

EASTON'S 175TH ANNIVERSARY – 2020

EASTON PUBLIC LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Mr. Chester Burley, age 70

Interviewer: Abby Bonoff, age 12

Date of Interview: June 3, 2020

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF PROJECT: All of the students at HKMS were given the opportunity to interview a longtime Easton citizen or one who has made a profound contribution to the town. I, Abby Bonoff, was chosen to interview the President of the HSE, (Historical Society of Easton), Chester Burley. I understand that Mr. Burley hasn't lived in Easton very long but realize that being the President of the HSE is a very important job. His most notable quote about Easton in my view was, 'I want to see it remain a quaint agricultural oasis that is surrounded by towns that are going very commercial'.

At the beginning of this interview we each stated our name and age. I asked Mr. Burley over ten questions, when answering these questions Mr. Burley went into fine detail which helped me get a sense of how and why he moved to Easton and the importance of the HSE to the town.

How long have you lived in Easton?

I moved from Greenfield Hill in Fairfield, so about four miles away ten years ago.

Why did you move here?

I found a house by accident as I was just surfing the web. It's a historic house built in 1790 and I just fell in love with it.

What is one of your most favorite memories from Easton/Most significant memory the HSE has created?

An event the HSE produced five to six years ago. It was a revolutionary war re-enactment weekend where we had five regiments of revolutionary war soldiers, a small cavalry, plus artillery. It was up by Staples School and took up all the fields. They camped with tents, camp fires and the British we put in a separate area! The origin is I was doing some research and I found that a raiding party of British marines came to shore on Compo Beach in Westport in 1781. Forty British Marines stumbled upon a small scouting group of patriots of six men. Elijah Morehouse was the senior officer and they took them as prisoners intending to go back to the ship. Elijah was so difficult and so annoying to the British officers with his demands, that they changed their minds and decided to march to his farm and burn it down. History doesn't exactly show us where the Morehouse Farm was but the fact that we have a Morehouse Road, lent itself well to the event. We built a barn with the plan of burning it down but it was August and the fire department said we'd need a firetruck nearby and that would not have been very authentic. After some back and forth we decided we needed the barn for two days so burning it down on the first day wouldn't work well for the second day! We settled on smoke bombs and smudge pots to create the image of fire.

What is your vision for Easton in the future?

I want to see it remain a quaint, agricultural oasis that is surrounded by towns that are going very commercial.

What is it like being the president of the HSE?

It is an honor and a privilege to be able to work actively to preserve the history of Easton. Our mission is to research, document and preserve the history of Easton and we have done a tremendous amount in the last couple of years to do exactly that. One other thing we are doing to preserve what we have is digitalizing a lot of it so printed materials are scanned, the photos are being digitized too. Our website and Facebook page contain hundreds of photographs that people are viewing from all over the country. Three years ago we had 74 followers on Facebook, now we have over 1000. The website shows the old schoolhouses. There were 11 school houses in Easton so no student would walk more than five miles each way. Two survive today- one is privately owned and the other, owned by the historical society, is down the hill from Greisers. It has no running water or electricity and a pot belly stove to keep it warm.

How do you protect our historical treasures- photos, stories, memorabilia?

We have an office on the backside of the library the society built with their own money- it cost about \$120,000. We have fire proof file cabinets and the room has a sprinkler system. Unlike some historical societies that are more like a museum we don't have any place to do displays. Originally the plan was to use the Bradley Hubbell house on Black Rock Turnpike as a stand-alone museum but that economic model doesn't work anymore- it was bankrupting us to insure and maintain the building. I have a financial background and pointed out that it would bankrupt the society. No one agreed at first but I persisted and after several resignations, I took over as president. The newly constituted board voted to rent it and we maintain the barn for exhibits. We have a collection of farm tools that span over 200 years in the barn. A former board member, Harry Audley owned a lot of the tools and he was a walking encyclopedia of what each tool did. As he got older I thought we needed to preserve his memory. I hired a film crew and for 1.5 hours they filmed him as he went through each tool and explained how it came into being, how it was used and how it evolved as new tools were developed. We plan of putting the video on an iPad so people can go around and learn about the tools.

Are there any Easton treasures that you are looking for?

The treasures that we look for mostly have to do with research rather than a teacup or something like that. The research we do often coincides with our current focus, or a recent lecture or an exhibit we are doing at the library. Today, we are researching notable women in Easton history coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment and there is not a lot of material we can get our hands on other than the obvious famous women like Helen Keller, Ida Tarbell and Edna Farber. Most of the stories and things written portray the men and this is true too in the two cemeteries where most of the headstones show the man's name prominent with the wife's name below in smaller type. We do love to get photographs and whenever we do, we scan them and preserve them digitally. We sometimes get a call from someone who lived in Easton but moved and is cleaning out their attic.

What has been the most surprising piece of Easton history?

Probably the fact that people in Easton are not really interested in history and it seems to be diminishing from the school curriculum. And younger people have less interest which is tragic because you can learn from history and obviously mistakes have been made and if you don't learn from those you are bound to make them again. We love history and we love to promote it and we'd love to get the schools more involved. We planned a program together but it never launched- we wanted to take a class and give them a project to research a family from Easton identified by their tombstones. We'd pick a dozen tombstones and ask the children to find the tombstone, photograph it and research this person and write a report.

Can people donate, either time or funds?/Do you have fundraisers?

We have done a variety- house tours and barn tours and re-creation of a historic baseball game with uniforms from the turn of the century. We host a number of lectures during the year where historians or authors come in. We have an annual Christmas party and we had a big celebration for our 50th anniversary. Our desire is we'd love the people of Easton to know about its history. We used to have an annual membership but it became disorganized and people moved, so we converted over to become a 'Friend to the Society' and if you make a donation you are eligible to vote at our meetings and you'll be a 'qualified' friend. You can donate any amount. We've also had past members leave us money in their will. If you visit the website everything is on there or you can use PayPal. We use this money to preserve what we have. For example we have leather bound journals that date back to the late 1700's that would disintegrate if we opened them and scanned the pages. There is a technology where you can put it into a scanning machine unopened, and it scans layer after layer like an MRI and scans every page and it is quite costly.

As the town marks 175 years what in your opinion is Easton's greatest contribution to the state/area?

It's probably something imposed upon Easton and that is the reservoir and the watershed property that feeds the reservoir and the reservoir provides the water for all of Bridgeport. Bridgeport gets the water and the benefit to Easton has been the preservation of open space and that has helped keep it out of harm's way from developers. And the fact that 40% of Easton is watershed property and the fact that there is a lot of care given to the remaining 60% keeps the town this quaint, agricultural oasis it is today.

Would you like to add anything else?

I would like to thank all the people who have supported the HSE and make special mention to Gary Simone (former Director of Parks & Rec) who helped with the revolutionary war weekend. He was fabulous to work with and was as enthusiastic as we were and teamed up with us.

And an interesting story about an old tractor I used to see near Greisers when I came from NYC to CT for weekends around 1985. Fast forward 30 years, that tractor got rusted out and overgrown by bushes and vines. I had a vision of restoring it and so I spoke to Dick Greiser and he said you mean "Mable" who was in every farm parade for 30+ years. So I rounded up some volunteers and we sanded it down and painted it and I just went by the other day and saw it was starting to fade again. So, we'll be looking for volunteers to give it a fresh coat of paint!