



# The Bethel Lark

The quarterly newsletter of the Bethel Historical Society

History...Without it you don't exist!



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Issue 4 (8)

## When Eleanor Roosevelt Brought Dreams to Town

### The Amazing and Forgotten Story of Her Speaking to the Graduating Class of 1954

Article and images from Sandra J. Johnson

#### **M** "After the H-Bomb...Now What?"

The year is 1954 and that was the question Peter Ranis asked Eleanor Roosevelt. Fifty two students were gathered at the Bethel High School graduation on June 25th, eager to hear Mrs. Roosevelt deliver her commencement address. In March of that year, the U.S. had, in fact, exploded a 15-megaton H-bomb at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands and 18-year-olds, much like Peter Ranis, were once again denied the right to vote. By April, 1954, McCarthyism was on the move. And still, Eleanor Roosevelt cleared her calendar and responded, twice, to Mr. Ranis' letter of invitation. Her first declination replaced by, yes, she would gladly be the commencement speaker.

In 1954, Mrs. Roosevelt would win the Nanson Award for her long fight for universal freedom of speech and religion. By 1999, she would be ranked in the top 10 of Gallup's list of the most widely admired people of the 20th century. For reasons all her own, this letter from a high school senior inspired one trip from Hyde Park to Bethel, CT. and a small New England town would start their frenetic preparation.

The Danbury News-Times would later report that the Bethel High School auditorium was "crowded to capacity." One graduate I was able to interview, Mrs. Charlotte Banks Schuster of Taylor Rd., recalled the intense heat and standing room only for parents due to the reserved seating for town officials and school personnel. She also clearly recalls the political climate in Bethel at the time. Mr. Peter Ranis, a classmate of Mrs. Schuster's currently resides in New York City and acts as Professor Emeritus in Political Science at City University of New York. He too remembers that the invitation to speak was controversial since he believes that Bethel was a "rock-ribbed Republican town at the time." In a Danbury News-Times article entitled, "Mrs. FDR, Grads Team Up, Teach Bethel Democracy," it was reported that upon hearing of the invitation for Mrs. Roosevelt to be the commencement speaker, "The GOP-controlled Bethel Board of Education flipped into a political froth." The article continues that Mrs. Roosevelt had been invited by the Sr. Class due to their admiration for her work on the United Nations Human Rights Commission and her "indomitable liberalism."

Despite the political climate, plans were underway. The Board of Education made arrangements for a pre-commencement dinner.



Eleanor Roosevelt appears at the graduation of the Bethel High School Class of 1954. The events began with a letter from student Peter Ranis. (Photo from The Danbury News-Times)

Class officers were initially not invited because they were "children" and should not be allowed to "mingle with their elders." [Danbury News Times, June 26th, 1954] Thankfully parents complained and those same "children" whose confidence and sense of citizenship touched the heart of Eleanor Roosevelt all received last-minute invitations.

Mr. Ranis was eagerly planning his transition to Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. As Vice-President of the Senior Class he was selected to write the letter of invitation. In 1952, Mrs. Roosevelt had received an honorary doctorate at Brandeis along with Mr. Ranis' older brother. He writes, "This must have influenced me to have the farfetched notion of inviting her to Bethel High as commencement speaker." He continues, "I was more than shocked at the way in which she communicated directly with me in the spring of '54."

Due to his academic standing, he was one of 4 essayists to present his thoughts before Eleanor



Yearbook photo of Peter Ranis - whose letter begins the story of Mrs. Roosevelt's visit.

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# The Bethel Lark

is published by

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Founded in 1960

The Bethel Historical Society is an independent, non-profit organization made up of a group of people dedicated to preserving Bethel's history through acquisitions and conservation of property, artifacts and stories. The Society is dedicated to the education of the people of Bethel and surrounding communities.

Monthly programs are presented on varied historical subjects. Also offered are programs geared toward the education of children such as monthly historical craft classes, Walking Tours of Bethel and a Child's Victorian Christmas Tea.



# The Bethel Lark

Text Editor.....Marc Moorash  
Photo Editor.....Ava Dawn Heydt  
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(www.seraphemera.org)

The Bethel Lark is always looking for contributions on historical tales and travels within the sphere of Bethel CT and her surrounds.

# The President's Perspective



Holiday Greetings from the Bethel Historical Society -

With another successful year behind us we look forward to the future of bringing new museum displays and interesting programs for 2014 to the community. Please read further on in this newsletter for our upcoming programs.

Over the past several months there has been a lot of unpacking of our collection in order to do a current inventory and renumbering of each item. This is a big undertaking but will give us a more accurate list of our items and how best to display the collection for the people of Bethel. Thank you, Marc, for spearheading this task.

Our Director, Hugh Goodman, is completing research on the early Bethel High School once located on South Street where the Fire Hall now stands. While visiting and talking with a member of the Fire Department, the discussion came around to a pen and ink drawing of the old High School by Bud Bennett. It turns out this had been on loan to them for about 34 years and has now found its way back home to us. It is unique as it shows an addition made to the right side of the old high school that does not appear in any photo we have. Speaking of Bud Bennett, we have several paintings of his but are having difficulty finding any information about him so we are reaching out to you. If you know anything about Bud Bennett we want to talk to you.

Of particular note, this year, is the financial bequest received from the Estate of Darius Sutton. We are honored to have been named a beneficiary. The first installment went a long way toward rebuilding our funds following the carpentry and painting work completed on our building.

Historical item donations and written history are the mainstay of historical societies. Most recently, the Society received donations from:

- \* Sandi Forman – 1940s women's hats
- \* Mary Spain – photographs of early Bethel

\* Barbara Hurley – clothing, Bethel Fireman's hat accompanied by a photo, a painting received as a wedding gift, and an antique chair.

\* Diane Kopta– a wooden hand scythe/hay rake from the late 1800s/early 1900s. It is a terrifying looking piece of farm equipment used not only to cut down the hay but to rake it into piles using very long rake teeth.

What are our future plans for the Meeting House in 2014? It will be the beginning of our Capital Campaign to finish the restoration of the 1842 Second Meeting House and provide Bethel with not only a much larger museum, but also research and presentation areas supported by state-of-the-art audio/visual equipment. This restoration phase will require working with the State and an historic architect to outline the phasing of each step of restoration with a bid process to follow. With your continued sponsorship and financial help, we look forward to carrying out our goals.

I wanted to save the best for last. Caroline Garrett, age 92, and a long-time supporter of the Historical Society through the many, many historical Bethel items and written history she has donated, was recently invited and recognized by the City of Cupertino, California, where she lives, as one of three World War II women veterans in her area. In her words, "We felt proud to be representing all the women in the military, for in the past they have not always received the recognition they deserved." Congratulations, Caroline. She also shared with me that she is the sole remaining member of her generation in the Andrews-Morrison clan, also among the dwindling few who lived in Bethel more than 90 years ago. Please stop in Veteran's Hall in the Municipal Center and visit the Bethel Historical Society exhibit. You will see Caroline's WWII uniform, her father's WWI uniform and a medallion presented to her, on her 90th birthday, by the great-grandson of General George Patten, who she knew. Caroline is the author of *Short Skirts and Snappy Salutes* that details her war years.

Until next time,  
Patricia Rist, President



In need of a lovely venue with a full kitchen, to hold an event or party? The 2nd Meeting House can be rented for an afternoon or evening! Contact Marc at 203 794 1050

# Artisans and Vendors Festival is a Crafty Affair

**“A Celebration of Neat Stuff” is a Success On an October Afternoon**

On an unexpectedly, and certainly most welcome, sunny October afternoon, a group of local artisans descended upon the historic 1842 Second Meeting House at 40 Main Street in Bethel, set up their creations and imaginations for all to see, and invited the town to come inside and take a stroll through the venue, a hall of beautiful items, or as we affectionately like to name it, “A Celebration of Neat Stuff”.

From the special issue of *The Lark* that was created for the event...

“We have, and we hope you agree on this point, brought together today in this space some of the most wonderful and talented and creative people in our area.

In putting together this event, it was impossible not to be awed, to have jaw dropped to the floor, and just marvel at what each person here has added to this day. Like a bazaar of old, in the building that holds such a large center of Bethel’s history, an artisans festival with all sorts of shinies and amazings and histories has sprung to life. It seems perfect and beyond.”

In many ways the event was like having a living art breathing gallery space for an afternoon (filled with what you see photographed to the right and more), including felted creations, handmade greeting cards, iron forge work from a local blacksmith, illustrations and paintings and photographs and and and...well if you missed out on attending, we’ll keep a little mystery as a hook...but if your idea of a fine afternoon is to browse through beauty, and purchase so as to support the arts, then most certainly there is no gentle way to word that you certainly missed out! But don’t fret, panic, or worry, you’ll have another opportunity, for certain, as the nexus of The Bethel Museum, the history of Bethel, the Second Meeting House (which truly is at the heart of Bethel’s history - much more on that idea in a future issue of *The Bethel Lark*), and art is one to continue to be explored...

What else is there to be said, then, about an afternoon where the one hundred and seventy one plus years of this locations’s story was added to with another page or two of tales to remember?

We’ll leave you then, with a nod and a hope that you’ll join us next year (for how could we resist annually filling the Theresa Leo and Darius Sutton rooms with such skilled and imaginative creations?) and one more thank you to all of the artisans and vendors who helped make this first event a fine leaping off point for a long-term collaboration of The Bethel Museum with the local arts and artists of Bethel and beyond!

Thank you, Wicked Waif, Semiosis Forge, Moonflower Studio, Kathy McDonald, Fox Ridge Antiques, Send a Smile Cards, Candles by Cathy, LadyBeadZ, Gillian Grozier, Marking Time Studio, Bethel Photoworks, Chris Bray, Simon Tyszko, Bethel Historical Society, Noetic Light Photography, & Seraphemera Books.

article by Marc Moorash  
photos by Rob Sauber



Fox Run Antiques brought a beautiful collection of old wooden objects that attracted quite the collection of oohs and aahs. This was their first time showing their wares at an event.



Candles by Cathy brought an amazing array of colors, shapes, sizes, all made from recycled candle wax that was reinvigorated into new fiery creations.



LadyBeadZ showed jewelry wearables of all colors and forms.



As another first-time exhibiter, Chris Bray Jr showed his hand-turned pens.

# "After the H-Bomb... Now What?"

The Continuing Tale of How the Former First Lady Agreed to Come to Bethel

## Mrs. FDR, Grads Team Up, Teach Bethel Democracy

When Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of Democratic president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, told the high school graduating class in Republican Bethel, "It takes time to have a perfect democracy," the graduates knew what she was talking about.

To welcome Mrs. Roosevelt to their ceremony the boys and girls of the Class of '54 went through an experience that probably taught them as much about democracy as they'll ever learn.

And their elders learned something too.

### SURPRISE REACTION

When Mrs. Roosevelt was invited to be the commencement speaker, the GOP-controlled Bethel Board of Education flipped into a political froth.

Her bid was extended by the senior class which admired her contribution to the cause of humanity via her work on the United Nations Human Rights Commission, as well as her indomitable liberalism through the years.

Incidentally, the last three senior classes at Bethel High have voted the Democratic Party their favorite political aggregation.

At first, after the public announcement that Mrs. Roosevelt had accepted the invitation, to

speaking, Republican Board of Education members thought they ought to hide out from their fellow townsmen.

Then, to their amazement, they began to receive requests for graduation tickets from people who wouldn't ordinarily attend such an event.

Included among the ticket-requesters were many old-line Republicans whose views were apparently much less tinged with partisanship than the worried board members.

Then Mrs. Roosevelt wrote regretting that she would have to cancel her appearance, the GOPsters heaved a sigh of relief but it was tinged with puzzlement.

Their perplexity deepened when expressions of regret came from the strangest sources.

### 'CHILDREN' PROHIBITED

By the time Mrs. Roosevelt wrote once more, stating she could come after all, the board had done a complete about-face.

Now they wanted in on the act and so a pre-commencement dinner was arranged in Mrs. Roosevelt's honor.

But here, again, the board flunked a test when it was decided that the officers of the graduating class should not be invited because they were "children" who

shouldn't mingle with their elders.

To complicate the situation, the "children" issued a ringing Class Day declaration pointing out that theirs was a democratic class, not a Republican or a Democratic class.

At the same time, a group of parents, most of them Republicans, heard about the rebuff to the class officers and began to make life miserable for the Board of Education.

The upshot of it all was that the "children" received last-minute invitations to the dinner which they were gracious enough to accept.

### IT TAKES TIME

So when Mrs. Roosevelt told a capacity audience that "every experience, if used to the maximum will be valuable in unexpected ways in other periods of your life," the hep kids nudged each other.

She also urged that "each person take an active part in the activities in the community.

"We who care," she went on, "struggle to improve on democracy. Every individual is recognized as an individual in this country."

But, she warned, "It takes time to have a perfect democracy."

to make contributions toward improving their community and nation so that it would shine as an example to other nations." Like graduates Peter Ranis and Charlotte Banks, Mrs. Roosevelt valued collaborative citizenship and believed a truly democratic United States would do more to combat communism than atomic weapons. Mrs. Roosevelt could not know in 1954 that we would eventually use the words 'global economy' and that the power of the internet would melt the divisions previously established by governments around the world. Even then, she challenged the students to travel and to share the ideas of American democracy. She asked that they have vision and "work and become part of the development for peace and not a development for destruction." [Danbury News-Times, June 26, 1954]

Seventeen graduates that evening in June would follow Mrs. Roosevelt's call to further their education. Eight would attend colleges like UCONN, The Wood School, Brandeis, Massachusetts School of Art, Clarkson College of Technology, Pratt Institute and Baldwin - Wallace. Nine others would attend Danbury State Teachers College.

By night's end, graduate Philip Munday would play a piano solo by Sibelius and Scholarship Pins would be distributed to 6 seniors who earned averages of 90 and above for the entire school year. Charlotte Banks Schuster and Peter Ranis would be recipients. Awards and scholarships would be awarded and finally Mrs. Roosevelt would rise with school officials and shake the hand of each and every high school graduate. Mr. Ranis remembers that "the graduation program almost melted in my hands that sweltering summer evening" when Eleanor Roosevelt "gallantly shook each of our hands."

June, 2014 will be the 60th reunion of Eleanor Roosevelt's commencement address. Peter Ranis recalls another milestone in an op-ed piece he wrote for the New York Times published October 17, 1984. In it, he quotes Mrs. Roosevelt's letter of April 13th, "Many thanks for your letter replying to my questions. I will gladly come to your graduation and I will probably come from Hyde Park. You mention 8:15 and I presume this is in the evening. Looking forward to seeing you." Earlier, in her first correspondence she would ask, "... how far is Bethel from New York City?"

On June 28, 1954, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote the following in her MY DAY newspaper column, "On Friday night I went to Bethel, Connecticut, to give a commencement address at the local high school..." She felt that Bethel was "typical of the small American community." She writes of her interest in longer compulsory schooling and the importance to have better teachers and a course of study to meet the needs of all youngsters. She stated, "You must go on taking every opportunity to learn that comes your way."

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The article above is the type of story that if one wrote it into a film, it would be unbelievable. (From The Danbury News-Times June 26th, 1954)

Roosevelt that evening. First, the school orchestra played "Pomp and Circumstance" and following an invocation by Congregational Minister Russell H. Milnes, the senior class would sing "I Believe." Then, each of the 4 members of the National Honor Society read their essay to this distinguished audience.

Gail Mortenson's essay entitled, "Can We Do It?" would state, "we will have salvation of freedom if we recognize the role we have to face." Charlotte Banks Schuster, a life-long resident of Bethel, would ask, "Who Does Think for Us?" She challenged the audience to consider how anything new could develop if people do not think for themselves. She would later leave the security of Barnum Square for the Lutheran Home for Women in New York City to attend The Wood School.

Valedictorian Marianne Voulgaris of Stony Hill District would offer that there is a desire but not a necessity for higher education for women. She would be one of 9 members of the class of 1954 to attend Danbury State Teachers College in the fall.

Peter Ranis of Lindberg Street titled his essay, "After the H-Bomb, What Next?" Today he is Professor Emeritus of City University of New

York, graduate of Brandeis University, author, and recipient of three Fulbright Awards which sent him to Argentina, Mexico and Berlin. Interestingly, his life's work would parallel Eleanor Roosevelt's commitment to labor concerns, working class unemployment and poverty. He asked his classmates in 1954 to take the path of hope and confidence. He felt that in war, all lose - both loser and victor. It would be up to his fellow graduates to respond to their "duty" to answer the question of "What Next?" Mr. Ranis now writes that his essay, "dealt with the dangers of the armament race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and the general conservative bent in the U.S. at the time with McCarthyism rampant." He remembers the influence of the paranoia experienced during the height of the Cold War.

We can imagine the utter stillness and anticipation as Mrs. Roosevelt walked to the podium. "We, who care, struggle to improve on democracy" she would say. "Every individual is recognized as an individual in this country. It takes time to have a perfect democracy, and in a democracy people in every community want to know what each individual does." Eleanor Roosevelt urged the Bethel graduates and assembled participants

# The Swans Still Swim...The Story of the Stony Hill Inn

## We Lose Another Landmark, One that Was So Integral in the Development of Route 6 and Bethel

There is truth, in the fact, that history, nearly more than anything, is the story of change. That what changes is what is recorded, and left for those that come after us, to find - and understand, and if we are diligent and engaging, to learn from. However, as a living historian, one who is tending to the present as much as the past, there is very little ability to separate the documentation from the heart (see the theme in the writing of this month's articles?) and the want to keep the past (which it is still present), from becoming history (in the colloquial sense of something being relegated to the past tense - from "is" to "was").

And so it is again we have a moment in which a eulogy must be presented, for yet another building yes, but for also that we have lost another location in which people gathered, celebrated, mourned, spoke, met, and shared stories - The Stony Hill Inn.

Owned by the Rubino family since the 1940s, the inn was both a destination for all travelers through the area (there's an element of the legendary Route 66 here - the fact that this is our Route 6, notwithstanding) and a place where food and friends meant something that only happens when a place to sit, to break bread, and to come back each Tuesday, or each year, continues on through generations (and some might argue, with a fairly valid case) and hasn't translated in the same manner to venues of this modern age.

We could fill the entire newsletter, and beyond, with the stories we've heard (and maybe at some point we will), but for the time being, let this small article be a signpost, not a grave marker, for The Stony Hill Inn was a place more than just a building, or the people, or the events, or the food, or even the stories and history - but a place where people gathered, and connected, and returned... because that is one of the greatest draws in an age of isolation - a place of home, away from home.

Which leads to...

...a request from us to all of our loyal readers of The Lark...

We are working on a short film about the history of The Stony Hill Inn. We have an amazing interview with proprietor Gene Rubino which will be the heart of the piece, but we need memorabilia, photographs, videos, stories, postcards, menus, & brochures. If you had a wedding there and have photographs with or within the building, or the gazebo - would you let us include it? If you have video from the grounds, from an event, from a visit - could we include it? Did you work there? Stay there? Would you do an interview (audio or video)? No story or image is too small - we would love to include it all.

The film is to be completed by April of 2014 when we re-open The Bethel Museum from its wintertime slumber, with new exhibits - including one about The Stony Hill Inn. This is a project that can be as great in scope as all of the stories about The Stony Hill Inn...won't you help us gather those tales together?



The entrance and the dining area...pre-extension on the far end. (photo from Gene Rubino)



The original building just after the purchase by the Rubino family (photo from Gene Rubino)



The swans, the swans...ask anybody about the inn and inevitably the swans appear.



A 1962 photograph of a billboard in Danbury (photo courtesy of Danbury Museum)



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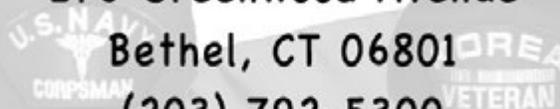
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# Eleanor Roosevelt and Bethel

## The Conclusion of the Story Behind Her Commencement Speech

Once, on a sweltering night in June, 1954, Eleanor Roosevelt graced a Bethel stage with her dignified commitment to education. She had already honored our country with her intellect, bravery and service. She edified a post-war world with her wisdom and humanity and marked history with her humility and grace.

I have visited Hyde Park and the cottage where Mrs. Roosevelt used mismatched china and comfortable chairs to entertain world dignitaries. The graduating class of Bethel presented her with an orchid and a sterling silver bowl as gifts for her visit. I like to think that both are tucked away

in some safe spot. It would be just like Eleanor Roosevelt to remember...

"The giving of love is an education in itself."

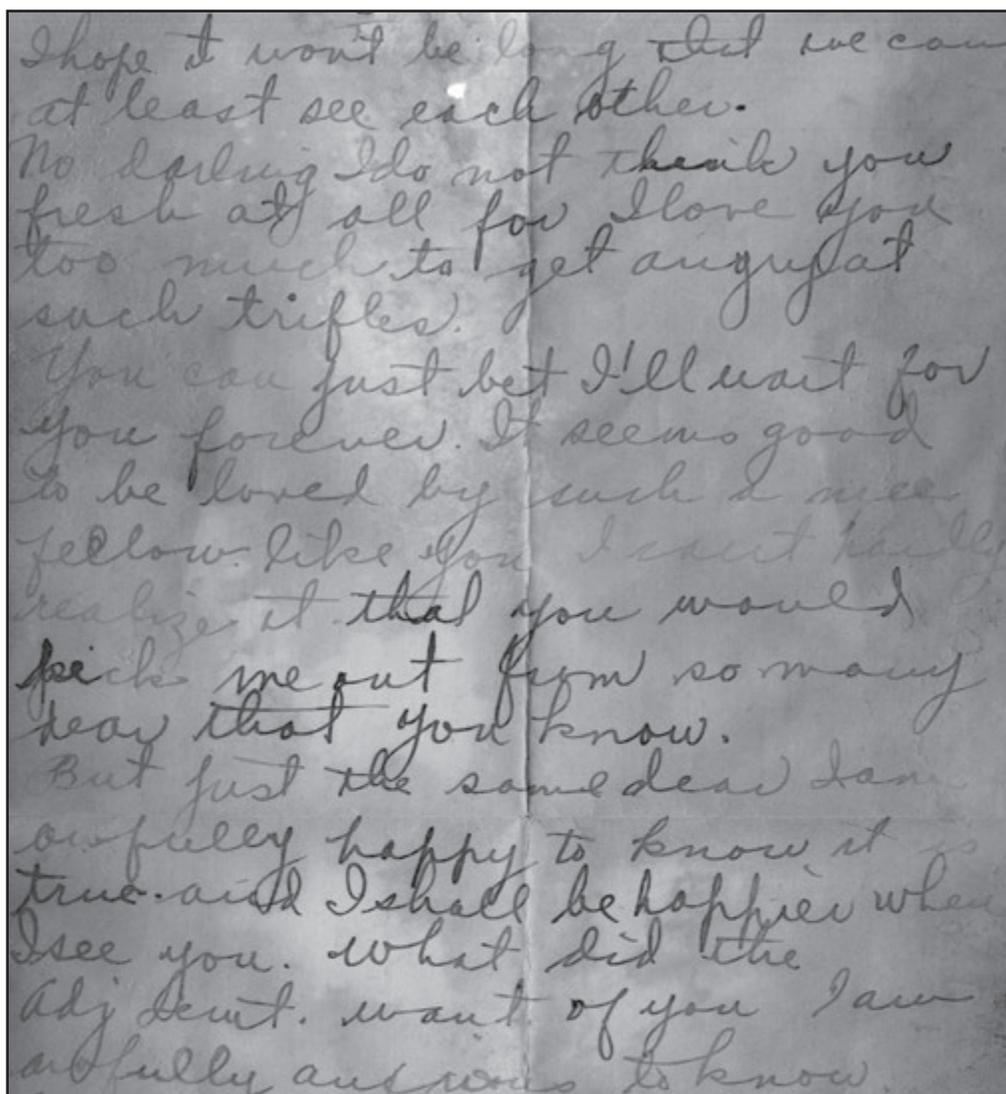
-- Eleanor Roosevelt

For additional reading and source material for this article please visit the following links:

\* BHS Wildcat - <http://tinyurl.com/pdnxb39>

\* My Day column - <http://tinyurl.com/ldf3fa7>

\* New York Times - <http://tinyurl.com/p8cyty8>



"I hope it won't be long that we can at least see each other. No darling I do not think you fresh at all for I love you too much to get angry at such trifles. You can just bet I'll wait for you forever. It seems good to be loved by such a nice fellow like you. I can't hardly realize it that you would pick me out from so many dear that you know. But just the same dear I am awfully happy to know it is true and I shall be happier when I see you. What did the Adj Lieut(?) want of you. I am awfully anxious to know."

From a set of love letters, found in the walls during the renovation of a Bethel home - recently donated to the Bethel Historical Society by Mary DeLuca. We've uncovered the identities of the two love birds, whose letters were exchanged in 1918. We're currently working on additional research in hopes of presenting it to you, in not too long of a time. Suffice it to say, Hiram and Floss (Florence) were married less than one year after these letters were written.

## Calendar of Upcoming Events

Saturday January 18th, 2014  
2:00pm - 4:00pm

### Bookmaking / Journalmaking class

Spend an afternoon with Ava Dawn Heydt and Marc Moorash of seraphemera books and learn how to stitch and craft your very own handmade journal. You'll learn a bit of history and leave with a journal decorated and assembled by your very own hands. Kids welcome too! Reservations Required by January 15th by calling Marc Moorash 832 515 9539 \$15 / \$10 BHS member price



Saturday February 8th, 2014

### Laura Ingalls Wilder

12:00pm - 2:00pm

Join us as we explore the life and family of the beloved children's author.

Activities will include:

Making Butter & Dolls & Crafts & Sugar in the Snow (weather permitting). Stories, Songs, Dancing, Food & More...Come dressed for life on the prairie. Ages 5 and up.

\$10 for Members \$12 Non-Members  
Any questions, please call Mary Ferri

203 730-2726



Sunday March 9th, 2014

### Albert Afraid of Hawk

2:00pm - 4:00pm

Bob Young from the Danbury Museum & Historical Society will give a stirring presentation on the story behind researching and discovering the remains of Albert Afraid of Hawk, leading to the repatriation of the remains to the Oglala Lakota tribe on the Pine Ridge Reservation in North Dakota. Not to be missed!



April, 2014

The 2014 opening of

### The Bethel Museum

Featuring a brand new exhibit and short film about The Stony Hill Inn

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Karen of Moonflower Studios smiles for the camera and shows off her beautiful creations at the 1st (to be annual) Artisans & Vendors Fair - "A Celebration of Neat Stuff".



The Swans Still Swim...the Story of The Stony Hill Inn...



-- The Bethel Historical Society Museum will be closed for the Winter and be reopening in April 2014 with all new exhibits, including a number of new additions to the collection. -- We're Now on Facebook! Like us at - [facebook.com/bethelhistoricalsociety](https://facebook.com/bethelhistoricalsociety)

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