

COMMENT

Provincetown Heritage Museum

By Josephine Del Deo

I would like to correct certain statements presented to the public both at the Annual Town Meeting and prior to the Town Meeting, by the finance committee, and others, which have misrepresented the true status of the Provincetown Heritage Museum's fiscal and physical health. At the request of the accounting office, I prepared a full overview of the museum's operation, since its inception, for the benefit of the Finance Committee and town officials, one week before the town meeting. Although these facts and figures were available, they were not used to back the museum's operating budget or its overall expense, or to verify the present excellent condition of the museum and grounds and its positive prospects for the future. Strangely enough, all was silent, except for the Board of Selectmen's routine request to fund the budget this year. The overall positive picture was not vigorously presented; it was hardly presented at all. I, therefore, wish to do so here.

In 1976, the museum was purchased for \$135,000 from the First National Bank of Provincetown. The building and grounds, formerly The Center Method-

ist Episcopal Church, had been designated as a National Registered Landmark on October 31, 1975. This meant that acquisition funding, as much as 50% could be obtained from the Massachusetts Historical Commission toward the purchase of the museum, which effectively would cancel the interest on the debt at 6-1/2%, leaving the total cost of the property to the town at slightly less than \$135,000. In four successive appeals, therefore, I secured \$65,925 from the Historical Commission in order to accomplish this objective. This 50% purchase grant obligated the town to sign a preservation covenant with the Commonwealth which required that the town maintain the building and grounds in its historic condition until the year 2018. This covenant runs with the land, and, therefore, regardless of ownership, no use of the museum may be contemplated which violates, in any way, the historic integrity of the building and grounds as an historic landmark. The debt for the property's purchase was retired in February 1990.

The capital expenditure during the last 17 years for all building repair undertaken under articles at annual or special town meetings, and finance

committee transfers, has been \$174,211 through 1991. (No capital budget has been requested for two years.) Capitalization plus amortization of the purchase debt annualized over the last 17 years, therefore, amounts of \$17,054 per year.

The operating budget, annualized over 17 years amounts to \$39 per year. The operating budget has been earned since 1985, and each year the balance of the budget returned to the town. I find it ludicrous, therefore, that anyone should choose to raise a "red flag" concerning an overall annualized expense to the town of less than \$18,000 per year. The major portion of our operating budget funds a salaried position for a head custodian, which is a shared position with the Community Center, and a job for a part-time, seasonal employee. Every other expense in the building, under the heading of the operating budget, must come from a sum total of between \$5,500 to \$6,500 of budget line items. This minimal operational expense is only made possible by the fact that the building is administered by a voluntary board of trustees and volunteers at the desk who receive admissions and provide visitor assistance for the four months the museum is open. It is doubtful if any budget in the town of Provincetown can lay claim to such a conservative fiscal schedule.

The further accusation of extraordinary future expenses due to further handicap access requirements than are already in place was a red herring deliberately and cynically contrived to mislead the public and voters. No such dilemma has yet raised its head. The rebuttal to this dire prediction could have been presented by the Town Manager who knows very well that, under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, handicap access in historic landmark buildings is a matter of flexible implementation, and, in S. 504, S. 17.217 (A) and (B), some of the important language which modifies rules for access in historic properties demonstrates that accommodation. The future expense of creating such access cannot, therefore, be arbitrarily determined by any member of the Finance Committee, or others, who have not examined the document I refer to, or other pertinent documents, and the conditions of the property.

Regarding the matter of Barry Clifford's proposal to use the Heritage Museum: I was requested by the Chair-

man of the Board of Selectmen on April 5th to conduct Mr. Clifford through the museum's building and grounds in my capacity as co-curator. I did so on April 6th, and, as soon as possible, when a meeting of the Heritage Museum's Board of Trustees could be convened on April 15th, made this tour with Barry Clifford known to them. I explained Mr. Clifford's proposal as it had been presented to me and offered my own views on the subject. It was a surprise to learn, several hours after the meeting closed, that the Board of Selectmen had already scheduled a meeting with Mr. Clifford, the Heritage Museum Board of Trustees and others, for May 10th. I subsequently expressed my belief, in a letter to the selectmen, that I felt such a meeting to be in violation of protocol, and that the proper procedure should have been to meet first with the Heritage Museum board and then, if appropriate, to schedule further discussion. It seemed no small insult to ask a board of trustees who volunteer their time, their genuine commitment and their effort to an operation as unique and important to the town as the Heritage Museum's for years, literally, and then, at the mere expression of outside enterprise, to sweep that commitment and those persons aside, as if their's was but a janitorial function.

For years, the official position of the town bureaucracy has been ever the same. The difficulties that have been placed in the way of the museum's operation have been time-consuming, hurtful and lacking in understanding of the hard work and loving labor which has gone on there, and it has only been because of the most loyal and heartfelt devotion to the project of maintaining the scheduled operation and, of course, of creating a national treasure such as "The Rose Dorothea" that the museum has succeeded. We have never had the kind of official support that the museum merits. Had we had, the receipts from admissions would have demonstrated even greater success. But we have had a budget in the black for the last eight years, and what was promised has been produced. What could not have been promised, and was not, was a capital earning that would cover every eventuality. No building in town could make that promise, since no one is a soothsayer for disaster.

The only real threat to the museum's future is a lack of support. I thank God that good citizens of Provincetown stood up and defended the treasure that is theirs; that they understood the heritage of the town which is housed here; that they realized what sacrifice has been made by many persons on behalf of that heritage. The vote was clear, if contested, and I predict that similar votes in the future will reflect even stronger support for the museum.

I do not understand why anyone feels they have a right to play an annual daisy game with a proven benefit, which has been recognized long ago by the citizens of Provincetown, and to say: "Shall we or shall we not fund the museum budget?" No volunteer would wish to be subjected to such a game, for the signal to all would then be: give us your time and your talents, but don't expect us to honor them. That is the wrong signal for a town, depending on its volunteers as it does, to send. As for myself and my husband, co-curator Salvatore Del Deo, this will be the eighteenth year that we have maintained and supervised the exhibits in the museum. We have always been gratified at the support the townspeople have demonstrated in their commitment to the Heritage Museum and their understanding of what it means to the town, and its heritage, and we can only hope that the town officials of this and future administrations will wisely forego their skepticism and join that support wholeheartedly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

"Frances," covered in my book.

I refer in one instance to the granddaughter, Patricia Benatti, her mother, Mary, and her father, Francis Silva, who was a crewmember of the dragger "James M. Burke" that brought up my Dad's body from the depths of the sea. I have corresponded and spoke with them several times since then.

I also corresponded and spoke with Leona Chapman, the granddaughter of Leonardo Sutera, one of the crewmembers of that ill-fated "Frances," whose body was never recovered.

She is the daughter of the fisherman Jimmy Sutera, who moved from Boston during those trying days of November-December, 1940, to seek information on the missing "Frances," on which his father, Leonardo, was a crewmember.

He settled, married, and raised his family there. All of them are still residents of Provincetown, with the exception of Jimmy Sutera who, his daughter Leona Chapman tells me, passed away in Provincetown some years ago. Her mother Frances, wife of the late Jimmy Sutera, also still lives there.

Again, I wish to thank you for that wonderful article, and all the friends I have made through its publication.

Thomas Piraino
Braintree

huge oval Esso sign (the coffee table) and children dancing and singing around the baby grand might all be happening at once.

At the center of all this, Liz O'Hara, youthful, beautiful, intelligent, witty, graceful, generous, compassionate, athletic, alive with spirit, flowed warmly through her home and through our town enlivening everyone she touched, inspiring many, including me, who she knew better than I knew myself and often loved more than I loved myself. It was the same with many others.

She had integrity. If one of her principles were challenged, in a few well chosen words her adversary was set straight. With me, by playing devil's advocate many an undeveloped idea or dogma of mine, fortunately, were shattered.

She brought light to any issue, be it political, behavioral, or as basic as how to best cook lobster. She had a wonderful life. We'll miss her greatly. Luckily, for us, her spirit was contagious and lives on in her many friends and in her children, who are imbued with her qualities. These reminders of her insure that she'll never be forgotten in Provincetown.

Harvey Dodd
Provincetown

Winter sand

To the Editor:

On or about April 20, to clear the roads of the winter sand accumulation Town workers pushed the sand off the roads onto adjacent private properties. In a conversation with Julia Enroth, the Wellfleet town administrator, regarding the sweeping practice, she told me that there was "no alternative" to clearing the roads of the waste and that if I did not like the practice, then the town "would not sweep the road in front of my properties." She further discounted my concern, stating that I was "the only person to complain."

Mrs. Enroth's less than eloquent defense of the utterly rude practice of dumping road waste onto private property signals a need for change in the way business is done in Wellfleet. I suggest the town repair the sweeper and put the town administrator's salary to the scrutiny of an override vote.

David P. Francis
Wellfleet

Happiest house

To the Editor:

For over 15 years I've been privileged with being the only year-round tenant in what many consider to be Provincetown's happiest house, where Liz and Jim O'Hara with their seven grown children (and their spouses, children and friends) rollick and relax from Easter to Thanksgiving.

Their house guests from around the world, accompanying the O'Haras through the Provincetown summer scene, appear perennially and are treated as part of the family, and might include a hitchhiker picked up 20 years ago, a band of East German sculptors met in New York, Irish musicians.

Over time their friends, too, have been welcomed into the fold with everyone pitching in to maintain the house, prepare the feasts. Sit-down dinners around a huge dining room table (painted by Arne Manos in the '70s), passionate discussions around the fireplace before a

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