondack Communities." Displays focus on five of Essex County's community-building institutions: business, churches, schools,

newspapers and civic organizations. Prominent among the displays are a working printing press, several old-time school desks, and the 1920s-era stage curtain from the Lewis Grange Hall, covered with advertisements for local businesses.

One wall in the Community Room contains a timeline showing milestones in the life of the building in which the museum is housed, starting with its opening as a school in 1915.

“We have quite a few people who come through and view the building itself as an artifact,” Gibbs said, “especially those who attended school here.”

- Next door to the Community Room is the COUNTY ATTIC, containing a glassed-in hodge-podge of typical household artifacts from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

- Going back down two flights of stairs, Adirondack History Center visitors will find themselves in the expansive basement of the old school building. The main, lower portion of the basement is dedicated to the museum’s TRANSPORTATION CENTER. Displayed in the high-ceilinged room that once was the school gymnasium are several excellent restorations of 19th century vehicles, including a fire-pump wagon and an 1887 Concord stage-coach.

In a small sub-gallery at the far end of the gym is an exhibit on the 18th century French and English forts at Crown Point. In the mezzanine overlooking the Transportation Center, where a few old bleachers have been left in place, a sound and light show played across a 35-foot map of Lake Champlain tells the stories of the early conflicts that determined the future of Essex County.

IF THE WEATHER is good, several outdoor interpretive areas at the Adirondack History Center deserve

attention during your next visit.

- An authentic COLONIAL GARDEN was carved out of the lawn behind the museum in 1955 and 1956. An adaptation of the Hampton Court garden of England’s King Henry VIII, it has been maintained for the last 39 years by the Essex County Adirondack Garden Club.

- Behind the Colonial Garden, a small NATURE TRAIL leads visitors through the woods between the Adirondack History Center and the adjacent Hand House, the restored home of a renowned 19th century state Supreme Court justice.

- Standing to the side of the old Elizabethtown School is a restored ADIRONDACK FIRE TOWER. A majority of the 69 towers erected on Adirondack and Catskill mountaintops in the early 20th century have been removed because of state wilderness policy. Parts of the towers from West and Kempshall mountains, in Hamilton County, were sal-

vaged for the construction of the Adirondack History Center’s very own fire tower. Yes, you can climb it; entry is from the former emergency exit at the end of the second floor hallway.

- New this year will be an outdoor exhibit on WATER POWER, which drove the lumber mills and other early industry of Essex County’s riverside hamlets. Central to the exhibit will be the huge, iron water turbines salvaged from an old mill in Lewis, which will grace the museum lawn like large industrial sculptures.

Living history

The Adirondack History Center offers special programs each year, in addition to its exhibits. One of the highlights of last summer’s program was a weekly “living history” performance.

This summer a new living-history show will be offered in July and August. The seven performances



The stage curtain from the old Grange hall in Lewis, covered with advertisements for local businesses, hangs across one wall of the Community Room.

will be staged on Fridays starting at 11 a.m.

“The performance last year started in the garden,” Gibbs said, “and worked its way all through the museum, with different scenes in each room.” Photos from the 2003 performances can be viewed on the Adirondack History Center Web site at adkhistorycenter.org. Some of the scenes were:

- In the Doll Room, an actress played a 19th century parlor doll.
- In the Community Room, two

kids acted out a schoolroom scene, telling jokes and pulling pigtails.

- In the County’s Attic, an actor made up as a display mannequin came to life. She told the story of Esther McComb, a 15-year-old who got lost hiking Whiteface from the north, accidentally becoming the first person to scale the peak of Esther Mountain, later named in her honor.

Last year’s performances featured the history of Westport, according to Gibbs. This summer, the focus will

be on the town of Keene.

“The Keene Central School drama program will start developing it,” Gibbs said, “and some students will be a part of it. Besides the performances here, there will probably be shows at the school and in the community, too.”

Inez Milholland remembered

Another event planned for this summer in conjunction with the Adirondack History Center is the Inez Milholland Weekend, the majority of which will take place on Saturday, Aug. 14.

Though born in Brooklyn on Aug. 6, 1886, suffragist attorney Inez Milholland had as strong a connection to the North Country as to the Big Apple. Milholland’s father, New York Tribune editorialist and NAACP co-founder John Milholland, came from Lewis, and Inez was raised in both communities.

Milholland was best known for leading 8,000 demonstrators in an Inauguration Day 1913 march on Washington. Milholland, dressed in flowing white robes, rode a white horse at the head of the march.

Eight years after the 30-year-old Milholland’s death in 1916 from a blood disease, the National Women’s Party held its national convention in Essex County in her honor. Part of that convention’s program was a memorial service for Inez in Lewis, which was attended by 10,000 people.

Lewis’s Discovery Mountain, which was supposed to have been renamed Mount Inez in her honor, will be one of the dual centers of activity over this year’s Inez Milholland Weekend, according to Gibbs.

“At the museum, we have a whole series of events planned for that Saturday. A play has been written about her by a New York City playwright,” Gibbs said.



The chair used by Manya Jokel Gersen, Elizabethtown dentist from 1920 through 1961, is on display in the County Attic.

“A women’s bike tour traveling the state will visit Meadowmount School, which was the Milholland home, and take the bike trail around Discovery Mountain — or Mount Inez — before coming down here for our festivities.”

Getting there

To get to Elizabethtown from Lake Placid, take Route 73 through Keene, making a left onto Route 9N just a few miles past Keene hamlet. Route 9N (High Street) comes to an end next to a golf course at an intersection facing the “new” Elizabethtown-Lewis Central School. Turn left onto Court Street.

From the Northway (I-87), take Exit 31 west to Elizabethtown on Route 9N, which becomes River Street. Take a left at the stop sign, turning onto Court Street.

The Adirondack History Center Museum, 7590 Court St., Elizabethtown, is located on the main street running through the Essex County seat. On the corner opposite the museum stands a handsome stone church. Up the street is the Essex County Government Center, including the old courthouse where radical abolitionist John Brown’s body lay in state after the Harper’s Ferry debacle.

The museum is open from Memorial Day weekend through Columbus Day. Hours are Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m.

Entry is \$3.50 for adults, \$2.50 for seniors, \$1.50 for students, and free for children under 6 and Essex County Historical Society members. Society memberships are \$10 for individuals and \$25 for families and businesses.

For more information, call the museum at (518) 873-6466, or visit the Adirondack History Center on the Web at adkhistorycenter.org.



A significant portion of the Adirondack History Center's mission is the preservation of historic documents, available for use by researchers in the O.B. Brewster Memorial Library.

Timeline

- *March 19, 1954* — Essex County Historical Society organized, with 40 charter members, eight board members.
- *Oct. 22, 1954* — Vacant Elizabethtown school building (erected 1915) purchased.
- *May 28, 1955* — Adirondack Center Museum opens in former school building.
- *July 20, 1957* — Colonial Garden opened on museum grounds.
- *June 6, 1958* — Nature trail opened behind the Colonial Garden.
- *Aug. 13, 1959* — The O.B. Brewster Room historical library dedicated.