

History's New Home



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A Great Day for History!

After years of planning and 13 months of construction, the Middletown History Center was formally opened June 9. Making it official at the ribbon cutting were (l. to r.) Middletown Supervisor Glen Faulkner, HSM trustee Eli Taylor, Margaretville Mayor John Hubbell, and trustees Doris Warner, Diane Galusha, Michael Fairbairn, Josef Schoell, Gary Smith and Pat Sanford. Trustee Agnes Laub is not pictured. See pages 6 - 9 for more coverage and photos.



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Three five-year diaries kept by Nelle Bly Shultis Ballard from 1932 to 1946 have been transcribed by Janis Benincasa. They offer us a unique, extended window into one woman's life in a remote corner of the Catskills (Vega, at the head of the Denver-Vega Valley, Roxbury). Janis, a folklorist by profession, reflects on the following page, on the process of interpreting history through words on a page, written nearly a century ago.

Who was Nellie Bly Ballard?

Born in Arena June 4, 1874, Nellie was the daughter of David and Clara Morse Shultis. She was married in 1912 to John Floyd Ballard (1889-1976) and died in Roxbury Oct. 22, 1971 one day before their 59th wedding anniversary.

By then she had become a noted folk artist who painted farm scenes and area buildings in the primitive style. John F. Ballard had inherited the family homestead in Vega, first occupied by Peleg and Martha Haines Ballard in 1794. Nellie worked with John to maintain the farm and home and raise their two children, Kathleen and Kenneth, recording the family's daily activities for nearly 15 years. The diaries were left in the former Roxbury home of daughter Kathleen Ballard Kelly (husband Howard). Its current owners, Karen and Rick Neblung, gave them to HSM's Diane Galusha in May of 2023.

The transcriptions will be available at HSM in the future; the originals have been given to the Roxbury Town Historian.

Nellie as a young farm wife and mother. Courtesy Ballard family
Nellie and John Ballard, probably at their wedding. Courtesy Linda Armour



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by Janis Benincasa

Nellie Bly Ballard was a terrible gossip.

By that I mean, she was not good at it, at least in her diary. There was one mention of a teen runaway who was picked up by troopers the same day only to do it again, years later, and one mention of a possibly scandalous “romance” (rendered parenthetically with question marks.)

Other than that, nada. Which begs the question, ‘Who are diaries for?’ In this case it was not for posterity or for recording secret thoughts never to be revealed. For Nellie, (“Mrs. John Ballard,” a formality with which she rendered all married women’s names over the 15 years that she tracked her daily life), the Five-Year Diaries, organized by date rather than year, allowed her to see at-a-glance what she and her family were doing on that date in the immediate years before and after.

I first became interested in oral history after reading “Working” by Studs Terkel in which the working lives of welders and farmers and receptionists and hair dressers are vividly depicted in their own words. The lives of the unsung, most of us, are fascinating. So, while Nellie recorded major events during WWII: “One thousand R.A.F planes over Germany. 44 did not return” (May 31, 1942), she also brings the war home by recording what boys registered for the draft, where they were posted, how long it had been since they had been heard from, when they came home. She wrote of the burden of rations and the paucity of meat during the war. And she wrote of the end of it, when all the stores in Margaretville closed in solemn celebration.

Nellie recorded the workings of the farm where they raised chickens, dairy cows, tapped 1,000 trees for syrup, grew vegetables. She recorded the results of milk tests, the fluctuations of milk checks, and local engagement in the 1933 nationwide milk strike. She recorded the price of the eggs she sold (22 to 40 cents a dozen!), the gallons of syrup sold for how much and to whom. She did the family banking, recording every deposit. And on Mondays, she washed and ironed.

Nellie wrote of every visitor and every visit she and her family made elsewhere. There are dozens of local family names in the diaries; too numerous to mention. You know who you are – Nellie’s diary might reveal what your ancestors were up to back then.

Back then, there were movie theaters in every town and the Ballards went to all of them. Back then, you could hitch a ride to town on the milk or mail truck.



Nellie surrounded by some of the hundreds of paintings she created in her 50s and 60s. Courtesy Ballard family

Back then, you could hire household help for \$1 a day. Times were different back then but in the Catskills, some things never change:

July 1941

29. Tues. Rain

30. Weds. Rain. Rain. RAIN.
Had 2 or 3 load of hay on bank below orchard spoil.

31. Thurs. Rain.

The Diaries of Nellie Bly Ballard

JUNE 6

1942 Sat. John + I planted garden
then went to Marguette at night.

1943 Sun. nice day Kathleen Howard
came from Prattsille, also Ken + Leona + John came
over and we all had dinner together

1944 Tues. the great invasion
egan across the channel from England

1945 Wed. Kathleen sick all day

1946 Thurs.

JUNE 7

1942 Sun. Long lonsome day.

1943 Mon Rained hard all day, John
came to mamas for dinner moved later then
went assessing to Grand Gorge, I came home
with him at night Mrs B came home from May.

1944 Wed. Invasion going on fine
Ken + Leona went to Walston, with chem coupe
Carrie Morse called in morning, Nellie
Rutehouse and Mrs Leo Morse doing day

1945 Thurs. Hilton Kelly went in Army

1946 Fri. Kathleen + Howard came up to
dance in hall John chud \$32.00 per wk

A page from Nellie's diary with entries for June 6 and 7, 1942 through 1946. Note the brief reference to the D-Day invasion.

(Below) Jim Ballard, ninth generation to occupy the Ballard homestead in Vega, was raised on the farm with 11 siblings. Nellie and John were his grandparents.



Friday, August 3, 1934 was a very bad day on the John F. and Nellie Bly Ballard farm in Vega.

“Inspector came and found our cows all T. B.,” wrote Nellie in her diary. Her matter-of-fact one-line entry hides what must have been a hard pill to swallow. The diagnosis of Bovine Tuberculosis meant that they could not sell milk produced by the family’s herd of 22 cows, and that all of the animals would be sent to slaughter.

The Bovine TB eradication program in the US had begun in 1917 after a blood test was developed to detect the disease which is transmissible to humans. At the turn of the century, TB was the leading cause of death in the US. It’s believed that 10 percent of TB sufferers had contracted the disease from cattle, cattle products or swine infected by cattle.

The eradication campaign was a massive nationwide effort by federal, state and local governments. Herds were tested, and animals that reacted positively were destroyed. Between 1917 and 1940 veterinarians administered roughly 232 million tuberculin tests and ordered the destruction of about 3.8 million cattle.

Special appraisers visited the farms to determine the value of the cows, and farmers were reimbursed for their loss to allow them to buy replacements.*

“Some farms it was so bad that 35 or 40 cows had to be destroyed,” said long time farmer Leonard Utter of Millbrook. Added veterinarian Dr. John Fairbairn, “It was so common it cleaned out whole valleys of cows.”

Remarked Utter, “Some would say ‘TB was the best thing that happened to so and so,’ who had a poor quality herd and got money to buy better blooded stock.”

The late Julia “Judy” German, interviewed in 2020, remembered cattle drives when cows infected with TB would be driven through the streets to the railroad in Arkville to be shipped to slaughter. They were accompanied by men “to keep them in line.”

Nellie Ballard recounted in her diary that on August 13 she and John, along with daughter Kathleen and her mother Clara Shultis, traveled over Bearpen Mountain on a cow shopping expedition. On August 14, she wrote “John & I went back to Lexington, bought 9 cows, 7 heifers of Frank Van Loan for \$1,000.”

Mon., Aug. 27. Our cows went to station at noon. Our new cows came. Also had barn disinfected, cost \$7.00 by Mead. . . . Sat., Sept. 8. We milked in barn at night, first since the cows went.

The Ballards’ infected cows had been appraised at \$1,170. The state paid

them \$682.70, the federal government’s share was \$412. But that did not account for the income lost over several difficult weeks that summer.

Nor was that the end of the story. In November, another cow tested positive, was killed, and brought the Ballards \$75 in government remuneration. They went back to Lexington and bought four more cows.

“By the 1940s the state (eradication) program had it pretty well cleaned up,” said Dr. Fairbairn. “For awhile, every herd was tested every three years. By the time I got out of vet school in the 1960s it was gone. TB is pretty much extinct now.”

* *An Impossible Undertaking: The Eradication of Bovine Tuberculosis in the United States*, by Alan Olmstead, *Journal of Economic History*, February 2004

Cows graze on what may have been the Murray farm (now Charming but Cheap antique store) on Route 28, between Arkville and Fleischmanns. Courtesy Lynda Stratton



Dairy
Farm Scene
at Arkville,
Catskill
Mountains,
N. Y.

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On June 9 trustees, members and supporters of the Historical Society of the Town of Middletown celebrated the organization's 20th year with the opening of the Middletown History Center and Nicholas J. Juried Archives. Doubling the size of the existing program hall, we have brought all of our operations, including an archives for our growing collection of historical materials, under one roof. President Diane Galusha's remarks at the long-dreamed of ribbon cutting follow:

We've come a long way since 2004 when a couple dozen people got together at Fairview Public Library to discuss forming a historical society. Twenty years of planning, programming and growth have led us to this moment, when we can proudly announce that history has a true home in Middletown!

This achievement belongs to so many people. Let's start with the 30 individuals who have served on the Historical Society of Middletown's Board of Trustees since it was chartered by the state education dept in 2005. Their dedication and effort established the organization that has become central to the cultural life of this community. Current board members, who dealt with the nitty gritty of this expansion project, are Pat Moore, Doris Warner, Agnes Laub, Josef Schoell, Gary Smith, Michael Fairbairn and Eli Finberg. Thank you for your guidance, ideas, and cheerfully offered help through this process.

HSM's solid foundation is due in large part to its loyal members. 130 at present. I see many here today. Thank you sincerely for your support.

This building, as some of you recall, was the home for many years of the Izaak Walton League, a conservation organization whose members



Nicholas J. Juried ARCHIVES



The lobby of the History Center features a map of Middletown created by Halcottsville artists Sharon Suess, Sarah Stone and Ros Welchman. Pictured on the doorway to the Nicholas J. Juried Archives are Oscar Dougherty and Anna Evans Swayze.

moved it to this location in the 1960s, built the pond and preserved this beautiful site. In the 1990s it was gifted to the New Kingston Valley Grange, which continued the League's tradition of hosting dinners, programs and other community events here – graduation parties, baby showers, wedding receptions. The Grange gave it to the Historical Society in 2012.

Transforming this treasured building into the history center that would bring all of HSM's activities under one roof was a dream made possible by several major funders:

Nick Juried's early gift gave us confidence that we could make this happen. The archives bears his name as a sign of our immense gratitude. We wish he

could have been here to help celebrate, but he couldn't make the trip from Austin, Texas where he lives.

Former State Senator Jim Seward provided an important lift by securing funding from the State and Municipal Facilities Capital Grant Program.

We are also very grateful for the substantial contributions of the A. Lindsay and Olive B O'Connor Foundation, the Pasternak Family Foundation and the Schoell Giving Fund. Their support encouraged individuals, families, businesses and other community organizations to donate as well. Special thanks go to the 27 members of the Legacy Circle for their generous

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An 1100-square foot addition to the existing HSM program hall was constructed to house an archives, accessible rest room, office and lobby.



New pondside seating offers a peaceful place to relax and reflect.

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contributions, and to local businesses who confirmed with their donations that they understand the value of preserving our history.

And of course today we would be standing in a dusty driveway looking at an old building in need of TLC were it not for the work of 27 skilled designers, contractors and craftspeople who produced this beautiful addition and landscape. Thanks to Paul Gossen for designing the structure, and to Rob Cole and Gina Griffin, general contractors, for heading up the roster of local tradespeople who did every-

thing from excavate to insulate. And to landscape designer Birgitta Brophy and contractor Carl Grocholl for producing this wonderful pathway to history.

Please enjoy refreshments provided by local bakers, and feel free to spend some time watching the family of geese on the pond from our new sitting area, with bench and glider provided by donors Josef Schoell and Addie and Steve Wat.

Thank you for coming to celebrate the Middletown History Center!



The new archives facility features climate controlled storage and work space.

SHARE YOUR HISTORY!

Do you have photos, diaries, documents, business records or other items that reflect personal or community history related to Middletown? Please contact us to discuss giving them a safe, permanent home in the HSM archives and library. We will offer a tour of the archives on October 13, when we expect to be ready to accommodate visitors and research appointments. Meantime, we will entertain information requests – and offers to volunteer! – via email: historicalsocietyofmiddletown@gmail.com.



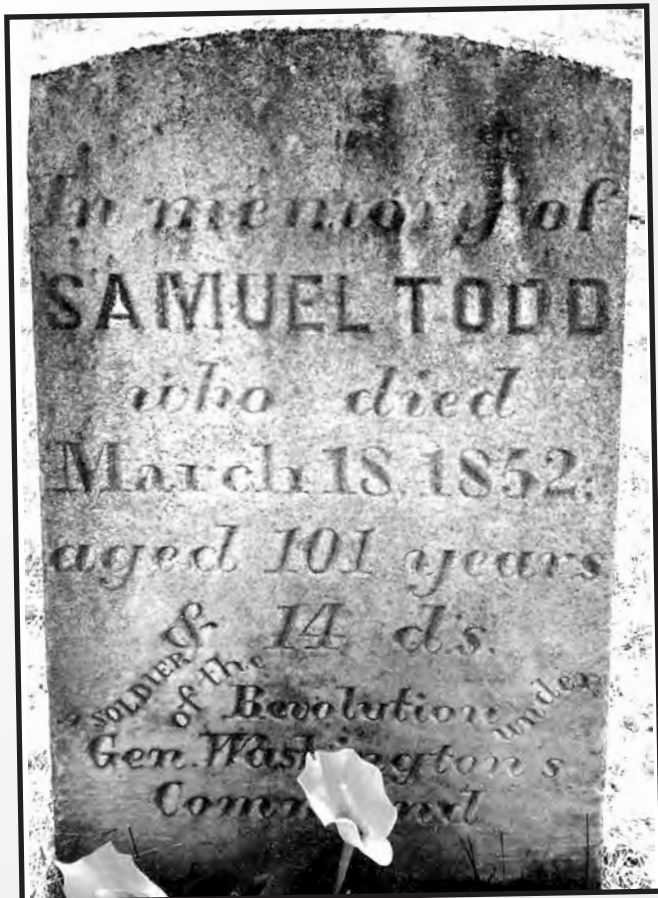
More than 100 people enjoyed refreshments and each other's company at the opening.

Help Us Find Our Heroes of '76

In observance of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, HSM is looking for volunteers to help document the resting places of Revolutionary War veterans buried in Middletown. This is part of a county-wide effort coordinated by the Delaware County Historical Association which aims to create a database to include all available information on every soldier that is buried in each town. At the end of the project, DCHA will produce a commemorative booklet with this information and may produce cemetery signs highlighting notable veteran burial sites.

If you would like to help with this effort please contact us at our new email address, historicalsocietyofmiddletown@gmail.com.

Samuel Todd, who died in 1852 at the age of 101, served under George Washington according to his Clovesville Cemetery headstone. HSM has a copy of his pension application detailing his experience in the war.



by Jerry Kittle

In 1955 Ed Kittle was in his 70th year. At that point most men would rest and reflect on a life well lived. Ed was not like most. A carpenter and a true craftsman he had one last job to complete.

Born in 1885 to Charles and Amanda Bush Kittle, Ed spent most of his life in the Margaretville area. Although having limited formal education he had a keen mind and a never-ending curiosity for all things mechanical. Ed became a skilled mechanic and toolmaker and opened the first Chevrolet garage in Margaretville with his brother Walter. During World War I Ed served his country at an airfield in Texas with the 233rd Aerial Battalion as an aircraft mechanic.

But Ed's true passion was working with wood. He went on to learn the trade and would build numerous homes and barns in the area, many of which still stand today.

The Great Depression of the 1930s took Ed to the Binghamton area for work where he would remain until the end of World War II. It was in the early 1950's when he returned home to Margaretville.

Over the years Ed had done some work for John and Earl Sanford on their farm at the end of Bull Run Road. The men became life-long friends and upon his return to Margaretville he secured a small plot of land down the hillside from the Sanford homestead. Ed had worked on this farm as a teenager in the late 1890s and knew the spot well. It would be an ideal location to build a camp and trout pond for the enjoyment of his sons, Art and Denny, and their families.

In the 1950s Ed began building his camp in earnest. First came construction of an access road off Bull Run

Road. Running next to a pasture the road took a sharp turn and down a steep embankment before crossing a small brook, ending in an open area surrounded by trees.

This huge task was done using only a small John Deere bulldozer and a lot of know how.

Next he skidded an old chicken coop down the pasture from the farm. This building would become his "summer home" and tool shed for the next several years. During that time Ed felled several large hemlocks that dotted the hillside and were then milled into lumber to build the cabin.

Finally work on the pond began with a concrete spillway and overflow being built. A large dozer was then used to excavate the pond and construct a 300-foot-long earthen dam. Fed by an underground spring, the pond, 14 feet deep, would be an excellent home for trout.

For nearly 20 years our summer vacations were centered around the camp at Bull Run, first working on completing the cabin that would welcome the Kittle clan yearly. My dad, Denny and our family would travel from Western New York and usually spend two weeks in August, often joined by Uncle Art and his family who were living in Vestal.

Wonderful times were had during those summer vacations. For a city kid there was nothing like spending time with my friend, Ray Sanford and learning the way of life on the farm. There was the excitement of landing a fat rainbow trout from the well-stocked pond. There was the solitude of walking along stone fences and through meadows in search of a wary woodchuck. A late afternoon dip in the cold water of the pond was followed by a hearty meal. Dinner conversation was lively and always led



Ed Kittle

by "Gramps," who was a master storyteller. As darkness fell with an inviting campfire the day would end under starlit skies.

Ed enjoyed the fruits of his labor for more than 20 years. A last reunion was held with Gramps in the summer of 1982. Dozens of family members spanning five generations gathered to enjoy the camp and honor one remarkable man. Ed Kittle passed away in 1983 at the age of 98. While the camp is no longer with us our memories of it and my grandfather live on.

Thanks, Gramps.

And thanks to Ray Sanford for his help with this remembrance.

Bryan Burgin penned a heartfelt tribute to Ed Kittle in his column "In My Valley" in the *Catskill Mountain News* on Sept. 22, 1983 (p. 2), the edition which also carried Ed's obituary (p. 7). That edition can be found online at <https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=cmn19830922-01>

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Fairview Public Library opened July 1, 1974 in the Erpf House, Arkville (along with the Erpf Catskill Cultural Center whose work we'll detail in a later issue of *The Bridge*). The library was given a provisional charter from the State Education Department in September that year.

But while it was the first to be called Fairview, it wasn't the first library to serve the community. Its predecessor, the Margaretville Library, had operated in several locations from July 1936 through 1968.

The "new Margaretville Library" opened with 400 books in 1936. The *Catskill Mountain News* article announcing it said Emma Votée of Arkville was the librarian, but failed to state its location. In October, 35 new books had arrived and patrons could borrow them at a "rental fee" of 2 cents per day.

In 1938 Margaret Thomson, a certified librarian, took over and hours were extended to a total of eight hours per week. "You will find the room comfortable and convenient," the news item said. In February 1939, the library advertised for 'a cheap desk.' Fundraisers were held regularly. When the library board of trustees got some push back after suggesting the Village might help fund the operation, they sent a letter to the *News* noting that it now had 1400 books, with a budget of \$126 per



Fairview as it looks today. The home of pharmacist Joe Christian on Walnut Street was purchased and expanded in 1994.

year. Still no idea where it was located. The new central school opened in 1940 and included a library, which the Margaretville Library either moved into or managed so that the public could use it. Summer visitors were welcome to check out books in "Room 105, Main Floor." Each month, a roster of local women charged with 'caring for the library' and their schedule was printed in the paper. There were 21 of them acting as volunteers.

At some point the library moved to "the Smith home," but again, location is unspecified. In June 1953 the Margaretville Library moved again, to a refurbished room in the Margaretville fire house on Church Street. Ruth Sanford and Peg Gottfried were prime movers, assembling books in rent-free quarters provided by the Village which had

spent \$921.49 fixing up the space. Borrowers were charged a \$1 fee per year. In 1954, the Pakatakan Library at the former artists colony in Arkville donated its 1800 books to the Margaretville Library.

In 1968 the Margaretville Library closed for some reason, but its collection of books was handed over to the newly chartered Fairview Public Library. MCS students and other volunteers moved the books from the fire hall to the former Fairview House — the big white house on the knoll in Arkville soon to be known as the Erpf House. The first Board of Trustees included Gary Atkin, Peg Barnes, Peg Gottfried, Ernie Hyatt and Dawn Roadman.

In need of more space, Fairview purchased the former Joe Christian home on Walnut Street, Margaretville, and built a sizeable addition in 1994. It was then, and remains, a busy place with four computer stations, a children's area, a large video and audio book collection, and a conference room that hosts puzzle and board game enthusiasts, meetings, presentations, and workshops. Last year Fairview counted 7,909 patrons and circulated 11,374 books and other materials. The Director is Doris Warner. Trustees are Lisa Mead, Cindy Taylor, Agnes Laub, Becky Porter, Andy Cahill, Allegra Condon, Joyce Gray, Darcie Sarubbi and Julia Marks.

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Jerry Kittle is the son of the late Clyde "Denny" and Erma Kittle. Denny was born in Margaretville and lived there until the late 1930s, when he went to work for IBM in Endicott. He served in the US Army Air Corps during WWII, earning the rank of Lt. Colonel. Following the war, Denny returned to IBM and spent most of his 35-year career as an account executive in the Jamestown, NY area. Son Jerry

grew up in Jamestown, attended Jamestown Community College, and received a bachelor's degree in speech communications from SUNY Geneseo. He retired in 2013 after spending more than 25 years as a public safety dispatcher with the Chautauqua County, NY Sheriff's Office. Jerry and his wife Barb reside in rural Westfield, Chautauqua County. He enjoys wood working, a passion inspired by his grandfather.



HISTORICAL
SOCIETY of
MIDDLETOWN,
Delaware County

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Happy Birthday, Fairview!



Dawn Roadman, left, trustee of Fairview Public Library, posed with unidentified woman at the library when it was located at the Erpf House, Arkville, c. 1974. Read more about Fairview's 50-year history inside on page 11.