

# THE SHIRETOWN CONSERVER

## The Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society Newsletter

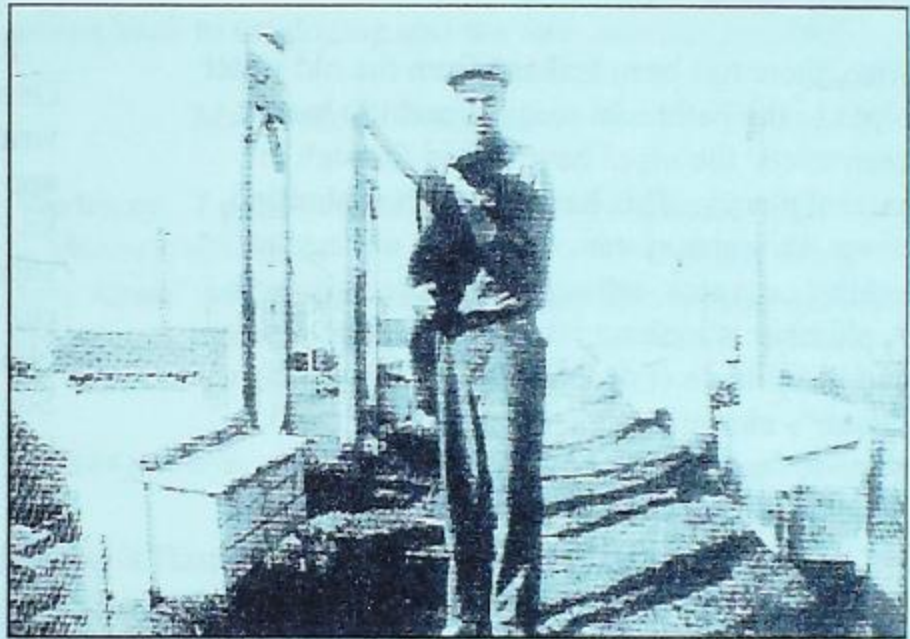
Volume VIII, Number 3

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### THE LURE OF SILVER BY LOU STEVENS

The silver fox ranch that my father and grandfather (Charles and Maurice Stevens) owned when I was a little shaver in the 1930's was located in Dover South Mills. There were two good-sized yards, one situated behind the main house, and the other in an adjacent field. These ranches, each about the size of a football field, were composed of many small pens about 14 x 14, and contained nearly 100 silver foxes at the time. Pure black foxes were long forgotten as desirable, while the platinum foxes, nearly all white, had not yet been bred into existence.

Early December was the usual pelting time when the two men would kill the foxes they did not want to keep for the coming year, and prepare their pelts then in prime condition due to the cold weather, for the New York fur market. For several days they would be deciding how many males to keep and how many females they should have, all based on whether a certain male was getting old, or whether the litters of certain females were not as large, maybe four little ones, as they once were.



The author's father, Charles Stevens holds a tame fox. The pens with the houses where the foxes slept can be seen as can the door that could be opened to feed them. Photo courtesy of the author.

#### Inside This Issue

Museum Receives Facade Grant	Pg. 2
Homecoming 2004	Pg. 3-4
Central Hall Memories	Pg. 5
The Blacksmith Shop's new sign	Pg. 6
An Unknown Photo ID'd	Pg. 8

There was always much preparation for pelting: getting the drying boards taken down from the shed attic, setting up the fleshing equipment, sharpening skinning knives, and preparing the strychnine. (Continues on page 9)



## **Observer Building Museum Receives Facade Grant & Other Museum Doings**

**By Jack Battick**

This summer we applied for and have been awarded a downtown facade improvement grant by the town. From this grant we will be able to purchase the materials necessary to reshingle the south side of the roof, replace broken clapboards all around the building, and remove the air conditioner from the rear wall and fill the space with clapboards to bring the building back to its near-original state. The grant only covers materials, however. The Society will still have to come up with the money for labor.

Also, there has been leakage from the old water pipes to the bathroom upstairs and it's been determined the pipes have rusted through in several places. This has necessitated shutting down the water system to prevent damage to exhibits, carpets, ceilings, and stored artifacts. A plumber is looking into removing the pipes and installing a restroom downstairs where the janitor's closet is at the moment. This will provide facilities for both staff and visitors. We hope to get some materials donated, but again we'll need money to cover the project before winter because without water the heating system won't work.

To compound problems earlier this summer we found that the thermopane in the bow window at the front of the Observer Building has dropped inside its frame leaving a gap at the top. A temporary fix with duct tape has been applied and a local carpenter says he will repair it before winter.

Other than that, the Observer Building Museum has receiving a donation of five filing cabinets from the home of Madelyn C. Betts, a much needed addition to our storage and archival facilities, as well as an old countertop desk from the Favor Tavern. (We hope to have that exhibited next year). Also, a number of

bookcases were donated by Mary Campbell which will come in handy when we have repainted the future library room upstairs.

Finally, Dave Lockwood has installed a new sign at the Blacksmith Shop (see page 6 for a photo) and has agreed to provide a sign for the Main Street facade of the Observer Building. The material costs for this are also to be provided by the facade improvement grant and Dave is providing the labor as an in-kind match for which all of us are very grateful.

## **Editor's Note**

Once again I'd like to thank all of you who have written with comments, photos, remembrances, and compliments. Please feel free to let me know your thoughts on any of our stories or to suggest or submit others. I hope you will consider sharing some of your memories, photos, and comments with the rest of the Society. You can reach me at 308 Foxcroft Center Road, D-F 04426, at 207-564-3576, or e-mail me at: [battick@midmaine.com](mailto:battick@midmaine.com).

And, a tip of the editor's hat to those who contributed to this issue of the *Conserver*: Jeff Stanley, Lou Stevens, Al Fortier, Jack Battick, and Mary Annis.

I hope all of you have a wonderful autumn season wherever you are living and remember to vote on November 2.

Nancy Klimavicz Battick, Editor



## HOMECOMING 2004 AT THE MUSEUM



Homecoming, August 7, the Observer Building Museum was open 9-5 and we hosted over a hundred visitors. On this and the next page are some scenes from the day.

At left: Mrs. Eli Towne, wife of Dover's first settler in 1803, tells visitors of the hardships and life of a pioneer wife. Mrs. Towne was portrayed by Leilani Stites.

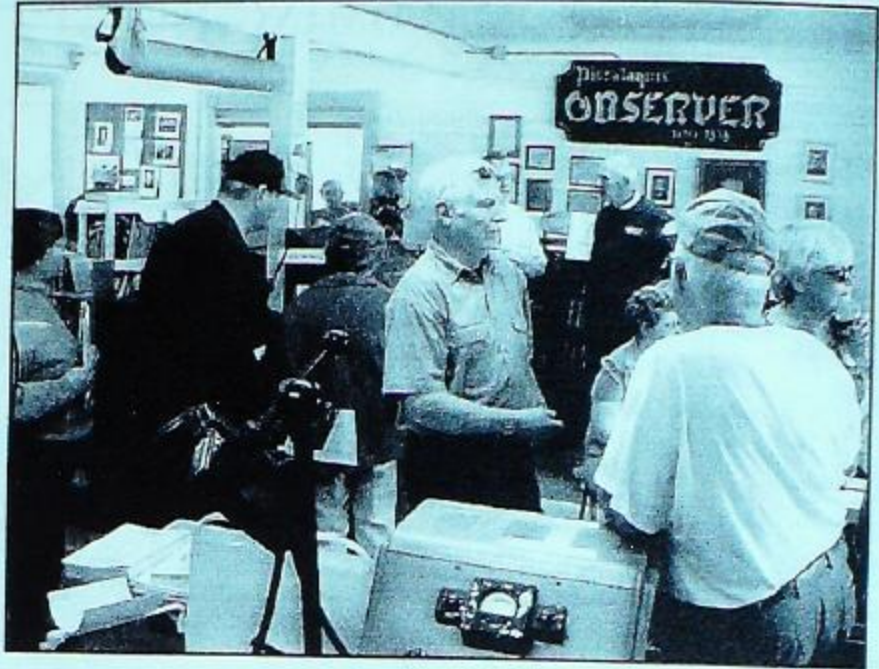
At right, members, classmates, and friends pause for a moment for our photographer, Jack Battick.



One of our smallest visitors agreed you're never too young to enjoy a stop at the Museum.



At times it was "standing room only".



This year's giant booksale, donations, new memberships, and throws earned over \$418 for the Historical Society.

Many thanks are due to all who contributed to making the day a success: Lou Stevens & Dot Greenlaw, hosts; Leilani Stites, re-enactor; Sharon Phillips (left in photo), Mary Annis (right in photo), Jack & Nancy Battick, Jim Annis, treasurer, and all who donated items for the sale. We were exhausted at the day's end but pleased with the turnout, comments, and donations we received.

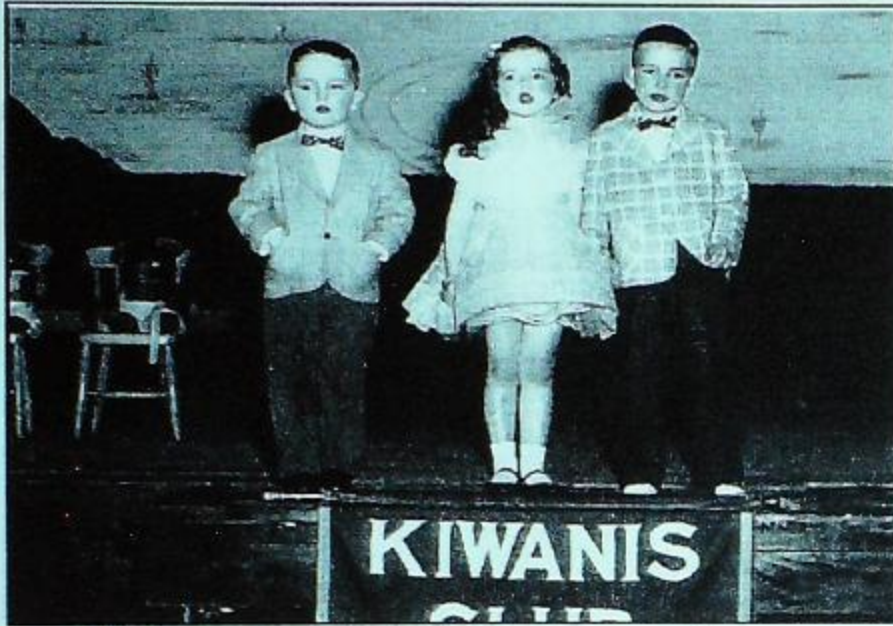
SEE YOU NEXT YEAR!





## Central Hall Memories

Society member, Senior Chief Personnelman Jeff Stanley stationed in Stuttgart, Germany, sent the *Conserver* the following note and photos in response to our request for Central Hall memories:



L-R: Phil Stanley, Lorinda Annis, Steve Sawyer. Photo courtesy of Jeff Stanley.

"...[the] letters about Central Hall certainly brought back some memories. There were many Saturdays when we would pool our money and rent the basketball court. I think it was a dollar an hour. The Rec Center was always a lot of fun too.

After reading the letters from Brian Howe and Mark Stitham, I went through some old photos of Central Hall events and found four; two of which were referenced by Brian and Mark. In the photo of the three singers, my brother, Phil, and Steve Sawyer were supposed to hold hands with Lorinda Annis. My brother had his own ideas and kept his hands in his pockets and one step away.

Keep up the great work of reminding us of the values of growing up in a small town and the enjoyment of our youth."

**Editor's Note:** Thanks, Jeff for sharing these great photos and memories. Do any of our other members have stories and/or photos they'd like to share? You can send them to Editor,

Shiretown Conserver, 308

Foxcroft Center Road, Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426. They'll be returned safely.







At the Society's June meeting, Betsy Ross (Leilani Stites) spoke to members and guests on whether or not the first American flag was really made by Betsy (a professional seamstress) or someone else. Photo by Jack Battick.

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## New Members

The Society would like to welcome the following new members:

Patricia Mereen	Connecticut
Gerald DuRocher	Dover-Foxcroft
Stephanie & Ronald Code	California
Derry & Barbara Decker	Colorado
Sean Stitham, M.D.	Washington
Kris Gurall	Massachusetts
Marcia Ellery	Massachusetts
Jerry & Janice Gower	Maine
Karen Pomeroy	Dover-Foxcroft
Debra C. Smith	Colorado
Robert Shaffor	Maine
Robert Morrison	Maine

We're so pleased you've joined us.



The Blacksmith Shop has a new sign courtesy of Curator Dave Lockwood. Photo by Jack Battick.





On May 12, representatives of the Sons & Daughters of Union Veterans presented a program on the Civil War to members of the Society. Left to right are: Wayne Bennett, Donna Runnels, Eric Boothroyd of the Sons & Daughters of Union Veterans. Photo by Jack Battick.

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#### Our Corporate Sponsors

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**Rowell's Garage**  
**Mark Stitham, M.D.**

#### Addresses, please

There are still some members who haven't given us their new addresses from the E-9-1-1 mandated changes in Maine. The Post Office is no longer forwarding mail to former addresses so if you know of any member who hasn't received his/her copy of the latest *Conserver* please have them contact the Society. Should your address or name change or if there is an error on your mailing label, please let us know. We don't want you to miss an issue.



## The Society's Unknown No Longer



In our last issue we published a photo of a childrens' play and asked if anyone knew any of the children in the photo, the date, occasion, or place. It was a pleasure to hear from Al Fortier in Connecticut who recognized the photo. Below are excerpts from his letter with an ID on some of the

people in this photo (shown above).

"Let us return for the moment to the late 20's (circa 1928 or 29) to get the details. First of all this picture shows the entire cast of a musical operetta presented by a very active and prolific Music Club the school system then had. The picture was taken at good old Central Hall . . . .

As I recall the operetta's theme was to present a cross section of important service occupations of life, such as the Navy, Army, nursing, and Boy Scouts. Even our traditional Santa Claus was included, played by Walter Rideout, son of then Superintendent of Schools. I do not recall the actual name of the operetta, but the theme was predominantly navy.

I am the sailor on Santa's knees in the center of the first row. The girl between me and Santa is Dorothea DeWitt. The third girl to my right is my Aunt Laurena Fortier (Dad's youngest sister). At the upper left of the picture are three women. The one whose face is just visible above the sailor's hat (Philip King) is Miss Jane Foster, the music instructor of the school system at that time. She conceived the idea for this operetta and was the spark plug to carry it through. On her left is my mother, Mrs. Rachel H. Fortier, a talented piano player and one who often played accompaniments to various music club performers. She provided piano lessons at our home for a number of students over the years and at one time had as many as 50 different students. The going rate at the time for a lesson was fifty cents.

The little girl sitting on the floor to my Aunt Laurena's right is Katherine Baily, who also became a talented pianist. In fact she played an excellent accompaniment at our 1936 graduation ceremonies. I cannot recall for sure whether she was one of my mother's pupils or not, but she could have been. She lived a few houses away from us on Harrison Avenue where we lived until 1933. Katherine didn't graduate from high school with us because her parents moved to Bingham in the mid to late 30's.

Al Fortier

**Editor's Note:** Thank you Al, for writing and giving us such a lot of information on the photo and the occasion. If any of you have had your memories jogged and can add to this, please send me a note.



## **Silver Foxes**

**(Continued from page 1)**

All the gear and apparatus were set up in a small building near the ranch behind the house. This building consisted of one large room, about 20 x 20, downstairs and an attic upstairs. The "shop" as everyone in the family called it, also contained the meat grinder and meat storage room as it served as the "kitchen" for preparing the food for the foxes which was composed of grain, water, and horsemeat obtained at a slaughterhouse in Brewer.

On pelting days, a roaring fire was built in the pot-bellied stove, and it often times became so hot that the pot would become scarlet red with heat. I liked to shake snow off my mittens onto the stove to listen to it sizzle before disappearing into steam.

No one paid much attention to the fire danger for it was the proper country custom then to have a good smudge going in the winter. The fat fleshed from the carcasses was also put into the stove once the wood was blazing away, and like the snow, would sizzle while it was burning.

I tagged along with father and grandfather when they went in to the yard to kill the foxes they had selected. I would scare the fox they wished to kill by throwing snow at it, making it run when frightened into the small wooden box which was connected to the cage by a chute. This box during cold weather was their cozy and snug home with hay added for insulation. The fox was trapped in the house by a board which was inserted into the chute to block the passageway.

Grampy would reach into the house to get the fox after the roof had been carefully lifted to reveal the fox ready to spring if approached too quickly. He then, again most carefully, placed a long pair of tongs around the neck of the fox and took his left hand and followed up the back of the fox to finally grab it by the nape of the

neck. How relieved I was when his hand had grasped the neck, for all danger of the fox suddenly snapping and biting Grampy was passed.

The fox was then laid on the chute and my father would inject strychnine into the heart of the fox by a hypodermic needle which was kept in hot water while outdoors as the poison could freeze very quickly.

I watched with great curiosity as my father easily found the heart. When I was a little older I could do this task and I recall proudly saying as my finger pointed to the exact spot, "Here's his heart, Grampy!"

In a few seconds the poison would take full effect and the fox relaxed becoming a silver heap that was safe for me to lug to the shop to be skinned.

There was the great danger of the fox thrashing so violently that Grampy would be forced to release it. Fortunately this rarely happened. When it did it meant the danger of the fox, running wild and careering into wire fences damaging its fur which would cut its market value greatly.

Once seven or eight foxes had been killed, we would go back to the shop where the two men skinned them. The keen blades easily cut the pelt and the toes away from the body. The carcasses were hung outside to provide food for the winter birds.

The pelt was then turned inside out and put on the fleshing board or form, a device which sat on the floor with a pole, about the size of the fox's body, extending upward at an angle so the tip of the pole came to the pit of a man's stomach. The fat was removed and became fuel for the fire. Pieces of shingle were placed in the legs to prevent them from shriveling up when they dried. (Continues on Page 10)



Within four or five days, the dried pelts were removed from the boards, turned fur side out, and then cleaned of traces of fat on the fur by shaking them in a burlap bag filled with dry sawdust. I was old enough to help perform that simple and not dangerous task. Next, the furs were combed carefully, and any extra conspicuous black hairs were plucked out to make the silver color more solid and therefore more striking, and so, of course, more valuable for a neckpiece or coat. How different from the time Grampy said he stayed up most of the night removing a few white hairs from a black fox so it would be pure ebony in color. That was the fashion then, but now, a totally black pelt wouldn't sell.

The furs were then packed and shipped to New York City to be auctioned off to buyers who were looking for the best pieces. I remember how intrigued my young mind was by the strange street address as it was not a simple name such as Elm or Summer but most numbers such 435 West 43<sup>rd</sup> Street. Many years later I walked through the fur garment district wondering what buildings housed the auction houses.

The auction company made its money by taking a commission from the sales. Within a week the price offer would come back, creating much discussion as to sell or not or take a chance they would rise in a few weeks. Of course, just like playing the stock market, they could drop too.

But then came the war and not many women were interested in furs, and after the war the prices for American pelts dropped due to the over-flooding of the market by foreign furs from Scandinavia. So foreign imports killing off an American industry is not a new thing.

Today, there is no evidence visible that the two fox ranches ever existed or the shop building. Only in my memory can I hear myself saying again, "Here's his heart!", smell and hear the fat sizzling in the stove, or see my father and

grandfather carefully groom the furs before packing the pelts into the box for shipment to New York City.

All that was yesterday!

Note: We would like to thank the *Eastern Gazette* for permission to reprint this article.

## The Society's Unknown



The above postcard was a recent gift to the Museum's collection. On the back is written the name "Mildred Thayer, Dover, Maine." Does anyone know anything about young Mildred?



## Mary's Message

What a busy and rewarding summer we've had at the Observer Building Museum. We have been open on our usual Sunday afternoons and this year we've tried Fridays from 10-2. The response has been good. Leilani Stites has been there every Friday, portraying Betsey Towne, wife of the first permanent settler in Dover. She has an interesting story to tell.

During September and October we will be open from 1 to 4 every Tuesday thanks to Leilani and her husband, Rich. If you haven't seen our new exhibits try to stop in before they are put away for the winter.

The Museum was extremely busy on Homecoming Day (see pictures pages 3-4), August 7. Our book sale was a huge success! There was barely room to move during the day. It was wonderful to see so many people there. I want to thank everyone who helped make this summer so successful. The hosts, the people who donated books, those who helped set up the sale (there were hundreds of books - a daunting task) and most of all, those who visited.

We now start to slow down and think about getting back to cataloging and the new exhibits for 2005!

Mary Annis, President

**October Program**      **October 6. Thayer Parkway. 7 p.m.** Everett Parker, Executive Director of the Moosehead Historical Museum will be our guest speaker. He will talk about Kineo and his new book: *Kineo: Moosehead Sentinel from Native Americans to Hotel Grandeur*. Don't miss this one!

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### The Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society Membership Application & Donation Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Town/City: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Annual Dues (\$5.00 per person):\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Donation: \$ \_\_\_\_\_ (tax deductible)

**Please make checks payable to:** Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society. Mail to: 308 Foxcroft Center Road, Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426. Dues cover April 2004-April 2005. Please enclose a list of gift memberships and we'll notify your recipients. The Society is a non-profit organization and all donations are tax deductible. Your membership and/or gift will help us continue to maintain our two museums (the Blacksmith Shop and the Observer Building, publish our newsletter/journal, The Shiretown Conserver, and continue our outreach efforts. Thank you.



**The Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society, Inc.**  
**28 Orchard Road**  
**Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426-3706**

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"My grandfather, Maurice, with two black pelts on the right and two silver ones, just starting to show white, on the left. Photo was probably taken in the early 1920's."

Lou Stevens

Once a coveted fashion accessory, the silver fox stole draped on a lady's shoulder, started at a fox ranch. For a personal memoir of a Dover-Foxcroft fox ranch in the 1920's and 1930's, read the Lure of the Silver starting on page 1.

Photo courtesy of the author.