The Fourth of July Parades

Gastrulation on the Eel Pond Bridge

by Jean Bigelow

Quissett and Woods Hole, we love our Fourth of July parades.

Dick Jones, one of the founding spirits of the Quissett parade, recalls that the idea for the Fourth of July spectacle was cooked up fifty-four years ago at a party in Quissett with Freelon Morris Jr., Molly (Jones) Willett, and Charlie Blevins. Dick believes Tom Lineaweaver and Bill and Betsy Shultz may also have been among the conspirators.

Lord Mayor and Mayoress Clint & Mary Jones ride in 1950 Quissett parade. Courtesy Dick Jones.

Early on it was just Quissett, then Quissett plus Woods Hole, and later two separate community events. As the affair evolved, geographically, socially, and generationally, the Glorious Fourth celebration within the boundaries of this diverse and (some say) quirky community to the west of Falmouth Village continued traditions and established much-cherished new ones. When the Marine Biological Laboratory (MBL) got involved in the Woods Hole parade it added its own hilarious scientific note. Both parades are always a joyful reflection of what Woods Hole and Quissett are all about.

The first parade (probably in the late 1940s) was modest: from the Jones residence on Quissett Avenue down Quissett Harbor Road to the Harbor House and back. After a few years participants decided to take their parade on to Woods Hole to join friends there. Instead of dispersing after their initial march around Quissett Harbor, several paraders piled into cars and drove to the Woods Hole Yacht Club on Great Harbor, reassembled and marched eastward along Bar Neck Road. This is where the fun got even better. More on this later.

Traditions were born: a Mayor and Mayoress of Quissett were designated, costumes invented, and rituals established. The first Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress were Dick Jones’s parents, Clint and Mary Jones; they were succeeded in office by Freelon and Frances Morris and then Bill and Betsy Shultz. Over time the succession fell to Dick and Megan Jones who have presided since the 1960s.

Over the last 40 odd years the Mayor in full costume has become a walking junk shop. The basis of his outfit is an academic gown topped by an academic hood that belonged to Dick’s dad at Princeton. Naturally he wears a top hat. Attached to the ample folds of the black gown, and covering at least 50% of the surface, is a collection of little tin pins that would make a collector drool. “Woods Hole Library Book Brigade” and “91-92 First Night,” for example. The mayor’s mace is a bedpost, split longitudinally. He also carries a huge, 18-24” silver key and wears an ancient sword. Dick says, “If you take it out of its scabbard, you see the rust, but I tell the youngsters that it’s blood.”

Traditions abound on the Glorious Fourth. At 8 a.m. the Mayor of Quissett presides at a colors ceremony at the Quissett Boatyard. Decked out in Colonial
Tom Stetson’s cannon blasts its colors echo in Quissett Outer Harbor, 1990. Photo by Scott Tynell.

Fourth of July morning and evening colors rituals are observed faithfully each year. Over the years older participants have been relieved of their duties by younger ones, often members of the same families. Freelon Morris III is the current drummer, and Nat Shaver, great-grandson of Franklin and Margaret King, serves as bugler.

Another tradition is the “The Spirit of ’76” leading the Quissett and now Woods Hole parades. As seen in a 1976 photo, Freelon Morris Jr., Charlie Blevins and Kent Swift enacted the famous A.M. Willard painting for many, many years, but early pictures from the 1950s show a young Dick Jones, Shang Goodwin and Charlie Blevins playing the role. Recently Kent Swift III took over carrying the flag, Freelon Morris III became the drummer, and Robbie Shaver (Nat’s brother) started playing the fife.

Photos virtually trace the history of a number of Quissett families. Family records show successive generations of the same
Charles Blevins, Dick Jones and Freelon Morris, Jr., lead the 1954 Quissett parade. Courtesy Dick Jones.


Quissett Yacht Club sailing instructors with students set to start the parade, 2001. Photo by Ali Rodin.

The next generation performs as the Spirit of '76 in 2001: Kent Swift III, Robbie Shaver and Freelon Morris III. Photo by Ali Rodin.

families, and many individuals, as they age, appear in the same costume year after year. Moll and Herb Willett always wore the same costumes, Moll the rags and makeup of a bum and Herb his Princeton reunion shirt and top hat. Cornelia Hanna McMurtrie always wears an antique black dress and bonnet, probably from a stash of old clothing she found years ago in Clint and Mary Jones's attic.

Political inclinations and special talents are also revealed. Megan Jones often dressed as the Statue of Liberty. She once received a phone call from a woman who apparently had deduced that impersonating the statue was Megan’s volunteer specialty. The caller said she understood that, on request, Megan would go to affairs dressed as the famous statue. Would Megan please attend the caller’s party, in costume?

When the ERA (equal rights amendment) failed to pass and Megan marched as the Statue of Liberty in mourning with a black armband, she was reprimanded by conservatives.

A group of Armstrongs, Allens, Joneses, Lords and assorted friends has always come up with a hilarious political statement. In 1984, Andy McKenzie, Doug Jones, Bill Armstrong and Gus Allen, all in wigs and stuffed bathingsuit tops, portrayed the East German Women’s Olympic Swim Team. In 1995, the group of extended families protested McDonalds coming to Woods Hole, and last year they carried a Florida ballot box indicating a place to vote for one Republican.

The Chalmers and Burt families have marched every year since at least the late ’60s. In 1969, concerned that the parade was getting too short, Steve Chalmers bought a 140’ bolt of red, white and blue material, fashioned a papier-mâché dragon’s head and cut a bundle of 10’ strapping. With fifteen friends and relations providing dragon legs, the result was a 140’ dragon which Steve says doubled the length of

Munson family’s London Taxi always carried the Queen and said “God Save the Queen” on side, 1977. Photo by Bruce Chalmers.


Fred and Peter Makrauer, 1981. Photo by Janet Chalmers.

Quissett Harbor Rail Road, 1973: Steve & Jeremy Chalmers; David, Meg & Doug Burt; Carol & Kerry Norton. Photo by Janet Chalmers.

A 140 foot dragon has been a Quissett crowd pleaser since 1969. 1998 photo by Janet Chalmers.


that year’s parade. In recent years the dragon, with a bigger and better head and many different sets of legs, has been a crowd favorite in the Quissett parade, but many observers have forgotten that the red, white and blue serpent lay dormant throughout most of the ’70s and ’80s.

While Chalmers and Burt children were small, a “walk-a-boat” served as the base of many floats carrying family children. From a biplane to a Viking ship, steam locomotive, blimp, shark, pirate ship and elephant, Steve and brother-in-law Ted Burt pushed the walk-a-boat around the harbor throughout the ’70s to the applause of spectators. In 1976 it served as the base for one of three floats that year featuring Washington crossing the Delaware. Too big for the walk-a-boat, during the 1980s the Chalmers and Burt children joined the many walking units of the parades, one year comprising a mini-dragon, and another year marching with friends as a flower garden behind a picket fence. The dragon made its comeback in the ’90s, sporting its new head and an assortment of long and short legs representing many Quissett families, not exceptional fecundity.

The next generation of Burts and Chalmers got into the act of float building in 1998 when Keith and Katy (Burt) Tynan produced a magnificent version of the USS Constitution, complete with squirting cannons, to add splendor to the parade. Two years later Steve Chalmers got back into the float-building business, creating the Quissett Belle, a grand Mississippi steamboat for his southern grandchildren to ride in.

Although the fife and drum in the Spirit of ’76 provided the beat for the paraders to march, and sometimes a bagpiper or group of musicians added music to the event, the Quissett parade had a crying need for band music. About 18 years ago Janice Bacon mined the talents of local people, high school students and all her relatives to assemble the first Quissett marching band. It was a huge success. Every year she sends sheet music to prospective band members and holds a half-hour rehearsal at the Harbor House before the parade steps off. Janice also had the inspiration to have the band play patriotic songs for all to sing at the post-parade gathering on the lawn of the Harbor House.
Back to Bar Neck Road down in Woods Hole, the residence of Prince and Ethel Crowell, and the holiday gathering place of the extended Crowell family.

During the years 1954 through 1966 all Crowells, none of whom lacked either inventiveness or humor, created what they called a "counter parade," a mostly stationary tableau based on some historic event. They staged this scene at the side of the road where the Quissett marchers had to pass and occasionally there was some interaction between the groups. Ethel Crowell (1883-1972), the matriarch in both the biological and management sense of the word, wrote the following short paragraphs about each year's production, revealing with gentle humor some individual idiosyncrasies.

1955 - First Major Performance

There may have been an informal "Disperse ye Rebels" engineered by Sears in 1954. No one seems sure. The first major performance was in 1955, planned, pushed and executed by Persis. She could arouse no enthusiasm at first, but at the last moment it blossomed.

A large sign announced it, but in the haste of the writer and lack of width of the sign, it came out on three lines:

The girls with night caps on their heads hung out of the windows, I rang a bell, and Olive had a candle and we were frantically calling "Where are the men?" Prince appeared in a red striped night shirt; Loren was invisible fixing a cuff; Carleton was strolling up the driveway dressed for lunch at the Breakwater, pretending he does not belong to this outfit. Children in various garbs were shouting "The Red Coats are coming" and looking about with guns.

1956

In 1956 we had borrowed the cannon from the Yacht club and engaged Browne Littell to shoot it, but alas! the parade came down Millfield Street to Albatross and did not pass the house. The children ran after it with sticks.
1957 - “Disperse ye Rebels”

In 1957 “Disperse ye Rebels,” many Littles were drilled by Loren on the tennis court, dressed as Red Coats charged through the Grinnells’ yard against the rest of us, as natives behind our wall.

1958 - George Washington
Crossing the Delaware

Our Polly was a handsome George. Our old reliable blue history book had a frontispiece on the crossing by E. Leutze. Prince made the boat from our large skiff and Persis worked hard on the costumes. We covered cartons with white paper for ice cakes. As often happened, the parade came early and we had a hectic last minute scrabble to get dressed, especially George.

1959 - Pirates off Penzance

Sears’ friends, the Youngs, from Bloomington had heard about our Fourth of July fun and planned their New England vacation so that they could take part in it. Loren dragged his mother-in-law away on a rope. Persis had a peg leg, and a knife in her mouth. Prince had a hook for a hand. Sears and Frank Young dragged out from the parade a pretty girl who enjoyed it, but her young child suddenly shrieked in alarm - - “Mama! Mama!”

1960 - Boston Tea Party

Once again Crowells’ skiff appeared. This time as “Ship Beaver” with masts, sides covered with black tar paper with holes for cannons showing and an English flag floating. Polly had made signs calling for a meeting in Fanueil Hall. Peat moss in old tea boxes from the Beverlys’ was thrown at the parade. Anne, and Persis and many Littles were Indians and disguised and in the boat. Prince was in a stew thinking there would not be room in the boat for the rest of us, little knowing about the plot afloat. The outlaws, instigated by Polly and Persis had plotted a secret counter scene as a surprise by Loren, Villa, Carleton and me. All the real Crowells were furiously, frantically fussing and pushing to get their spouses into their costumes and onto the boat. But the outlaws had a real tea party table set up near the Marvins with a sign “Beacon Street - not rebels but in-laws” and the four were dressed as proper

Bostonians and drinking tea with a silver service and all. One bystander even stopped and asked for a cup of tea.

1961 - "Valley Forge"

Prince Sears III was sleeping in a sentry box made from a step ladder, canvass and brown paper. Prince was warming his hands at a fire. I was lying on a blanket with a bloody leg (tomato juice) and Villa was bandaging it. Sears was an impressive Baron Von Steuben with mustache, an old lynx scarf, made into a hat, Loren's big navy coat, and was drilling Persis, Carleton and Loren. Polly was George again, pacing around. Sails were put over the wall to simulate snow. The wind caused a good deal of "drifting" that needed constant control. Olive, dubbed "camp follower" by Persis, was bringing food in a basket and water. Carl arrived carrying a French flag and a scroll telling George that the French had joined our cause. In the usual last rush I made a sign and Polly put it up on our house; it said "Continental Army Headgarters." Fortunately Villa discovered the error at the last minute and changed it to "quarters."

1962 - "Yorktown"

The parade came early and as usual a great rushing around. Carl was George and Prince Sears III as Cornwallis were dashing in costumes made by Persis. Some were aides and others were French soldiers with berets with red pom poms. Prince had masts behind the wall for the French ship "Villa de Paris." There were more than ever in the Quissett parade this year. Olive says we were historically incorrect as Cornwallis sent an underling to surrender.

1963 - Bells

In the newspaper that year the government had asked everyone to celebrate the Fourth of July by the ringing of bells. Each of us planned his own bell. Sears was the “Beautiful belle of Woods Hole” in a long fuchsia evening dress and much makeup. Prince made a form for Persis to lie under and ring a bell buoy. Prince Sears III was a bell-boy, many bags hanging from his mouth, shoulders and hands, also typewriter, guitar, etc. Mae sat at a table ringing a table bell for me, the maid. Polly was Alexander Graham Bell. Olive was in a cracked liberty bell she had made from brown paper. Prince had the ship’s bell from the “Alice Wentworth.” Carleton was “belly-high” and “low bell prize winner.” Loren was the “town crier.” Villa in a fine cow mask peeping over the wall, using a cow bell.

1964 - Concord Bridge

Dad made the bridge across the road and a chalk river under the bridge. Prince Sears III, Carl and Sears, carrying an English flag borrowed from Douglas, were red coats and came from the west. The rest were continentals and met them. We kept repeating this several times, the dead coming to life.

1965

We had not planned to celebrate as Loren had been sick. At the last minute we had a “sabbatical safari” looking for rare birds. All were dressed in old clothes with birdie hats, staring at the parade through binoculars. Prince Sears III had dressed carefully as a professor and one of the passersby was dressed in a similar costume.

1966 - “Viking Ship”

It was Olive’s idea. Prince and I were supposed to be in Scandinavia. The sign read “Lief here first.” We had a miniature ship of Richard’s for a model. Prince made a grand ship out of Dan Clark’s large dory. Sears brought garbage can covers from the MBL and decorated them for shields. Persis Ann made a wonderful dragon head with teeth and red tongue. Most of us, plus Joan Gessaman, were in the boat rowing and had all kinds of helmets with horns and spears, swords and knives. Dan Clark loaned us a real helmet. Fred was in the stern, bare and berserk. Carl was handsome as Lief and Sears an impressive helmsman. Prince Sears III, a wonderful Indian, was supposed to greet the discoverers, but instead turned commercial and hawked souvenirs, perhaps from Gay Head.

Following the encounter with the Crowells, the Quissett troops would march to Water Street and on to Dave Estes’ Landfall. Dave recalls that his role in the celebration began in the early 1950s and continued for a “good 30 years.” Dave would put Cokes in the walk-in cooler for the kids and have beer for the hot marchers. When the parade marched into the Landfall in costume, the regular customers hav-
ing lunch "wondered what in the dickens was going on." Dave donated the Coke and beer in large part, and says the Budweiser distributor may have helped. "It was great fun while we could manage it," he says.

The participation of the MBL began some time after the Crowell pageant died out, probably in the early 1970s, when Phyllis Goldstein was president of the MBL Club. Phyllis says she's now in charge only "tokenly," to the extent that on the Fourth of July everyone calls her. She insists that all she has to do is remind the MBL stewards to get the watermelon. Neighbors who hear her piccolo in the early morning going over "Yankee Doodle" and "Stars and Stripes Forever" realize that she does more. She, along with former MBL Director Harlyn Halvorson toting the flag, and Rocky Korr as drummer, now lead the parade in Woods Hole village as "The Spirit of '76." Townspeople fall in with the procession as they please. Phyllis' granddaughter Sophie likes to walk beside her in the parade, and her son Brian usually falls into place somewhere, along with his friends.
1976 Woods Hole parade steps out with Albert Szent-Györgyi as Uncle Sam and Phyllis Goldstein as fifer. Courtesy Phyllis Goldstein.


Protesting the proposed McDonalds franchise dominated the 1995 parade. Courtesy Phyllis Goldstein.

In 1976, the year of the bicentennial, Albert Szent-Györgyi was asked to be in the parade as Uncle Sam. Puzzled, the Hungarian-born 1937 Nobel laureate said: “Why would you pick me?” But he agreed, and his wife, according to Phyllis, made him “the most beautiful Uncle Sam outfit.”

1976 was also the year when another “ambush” was cooked up to counter the parade. Ellen Weiss recalls as follows.

I hope you remember the year, I think 1976, when, as the parade reached Lillie, a band of ‘British’ soldiers appeared to challenge the 4th of July revelers. It was the Montroll family (of Brooks Rd.) a family of ten children (not all there, and mostly grown up by then), a family with a great sense of fun and spirit. They had stayed up all night sewing the red coats, and they were a great success.

Young MBL scientists in the Grass Fellowship Program began taking part in the parade around 1983. Developed by members of the Grass family and others, the Grass Foundation “seeks to encourage independent research by young persons trained for careers in neurobiological investigation,” writes Steve Zottoli, director of the summer course. When a former Fellow sent a lot of grass skirts from Hawaii to Woods Hole, these became the basis of the theme-of-the-year, such as “Mardi Grass” and “2001 Grass Oddities.” The result is a unique part of the Woods Hole parade, with the bright green color and the surprising sight of (mostly) male legs under the waving grass.

For the embryology course, Scott Fraser reports that his group has appeared for the past four years as the “morphogenesis* drill team.” The drills of different embryonic cell motions teach the students the basics of embryo morphogenesis - and the students have great fun, Fraser says. Richard Harland, co-director of the course, discloses their reasons for participat-
2001 photo by Elizabeth Armstrong for the MBL.

At corner of School and Water streets, 1976. Courtesy Phyllis Goldstein.
"other than teaching the students through reenactment: 1) feeling foolish that other courses could make fools of themselves while we stood on the sidelines; and 2) confidence that we could perform acts more bizarre and obscure."

"It's not at all clear," Harland says, "that many of the people on the sidewalk can follow which species or event we are enacting, but we know... There was one famous occasion, while we were performing sea urchin gastrulation** on the bridge, that someone in the crowd remarked to his neighbor 'it's a sea urchin!'"

Gastrulation on the Eel Pond bridge? If only the bridge could talk, we might learn what other interesting things have happened on the streets of Woods Hole.

Footnotes

* "the structural changes occurring during the development of an organism, organ, or part," Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Second College Edition, 1979, s.v. "morphogenesis"

** "an embryo in an early stage of development, consisting of a sac with two layers, the ectoderm and endoderm, enclosing a central cavity, the archenteron, that opens to the outside through the blastopore" Ibid. s.v. "gastrula"

Biography

Jean Bigelow has been a summer resident of Woods Hole since 1948 and a year round Woods Holer since 1994. She has served as editor of the Mainsheet since 1995, was a co-founder in 1979 of the Southborough Villager in Southborough, Mass. and served as editor there until 1989.

2000 photo by Elizabeth Armstrong for the MBL.
Moll Willett protected by umbrella in 1977, on only rainy 4th recorded. Photo by Bruce Chalmers.


Fire truck was regular Quissett parade participant for many years, 1977. Photo by Bruce Chalmers.

Festive parade watchers gather in front of Jenkins House and Hammond House in 1977, the year the Quissett Harbor House connector was removed. Hammond House was later dismantled and moved to the state of Washington where it was rebuilt on a site overlooking Puget Sound. Photo by Bruce Chalmers.