

Vaudeville in Arkville

A modest little house on lower Dry Brook Road played a role in the vibrant tourist and entertainment history of our area.

Benjamin and Rose Kolber, Polish immigrants, came to Middletown from NYC looking for a place to rent to accommodate lodgers. They landed in Arkville, rented the Kutner House (now the Maple House next door to the Arkville Fire Hall) and took in boarders. They later rented a house on Dry Brook Road and welcomed boarders there.

This house, believed built in the 1830s, had been the home of the Baker family and, for the last half of the 19th century, of Dr. Sherman Street, who had married Julia Baker. Sherman, Julia and son John Street died between 1897 and 1903. It's not clear who Benjamin Kolber rented it from (post 1910), but in 1915, his son Harry Koler purchased it for \$2,000. It was a move that brought the property his father had rented into family hands, where it has remained ever since.

Harry Koler was one of 13 children of Benjamin and Rose Kolber (the name was variously spelled with and without a B and a T; another son Herman Kolbert also ran a boarding house known as "Kolbert House" a few doors away from Harry on Lower Dry Brook Road; it is today the home of Wayne and Linda Caswell.)

Harry Koler (1882-1962), was a vaudeville performer and comedian who began his career in 1904. During summers, when there were no shows held in un-airconditioned theaters, he retreated to Arkville and often hosted fellow performers and family members in this eight-bedroom house. Billy Rose and Milton Berle (nephew of




The Kolbert House in 1925 was a lively place. Family members also spelled their name Koler and Kolber.

another Arkville hotel proprietor, Charles Glantz) are said to have played the piano there.

During the 19-teens and 20s Harry and friends staged benefit shows for various local organizations. In the summer of 1918, the Catskill Mountain News reported on back-to-back events held at "Koler's Barn Theater" in Arkville (location unknown). A vaudeville show July

continued on page 2



The Bridge is published periodically
for members of The Historical
Society of the Town of Middletown.
EDITOR: Diane Galusha
DESIGNER: Trish Adams
Print version printed at
ArtCo Copy Hut, Kingston, NY



Vaudeville performer Harry Koler (above) in his prime.

The Wall of Fame at the Kolbert House features many notables of early 20th-century stage and screen, including Molly Goldberg, who got her start in her family's Fleischmanns boarding house. Can you find her in this photo?



continued from page 1

22 benefitting the “Permanent Blind Relief war fund” was given by the “theatrical people stopping at the Koler House.” The following week, a dance for the benefit of the Red Cross was held there under the direction of Mrs. Samuel Korn. The music was furnished by Mead’s orchestra. “A short impromptu entertainment was given by Harry Koler, Harry Weston, Helen Langsfield, and Baby Beulah Wolff. \$15 was the result of the affair.”

And in 1922, the annual benefit show for the Fleischmanns Catholic Church “was arranged by Messrs. Koler and Belmont, well known professional stars in Keith’s circuit of vaudeville

houses.” It featured members of their respective families, including “Little Miss Ethel Kolbert.”

For much of the year, Harry and his vaudeville colleagues traveled the country performing in big cities and small towns. He also appeared in some popular stage shows — as “Hard Boiled Herman” in the musical comedy “Rose Marie” (the film version in 1936 starred Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald), and as Ira Pond in “I Must Love Someone” for 191 performances at the Longacre Theater in 1939.

But in the summer, Harry returned to Arkville where in the 1930s he established a “chop suey and chow mein” restaurant in the kitchen that was added to the rear of the house. The cook was named “Sing Low” and the eatery proved popular for a few years.

Harry came out of retirement to appear in UFO shows during WWII. Divorced with no children, he sold the Arkville house to his brother Mack Kolber, who came up summers with his wife. Mack and Harry operated a cigar store in the theater district in Manhattan which was popular with stars of stage and screen.

Mack Kolber left the Arkville house in the 1950s to nephew Benjamin Munk and wife Ione. It remains a family summer home.

HSM EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Diane Galusha, PRESIDENT Bill Blish, VICE PRESIDENT Marilyn Pitetti, TREASURER

Amy Taylor, SECRETARY TRUSTEES: Henry Friedman, Agnes Laub, Pat Moore,

Barbara Moses, Josef Schoell, Doris Warner

www.mtownhistory.org

history@catskill.net

Find us on Facebook!



Margaretville was a ghost town when this photo was taken April 5.



It has been just nine months since COVID-19 arrived to transform our lives and communities. Time has blurred, and it seems like another lifetime that we came and went without thought, socialized, worked, went to school, attended concerts, shopped and held face to face conversations without masks. Zoom? Who knew?

This has been a strange and momentous year. HSM has attempted to document COVID's local impact for posterity. Now, as we await the vaccines that will hopefully allow us to one day resume some degree of normalcy, we offer a few mementoes and interview excerpts from the early days of the pandemic this past spring.

On Isolation

Julia Reischel, Coordinator of the Rural Communities Opioid Response Planning Grant for Margaretville Hospital:

“The social isolation that is required to combat the spread of COVID is damaging to most people, none moreso than those who are attempting to overcome addiction to narcotics. “One’s recovery is predicated on feeling a sense of community and belonging, and the ability to have joy and pleasure in life. All of these things have been subsumed by the pandemic. You can’t

see people, you might be isolating with an abuser or someone you have tensions with, your job is almost certainly lost. This is terrible for people in recovery. There will be high rates of relapse and recurrence. People will die from it. People are already dying from it.”

On Shifting

Mike Riley, proprietor of Picnic, a Margaretville eatery that employs four people:

“We do as much contactless transaction as possible. People look at the menu online, call ahead and place their order, paying generally through credit cards. And then we do curbside pickup and delivery. We do allow two people at a time inside if they are paying with cash. We sterilize the money with bleach solution, and bake it in the oven. . . There are a lot of people who feel it’s a hoax. There is a major trust issue with this whole thing right now, a disconnect between science and the administration of science, a real gap. People think they’re smarter to be cynical. And they’re angry when we can’t deliver what they want.”

continued on page 4



continued from page 3

On Adaptation

Karen Bramley, Roxbury Central School third grade teacher:

“Our Superintendent told us to start thinking about the possibility that school would be closing for a period of time. But basically we had three days. We were told Friday we would close for two weeks. Then on Sunday it was extended to three weeks. Parents were notified. On Monday we told the kids and taught them how to use Google classroom. They weren’t sad or scared, I think they were shell shocked. All kids from third grade and up were provided a Chromebook and younger students who needed one got them too. MTC stepped up and provided internet connections. . . This is the hardest thing I have ever done as a teacher. I’m not in the classroom, the kids are not in front of me. Eight- and nine-year-olds really need that one-on-one connection to learn. . . I feel so bad for the parents, especially those who are still working. They have to come home and teach too. The parents are doing the best they can.”

Linda Ballard, proprietor of Catskill Seasons, pivoted from sporting goods to food and toilet paper when it appeared that’s what people needed.

On Generosity

Frank Canavan and Joyce St. George, Coordinators, Community Pantry of the Town of Middletown:

Frank: “There are 580* households now registered with the pantry from Middletown, but also Andes, Roxbury, Big Indian. We made the decision early on to deliver food to recipients to keep them safe. We leave the box on the doorstep, knock on the door. We have people making masks, and we put the masks in the bags with the food. We check in with people, see how they’re doing. A lot of elderly people are very scared, terrified to go outside. For some this may be the only contact they have with the outside world.”

Joyce: “We encourage people who have small businesses who are struggling to come to us for food. We’d rather they use their limited funds to pay their electric bills or whatever and use us for food for awhile. . . . The community has really gone to bat for the pantry. We have more volunteers than we could ever have imagined, people donating money, donating food. It’s been an amazing experience.”

**By the end of 2020, 625 families had registered for help from the food bank.*





Clockwise from top left: Churches were closed for much of the year. Some have offered services via Facebook.

The Class of 2020 didn't have much of a senior year but they paraded through Main Street to pick up caps and gowns June 13.

Scott Gray organized a barbecue April 17 to provide townfolk in isolation with a hot meal.

Anne Sanford wasn't taking any chances with this face shield.



by Georgia Taylor

I lived with my parents just a few steps down the road from the school house. We moved there when I was four years old. Mom kept busy tending the feed store next door to our house, and there was my baby brother to care for, too. Dad worked out.

I seemed to have been charmed by the school bell ringing out calling the students to class. Being inquisitive and adventurous as a four-year-old can be, I started slipping away through open doors, only to be welcomed by a giant of a man who let me sit amongst children of various sizes. Mom soon caught on to where I was going and came to retrieve me but was told by the teacher, Mr. Shultis, "Let her stay." Thus began my humble school beginnings.

I could go home for lunch or carry lunch and eat at school. Sometimes



when I went home I returned with a treat for all. On bitter cold days I enjoyed hot soup with the rest, heated up on the wood stove that kept the school warm.

The class size was smaller than in years past, as centralization was taking place and kids of age were going to the high school in Margaretville. There were no partitions to separate classes. Particular classes would be grouped together and the rest studied or did projects on their own. It was not unusual to hear questions asked of a class and someone not in that class responding. In reality, we were all learning together.

The day started with the Pledge of Allegiance, Scripture reading, taking attendance, remarks from the teacher. At morning recess we often did exercises standing beside our desk. We went outdoors as much as weather allowed. Tag games were very popular such as Kick the Can (a version of hide and seek), and Red Rover, Red Rover I dare you to come over. In Kealy Over, a team was on each side of the school, a ball was thrown over the roof and when we heard the ball was "Caught!" all ran to exchange sides. Anyone tagged with that ball became a member of that team.

My first teacher was Leland Shultis and for second and third grade it was Hildreth Franks. Both lived in or near Arena. The Superintendent of Schools, Miss Zena Travis, often visited the school. Like Mr. Shultis, she was large in stature, a very delightful, humble person. She not only knew the students but their families.

By the time I was in third grade my little brother was getting his wandering bug and he found his way to the



Georgia Fairbairn and little brother Fred playing in the East Branch of the Delaware.

school. He could not reach the door handle but got many giggles from the students by his trying to enter. He would finally give up and return home. I breathed a sigh of relief.

One of the worst things about the school was a trip to the outhouse. Can you imagine how embarrassing it would be to go to the black board and put your initials in the lower left corner by the door? More than one set of initials there meant you waited your turn.

It was an unforgettable experience attending my beginning years of school at the Stone Schoolhouse during the last years of its existence as a school.

Georgia and Dave Taylor were married at the Stone School in 1952.

Stone School students in the 1930s when Lena Borden Tiffany was their teacher. See any one you recognize?



Georgia in 2020, in the doorway of the school she first attended as a curious four-year-old.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

We learned just enough about Peter Kittle to warm up the cold hard signature he carved in this boulder on his Millbrook farm. Peter (1888-1960) was one of 13 children of Willard and Emily Carroll Kittle. He grew up on what's known locally as Cat Ladder Farm at the head of Kittle Road and never strayed very far. He didn't marry, nor did he go into the service as his brothers did. Peter lived with his widowed mother, and after she died in 1936, bachelor brothers Harley, Olin and Peter shared the farm. He was also a house painter and cut wood for Corbett & Stuart's acid factory. A few

items from the *Catskill Mountain News* in 1918 and 1919 offer some color. On May 31, 1918 he warned the 'sneak thieves' who entered his brother Grover's barn and stole grain, and who swiped a quart of maple syrup from the sap house that he was ready to "apply a remedy with a few charges of No. 6 shot." On September 6, 1918, he had several bones broken in his right arm when he was struck by a horse. And on Feb. 21, 1919, "Peter Kittle received through the mail a German helmet with a bullet hole through it. It was sent by Pvt. Ray Kittle from France." Ray was Peter's brother, who was the grandfather of Ken Kittle, who currently occupies Cat Ladder Farm with other family members. Ken took the photo of the boulder.

THE 55¢ POST

THE 55¢ POST is an exclusive feature for members who receive *The Bridge* via e-mail. Because your newsletter requires no stamp, you get an "extra"!



Give a Gift, Get a Gift

Give the past as a present for the holidays! A gift membership to HSM (\$10 for a senior or student; \$20 for an individual; \$30 for a household) gives the recipient three issues of the history-packed *Bridge* newsletter, the monthly HSM Today e-news, a set of either five vintage local post cards or five notecards featuring original paintings of local scenes (like this one of Skene Library by Ellen Wong), and a cheery letter from us announcing your gift. You'll get a set of post cards or note cards, too, with our thanks. Send a check and the address of the recipient to

HSM, PO Box 734,
Margaretville, NY 12455.

Happy Holidays!

