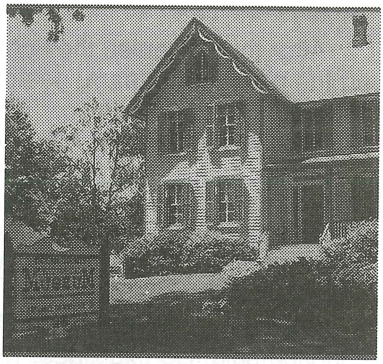
Ocean County Historical Society: Same Mission, Renewed Purpose



The Ocean County Historical Society Museum in Toms River.

In the two years since Bob Garthwaite took office as president of the Ocean County Historical Society, the organization has undergone a renaissance of sorts.

"Our motto is, 'Telling the stories of Ocean County,'" he said. To that end, during his presidency a core group of hardworking individuals endeavored to tell the county's stories in new and more numerous ways.

They laid out specific goals, along with plans for achieving them, and in so doing, brought about a renewed sense of enthusiasm that has spread throughout the organization.

"We dusted things off," he said. Some older, defunct programs have been brought back, and at the same time new ideas are taking shape. To cite some examples, the Society received a $4,000 annual grant to produce and publish its bi-monthly newsletter, The Society Scroll; the exterior of the Historical Museum on Hadley Avenue has been spruced up with fresh paint and landscaping; and two rooms (so far) inside the museum have been totally redone.

"We want the county to be proud of us," Garthwaite said, referring to the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, which provides staff and funding support.

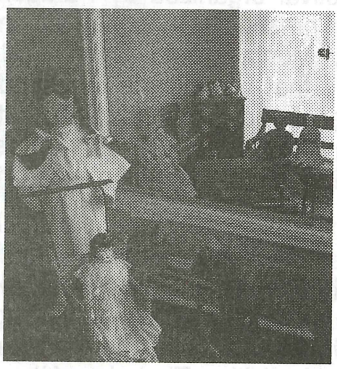


Photo Credit: Victoria Lassonde

The seeds of change were planted a few years back, when board members decided it was time to take a closer look at the Society's operations in order to evaluate its effectiveness, identify and address areas of concern and implement changes or solutions.

There was a board meeting where trustees dug into their own pockets to come up with the funds to purchase a one-of-a-kind historic quilt for the museum's collection. Recognizing the meaningfulness of the acquisition, which depended on the board members' contributions, everyone was compelled to pitch in. It was a nice moment, he said. Suddenly, "everything came alive," he recalled.

One accomplishment Garthwaite said he is most proud of and hopes to see continue after his term ends June 1, is the Society's increased visibility to the public.

"These two years," he said, "because of a lot of efforts, not just mine, have really brought out the best in our membership."

The Society itself has a long history, beginning in 1950 when it was created, in the centennial year of the county's founding in 1850. Its mission has always been to preserve and present the stories and artifacts of the past – to educate Ocean County residents about the history and heritage of the region, by means of

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publications, programs and exhibitions. Over the years, as the members and officers have changed, so, too, have the ways in which the Society has gone about fulfilling its mission.

Now, with new president Hal Unger at the helm and a long-range plan underway, the organization is well positioned to chart a smooth course into the next 60 years.

The entirely volunteer-driven Society has a leadership structure comprised of a five-person executive committee – president, vice president, treasurer, recording secretary and membership secretary – plus a board of 15 trustees. The trustees are diversified in their backgrounds, which include education, government, military and healthcare fields, but they all have two important things in common: They are people who enjoy history and strongly believe it should be made available for others to appreciate; and they share a deep love for the community of which they are all a part.

Of the more than 400 dues-paying members, about 60 are signed up as volunteers, to be called on to help in any number of capacities with the various programs and events.

One recent afternoon inside the Historical Museum's Richard Strickler Research Center, the men explained that the transition of leadership had begun in the months preceding the end of Garthwaite's term; but the proverbial passing of the baton officially takes place in June.

The two men's respect for each other is apparent, even where they differ in personality. Garthwaite is "the consummate diplomat," according to Unger, though Garthwaite said he prefers to think of himself more as a "cheerleader." Unger, a decisive and experienced personnel director, is to thank for making the Society a well-managed organization, in Garthwaite's opinion.

But what distinguishes the men from each other is not half as important as what makes them similar, namely, their commitment and dedication to seeing the Society thrive. Their respective talents have been, and remain, valuable tools to help make the organization run smoothly.

"I've been sitting next to Bob at board meetings for two years," Unger pointed out. So they can't help but be familiar with one another's perspectives.

Garthwaite, a Toms River native, is a documentary maker and worked for the NBC network in New York for many years, before returning to the area. He created two important documentaries for the county, one called "The Toms River Blockhouse Fight" and another, simply titled, "Ocean County." He developed his love of local history as a young kid, through stories from his father and grandfather, who was at one time the oldest living blacksmith in New Jersey.

Unger, too, from North Dover (Toms River), became fond of history at a young age. He has always been particularly drawn to history that pertains to American government; he served in the Army, was the civilian personnel director at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station and loves to visit Washington, D.C., so it is fitting that he feels so at home living in the County Seat. His interest in the Historical Society began indirectly, through his wife Mary Lou, whom Garthwaite described as a real "worker bee" in the organization.

Because impressions made on children can last a lifetime, the museum hosts a program each year that brings third graders from districts all over the county for a guided tour through the past.

Unger explained the breakdown of committees and teams that have been put in place to oversee the various aspects of the organization. The three main committees, under the board and executive committee, cover program and event planning; policy and personnel; and finance and insurance.

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Within the program and event planning committee are nine separate program teams that handle things like publicity, publications, acquisitions, exhibits, education and the research center, while fund-raising event teams organize bus trips, Victorian teas, the annual quilt show, the train show and the ongoing raffle.

While each team or committee has specific tasks to carry out, careful attention is paid to how they all tie together to form the big picture.

The timing of this summer's Purses and Accessories of the Past exhibit with the elegant Victorian Tea is "another example of how we try to synergize things," Unger said.

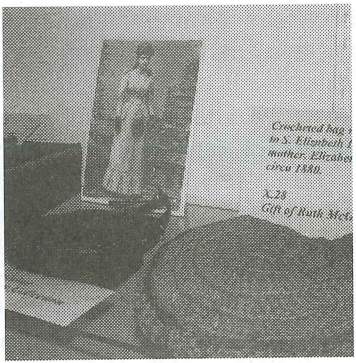


Photo Credit: Victoria Lassonde

"Purses and Accessories of the Past" exhibit items.

In the near future, Unger said, other rooms inside the museum will be done over; presently the museum is in the process of computerizing the research center and museum collections, inputting data for every book and creating a database of artifacts. Additionally, an outside agency will conduct a free assessment of all the historic materials in storage, to see if they have been affected by climate or moisture.

Some measures have already been taken to further protect the items on display, which he pointed out on a tour of the museum, a two-story 19th-Century Victorian home with each room decorated in a different historically accurate theme. To prevent sun fading, UV-ray-blocking glass film has been applied to all the windows.

Fresh paint and "new-old" curtains have livened up the music room and parlor; the kids' room upstairs is next on the agenda, followed by the "craft room"; mannequins posed in different settings model the fashions of the time period. In the basement, where the board meetings are held, more items still – Colonial, Native American and even prehistoric finds – serve to illustrate Ocean County's rich history.

During his term as president, Unger said he would like most to see an increase in membership and a greater show of volunteerism, since manpower is essential not only to participate in activities but also to organize and run them.

"You can have great ideas, but you need somebody to grab the reigns," he said.

For more information about membership, exhibits, upcoming events or any of the Society's other offerings, visit www.oceancountyhistory.org, or call (732) 341-1880.

- Victoria Lassonde