



The Hourglass

CCXIII Northborough Historical Society September 2012

www.Northboroughhistsoc.org

NHS1906@verizon.net

Meeting September 21, 2012 -- Pot Luck supper 6:30 PM

Program: What Did Northborough Look Like Fifty to Sixty Years Ago?
Bob Ellis will present slides from the 1950s and 60s.

John Kellette Yet Again

Although I've written on John William Kellette more than once before, a recent development has brought him to mind again. The continuing popularity of "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," not his only achievement but the one which keeps his name alive today, is an interesting phenomenon.

First of all, I would like to hearken back to my essay in the last Hourglass published in the 1900s, which some of you have perhaps never read and which very few of you will have right at hand. Among the enormous number of donations which Pat McFarland has made to the Historical Society was a column that appeared in the Worcester Telegram (or perhaps Gazette). It is undated but bears a handwritten note "Dec? 1919." In checking that issue during a long session with a microfilm reader (which I despise), I could not find the article in that or any other issue around that time. It was clearly written by a journalist of that newspaper. The subtitle of the article is "Kellette Does Not Forget Child That Inspired Bubbles."

If this article is credible, and I have no reason to think that it is not, it firmly disproves the statement on the sheet music that the lyricist was "Jaan Kenbroven," which is actually a conflation of the

Membership
Northborough Historical
Society

Membership Renewal Time

Membership Dues:
Regular \$15.00; Student
and Seniors (65 and over)
\$10.00; Family \$35.00; and
Life \$250.00.

Dues should be sent to
Judy Bissett
300 Ball St.
Northborough, MA 01532

Checks should be made out
to the
Northborough Historical
Society

Curator's News

Back in June the second graders from Proctor School visited our museum and learned some of Northborough's history from tour guides Sandra Chaurette, Linda Corbin, Diane Guldner and Jane

names of three men of the music business, who in my mind were clearly the type of pseudo-author that song writers of the time often had to endure to get their compositions published.

The story is that the title came from a ragged seven-year-old girl whom Kellette met on a New York street. She was trying to quiet a baby brother: "I gotta take care of him 'cause the doctor says he's going to die." Kellette asked why the girl's friends called her "the bubble girl." Her reply: "I guess it's because I'm always blowing bubbles. I ain't got any way to play but making soap bubbles, and I see all kinds of pretty things in them. They don't last, though."

By the next day Kellette had written the music and words of the song. As a person who might more plausibly than "Kenbroven" be called its co-author, Madge O'Brien, along with her family, received from Kellette the funding of "a near little home in Westchester." Furthermore, the baby did not die. Thus I had to call my December 1999 article "A Christmas Carol." Kellette inscribed a copy of the sheet music to our Historical Society, noting that it had sold five million copies. (See page 94 of Images of America: Northborough, if you have it.)

But it is unlikely that this story was known by many of the people fascinated by the song. It was sung in a Broadway production, The Passing Show, in 1918 (very likely without Kellette's permission!).

The song was played by a band in Redland Field in Cincinnati before the first game of the 1919 World Series—an unfortunate series, for the Chicago White Sox (or "Black Sox," as they became known) were charged with throwing the series to Cincinnati.

The song has been featured in many movies. It is heard three times in the 1931 Jimmy Cagney film Public Enemy, directed by William Wellman. As a piano instrumental it graced the 1934 Stella Dallas. It was heard in Men and Wings (1938), in the Doris Day-Gordon McCrae movie On Moonlight Bay in 1951 and in the 1999 Woody Allen movie Sweet and Lowdown.

The West Ham United soccer team in England use it as its theme song. Several members of this team paid their respects in our museum a few years ago. If you want to hear the first recording of the song

Fletcher. My thanks to them for providing a wonderful visit for the children.

Time this summer has been spent on updating the massive inventory list of our Collection. This is an on-going process that has no end but will aid in retrieving and identifying the many items in our possession when needed.

New Accessions:

Book, Go, Bird Go on Mark Fidrych from Claire and Parker Swan

Framed photographs by Kristine Brunstetter

Photos from N. High School, Class of 1936 and others of Ruth Hammond Anderson from her daughter, Janet Dooley

Large collection of photos, books and genealogy of the Pease, Felt, Norcross and Wells families from Marcia Abernathy of Greensboro, NC.

Ellen Racine, Curator

Northborough Historical Society to host several Applefest activities.

The Northborough Historical Society will host several activities during the Town's Applefest celebration on September 15-16, 2012.

On Saturday, a booth at the street fair on the Algonquin High School grounds will feature a "Then and Now" picture quiz

by Ben Selvin and His Novelty Orchestra in 1919, you can hear it on redhotjazz.com.

And now the latest. I heard it played during the depiction of a love scene as part of the entertainment at the recent London Olympic Games, but if Jo Ann Sullivan had not called me and suggested that this instance be entered in this newsletter, I would most likely not have thought of this subject one more time. So nearly a century after its composition Kellette's song continues to bubble forth.

Bob Ellis, Historian

along with maps and books for sale. At the Historical Society building on Main Street, the museum will be open from noon to 4:00 p.m. Vintage farm implements and motorized equipment will be displayed on the front lawn while the museum is open. Children's games and simple crafts from the mid-20th century will also be featured in a hands-on display.

From noon to 2:00 the Society will host an ice cream social. A wide selection of toppings will be available for make-your-own sundaes, and homemade root beer will be available for old-fashioned ice cream floats. Ice cream social participants will be entertained by the "Stony Hollow String Dusters," a blue grass band.

The Northborough Art Guild will be hosting an art show in the meeting hall with floral arrangements created by the Northborough Garden Club from noon to 4:00 also.