

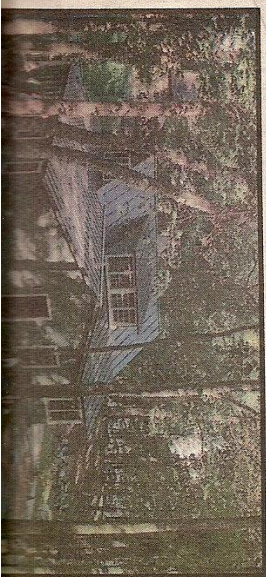
Thursday, August 26, 2004

People & Places

Rutland Daily Herald ♦ Page C1



A boat carries visitors to a fund-raising event on renowned Neshobe Island (background) on Lake Bomoseen on Sunday.



Memory island



Memory island

Neshobe Island's rich, sometimes wild history revisited in fund-raiser

By ED BARN

Herald Correspondent

When Sheila McIntyre proposed the idea of raising money for an addition to Castleton Free Library by holding a gala celebration on Lake Bomoseen's Neshobe Island, organizers were a bit nervous about selling 150 tickets at \$125 apiece.

Not that it was a totally unreasonable price. In addition to a tax-deductible \$65 donation, that amount — or donations and volunteerism — had to cover the cost of a jazz band, a pianist, champagne, a gourmet dinner, and historical re-enactors.

The tickets sold in two weeks, and soon there was a waiting list. This would not only be a charitable event, it would be a historic occasion: the public's first chance to see what had been happening on an island that was as mysterious as it was storied.

"People have been wanting to get on that island for 60 years," said McIntyre, a library board member.

Everyone knew it had once been owned by a group of famous writers, actors, and musical theater people that included the Marx Brothers. Many residents had passed along family stories about the wild carrying on that took place in the center of the lake.

Now, thanks to the island's new owners, Davene and Jerry Brown, who had spent six years restoring it "to its former glory" (as McIntyre put it), there would be a chance to learn the truth.

Not only would there be the original stone house and the rebuilt guest house, with many of the furnishings dating back to its 1920s Jazz Age heyday, there would also be three performers re-creating three of the leading personalities through their writings.

Between 3 and 10 p.m. Sunday,

nine watercraft of both modern and antique vintage ferried the visitors to an event that will now be another chapter in the saga.

People took self-guided walking tours, listened to Rita Lane play music from the Irving Berlin era on Berlin's own piano, heard local actor Ted Pendleton reprise his version of Roaring Twenties author and theater critic Alexander Woollcott from the play "The Man Who Came to Dinner," listened to writer Sarah Widness portray the wicked wit of Dorothy Parker, watched as Nat Benchley did a condensed version of his acclaimed

New York City show, learned some of the island's stories with Davene Brown, and sang period songs around a bonfire with the Onion River Jazz Band.

As the day wound down, and the boats began returning guests to various mainland docks, people's comments again and again returned to two things: the amazing work the Browns have done in conserving one of Vermont's leading literary shrines; and the way so many people had pulled together in support of a library as big in their hearts as it is small in size.

"I think it's a terrific day, a terrific turnout," said Benchley, who admired the work people had put into its organization.

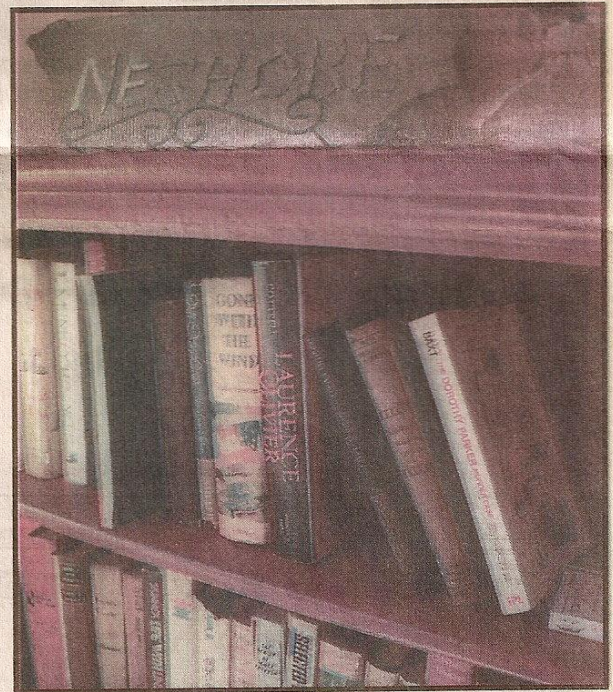
It was impressive how many people had come in support of the library, he said — "and for the fun of it."

Fun was at the heart of what happened on Neshobe Island when members of the Algonquin Round Table took refuge there in the summers away from New York City.

There had been real Algonquins on the island, which one account said had for many years been a happy hunting ground for those looking for arrowheads. People still find some, Brown said, an indication that fish-



A boat arrives at Neshobe Island for the start of festivities. The event was delayed a day by rain.



The home on Neshobe Island has many books written by (and about) the famous people who stayed there.



Visitors were encouraged to wear 1920s-style garb for the weekend event on Neshobe Island.

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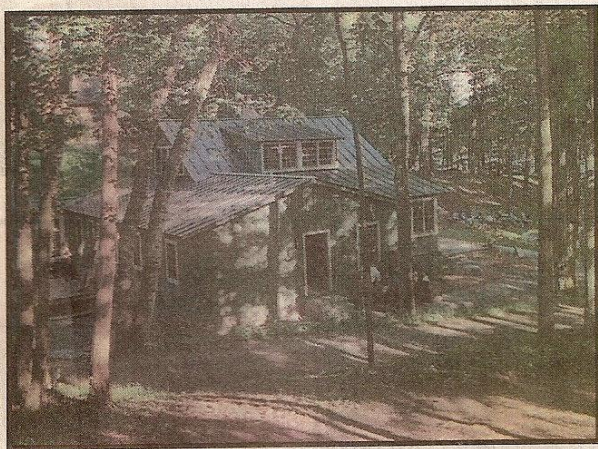
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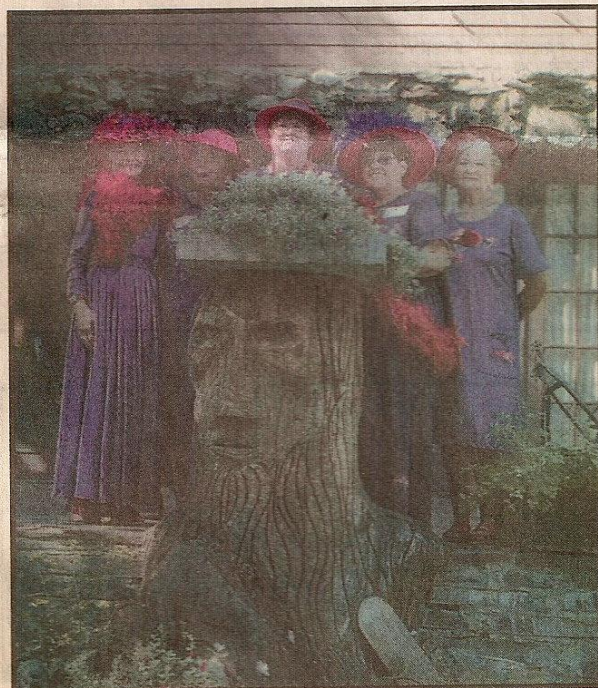
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Neshobe Island has a rebuilt guest house, but its furnishings are from the island's heyday in the 1920s.



The Red Hat Ladies of Fair Haven had a role in the Neshobe Island event last weekend.



The Onion River Jazz Band entertains the 150 people who paid \$125 each to visit the island.

**Story and
photos by
Ed Barna**

Island

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rich Lake Bomoseen had been a place where the Western Abenaki camped during the season when they could gather part of their winter's food there.

But it wasn't until 1881 that the 10-acre island (now less than eight acres due to the Bomoseen outlet dam, Brown said) got the name Neshobe.

The Rutland County Historical Society later produced a booklet titled "An Account of the Celebration of the Fourth of July, 1881, at Mason's Point, Lake Bomoseen, Including the Report of the Ceremony of Christening the Island of Neshobe," to which about 10,000 people were reported to have come. It was named for an Indian scout who helped the Green Mountain Boys.

The Historical Society put down 1790 as the year when the island was first settled and cleared, and houses built. A Yankee Magazine article shared by McIntyre indicated that a pig farm was there once, then a small hotel, which eventually burned.

That hotel was part of a belt of establishments in New York, Vermont, and the rest of New England to which city families would come for extended stays, once the railroads arrived in the middle of the 19th century. So it wasn't that much of a surprise when Alexander Woollcott and nine of his New York friends formed the Neshobe Club and bought the island in 1924.

Woollcott was well known as the theater critic for the New York Herald Tribune, and eventually became a radio star in that medium's pre-TV heyday. His reviews were admired and feared. They included such salvos as "The scenery was beautiful, but the actors got in front of it," and "It was one of those plays in which all the actors unfortunately enunciated very clearly."

In the city, at the Algonquin Hotel on 59th Street, the imperious Woollcott lorded it over a luncheon group whose informal membership between 1919 and 1929 included at various times Parker, Benchley, George Kaufman, Edna Ferber, Douglas Fairbanks, Jascha Heifetz, and more than a dozen others whose names, in many cases big on Broadway at the time, have faded from common memory.

And there were the comic vaudevillians whom Woollcott discovered, publicized and helped turn into stars: the Marx Brothers.

The hotel eventually built a large table to accommodate these regulars, so that they acquired the name still usually attached to them: The Algonquin Round Table.

The group's nickname better characterized the scintillating repartee and verbal one-upmanship for which they became famous: The Vicious Circle.

Parker, playwright, reviewer and the author of three books of poems and many short stories, is evoked in the 1994 film "Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle." Here are some examples of her "caustic wit, wisecracks, and sharp eye for 20th-century urban foibles," as one account of her career put it:

■ As a reviewer: "This is not a book to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force."

■ About Katherine Hepburn on Broadway in "The Lake": "She delivered a striking performance that ran the gamut of emotions, from A to B."

■ Entering a party where Clare Boothe Luce had remarked "age before beauty" and had stepped back to let Parker go first: "Pearls before swine."

■ In a Round Table game of inventing new definitions for lesser-known words: "You can lead a horticulture, but you cannot make her think."

■ Observing the financial frenzies of the Roaring Twenties: "If you want to know what God thinks of money, just look at the people He gave it to."

■ When people were passing along the news that "President Coolidge is dead," Parker said: "How can they tell?"

Widness, who said she took on the role of Parker for the celebration because she admired her work, said her best-known lines were probably "Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses." Then, getting into character, she added her own lines: "That way I can't see / What the men are doing to me."

This was definitely true to the free spirit of a woman who once said "Brevity is the soul of lingerie" and on another "One more drink and I'd have been under the host."

As an example of the kind of generosity the Neshobe Island event inspired, a collector of Parker memorabilia on the other side of the country heard about the occasion and gave the Browns a framed copy of a famous sketch done of Parker on the island at a time when she went swimming in a large sun hat — and nothing else.

But Woollcott gave away nothing in the wit department. Here are some of his lines:

■ "Character is made by what you stand for; reputation by what you fall for."

■ "Nothing risqué, nothing gained."

■ "All the things I like to do are either immoral, illegal or fattening."

■ "His huff arrived and he departed in it."

■ "Many of us spend half of our time wishing for things we could have if we didn't spend half our time wishing."

But the Roundtable was a place where anyone could get topped. One time Woollcott, imitating the lines of a well-known poem, asked, "What is so rare as a Woollcott first edition?" He had set himself up for Franklin Adams, who replied, "A Woollcott second edition."

Neshobe Island became a kind of reservation where this sort of merry madness could be let loose.

"All these people were just crazy," said Benchley. He gave as an example the way Harpo Marx and a friend decided on the spur of the moment to go there, took trains and buses all the way across the country from California and surreptitiously got onto the island.

They hid behind some trees and made a surprise "attack" on Woollcott and his companions ("I'm not sure they had clothes on or not"), then promptly went back to California.

The Roaring Twenties turned into the Depression, then another World War.

Woollcott sold the island, history became legend, and legend became mystery.

But Neshobe Island was never turned into a private preserve, commercial development, bed-and-breakfast inn or literary conference center. McIntyre said former owner Merritt Chandler always felt that the island was his in trust, as a legacy to preserve, and he did what he could to maintain the stone house that Woollcott had built there.

The way the Browns came to buy the place in 1998 is another remarkable chapter in Neshobe Island's history.

Davene Brown said she and Jerry wanted to get a lakeside place for the sake of their two teenage children and their friends, and wanted something far enough from their home in Hebron, N.Y., to serve as a getaway. So they came to Wenda Bird, a real estate agent with two decades of experience around Lake Bomoseen.

The Browns looked at eight places around the lake, Bird recalled at the gala, but none had

the kind of privacy they wanted. But she knew a place with plenty of privacy, if they were willing to pay \$800,000 and if Merritt Chandler was willing to sell it to them.

They did have the money. Brown said that in addition to her husband's excavating business, she had inherited some of what her father received from selling a manufacturing business he had started in Argyle, N.Y.

However, there was another problem. It was early December, Bird recalled, and the lake was choked with ice. The only way she could show Neshobe Island to the Browns was to use a hovercraft, but the only such boat in the area was sitting inoperable in a field because its inflatable cloth air bags had broken down.

So Bird found a local seamstress who could repair the air bags, then paid \$375 to rent the craft for a day. On the same day as Vermont's great ice storm, the Browns came up and they went to Neshobe Island.

"I didn't sell the island," Bird said. All it took was five minutes, and the Browns knew this was the place they wanted, and Chandler knew they were the right people for the place.

Chandler left them all sorts of pictures, magazines and other memorabilia, Brown said, much of which they have used to turn the library of Woollcott's Stone House into a kind of memorial for the Neshobe Club years.

Davene Brown scuba dives, and has found a few relevant artifacts, such as part of a croquet ball never retrieved from the water. And she frequents eBay, bidding on any treasures she feels belong with the island.

Though trees have overgrown the old croquet ground, and a septic system will eventually have to go there, the paths that the Algonquin group and their friends wore through the cedars are still there.

So is the slab of stone between trees that was Parker's "pouting bench" when she was in one of her depressive moods.

The shower and sink and toilet in the Stone House are another kind of memorial: made of verde antique green marble, they had

been a kind of bathroom of the future at the 1939 World's Fair in New York, from which Woollcott had bought them.

The building the Browns call the Guest House had to be completely rebuilt, from the foundation up, Davene said. The gala was in fact the first day of its restored life, she said.

"I think it's wonderful, absolutely fantastic, to have this place restored and brought back to life," said Rita Lane, well known in the area as a Marble Valley Players accompanist, but on that day the performer at Irving Berlin's old piano. The Browns "have opened their home and the island, and have generously shared them."

That generosity, and the dedication of people like McIntyre, co-chairwoman Sharon Brown, and the 10 other members of the core committee, helped to inspire a huge group effort.

By Aug. 22, that included 10 "boatmen" (nine boats, several of them interesting antiques in their own right), 13 assistant "boatboys," six other shuttle helpers and a large crew of on-land assistants.

The official program list of "contributors" runs to nearly 40. A few were simply financial supporters, but many had more involving roles, such as:

■ Bryan Johnson, known in the area for the huge private parties he cooks for in Clarendon, paid admission then spent most of the time making sure the turkeys were cooked properly. Many were delighted when he turned out to be the winner of a raffle for a weekend at New York City's Algonquin Hotel, which had donated that prize.

■ The Red Hat Ladies of Fair Haven, led by Mary Anne Liguori; open to women over 50, the nationwide society emphasizes not letting age stop the fun, symbolized by the red hats and purple outfits the members wear.

■ The Marble Valley Players costume barn, which provided Twenties costumes for a number of those who wanted to live up to the announced stylistic theme "Black and White."

■ Roz Rogers of the Trak In restaurant on the eastern shore of Bomoseen, responsible for much of the food.

Once the bonfire had died down, and people were done singing "In the Good Old Summer-time" and "Give My Regards to Broadway" and others from the "Neshobe Island Song Book," and the flashlights they had been advised to bring were in use on the paths to the boats, many were probably wondering if such an event could ever happen again.

Not in the near future, never on the same scale, and only for charity, said Jerry Brown.

If people really care about the place, he said, they should make sure there isn't any trespassing, because that is what could lead to serious damage.

But those who love Neshobe Island can rest assured that the Browns see themselves as stewards of something that they hope will continue on.

As Davene said, "we're caretakers," making sure the treasure ultimately gets passed along.



Robert Benchley, on Neshobe Island last weekend. Robert Benchley was a visitor to the island.

