

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

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* ITALIAN FARMERS *

THEY DEMONSTRATE THAT THE SOIL CAN
BE TILLED WITH PROFIT.

-- Farms Are Being Acquired by
Them in the Rural Sections of
Johnston. -- A Picturesque Colony.
(FROM PROV. JOURNAL, 10-18-91)

Out in the rocky, rural sections of Johnston there is a colony of natives of sunny Italy who are demonstrating that farming can be made profitable. Scattered through the districts known as old Simmons ville, Hughesdale and Pocasset, they are accumulating earnings that surprise the native population, and they are buying or leasing every cheap bit of land where they can obtain possession. No old, worn out, or stone-covered area seems too poor to yield them adequate returns for labor expended with judgement and persistency. The natives reluctantly admit that the new-comers are surpassing them in making money out of farming. But, they say, "The Italians will live where we would starve; they can live on 10 cents a day. When a Yankee takes a wife he has to support her, and spends a good deal of his money on fine dresses and fancy furnishings for the house. The whole family has to have good clothes, and other things not absolutely necessary consume about all his earnings. But when one of these Italians takes a wife she turns to and works at money getting with no thought of finery either in dress or house fixin's."

There is something suspiciously like envy of hard-earned success and scorn for rigorous economy in the reflections of those who are looking forward to the possibility of being superseded by the Italians, but their declarations are based on apparent facts. The

men and women, and also the children, continue their efforts to build up the financial prosperity of the household. They concentrate their united mental and physical energies in the single purpose of making money, and they certainly are denying themselves of much that the American farmer considers essential to comfortable existence. They have come to this country with the same eagerness to obtain wealth, that has brought people of all nationalities to our shores. They know that they cannot, as unskilled laborers, amass sufficient capital on which to build up substantial possessions without roughing it, for a time at least.

They first appeared in town about 15 years ago, when a number were employed by Alfred A. Williams, at Pocasset, and at about the same time some of his neighbors gave them a trial. These were a few who ventured into Johnston from the colony of Italians on Federal Hill, where they were not so numerous then as now. Being fresh arrivals in this country, and unacquainted with the English language, they were not able to readily secure employment in the city. As tillers of the soil, they had had no training, but soon demonstrated that they possessed natural aptitudes for the work. The most important factor in their favor was willingness to labor faithfully for small wages, and another trait that soon won them preference, was freedom from the evil of drunkenness. The farmers had been greatly annoyed by the inclination of other farm hands to get drunk whenever they received wages, and when their help was most needed in the busy seasons they were not to be relied. The Italians never lose any working

time by indulgence in the cup that inebriates as it cheers. When they first appeared in Johnston they hired out for a dollar a day in summer, and were willing to work for half that sum in winter, and support themselves out of their small wages. They lived in shanties built on the farms where they worked and, having no women with them, they lived in a very primitive fashion. Bread was the only staple article of food which they bought, and a German baker from the city visited them once or twice a week and stacked up stale loaves in their shanties as wood is corded. While at work in the fields they devoured corn, onions, carrots, and other vegetables while picking them during the seasons when such things were growing. At other times they had them stored for winter use in a dry state, having a peculiar method of preserving many vegetables for winter use.

In the course of a couple of years some of them sent for relatives; and parents, brothers, sisters and wives joined them. All worked on the farms, the women getting 70 cents a day and earning all that they were paid. They were fully as able to do farm work as were the men, and in picking and handling small vegetables were more nimble-fingered and therefore quicker. One of the first among the immigrants was Dominique Parrelli, a thrifty frugal fellow, who in a few years after his arrival had earned and saved enough to make a couple of trips to the land of his birth. He satisfied his relatives that this was the best country under the sun for industrious folks, and he had no difficulty in persuading them to return with him to Johnston.



The proceeds realized from a sale of small real estate holdings of the family in the old world, coupled with their earnings after arriving here, enabled them to buy a tract of 20 acres in a barren section, known as "Mount Misery."

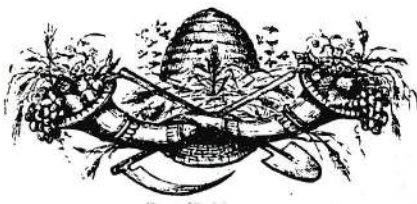
MOUNT MISERY - In Rhode Island, a Guide to the Smallest State (Boston: Federal Writers' Project of the WPA, 1937, pages 452-453) is the following entry about traveling west on Hartford Avenue from Providence:

At 8.8 m. is the junction with Atwood Ave.

At 8.9 m. can be seen Mount Misery (L), on which, according to tradition, there lived years ago a few families who were very poor and were always living in misery. [This hill is between I-295 and Atwood Avenue, cutting across the face of which can be seen Rt.195 when looking south from Memorial Park pond. -Ed.]

They paid \$1500 for the land and a few old buildings. This was 10 or more years ago and today Tom's old employer says: "If Yankees would figure as close as those Italians do they could get rich at farmin." Parrelli's compatriots pursued the same course in other parts of the town, and within a few years have become the possessors of at least 30 Johnston farms, varying in size from 12 to 200 acres. Out in the back part of town, where they are numerous, a visitor might readily suppose that he had suddenly launched from amid familiar scenes into a foreign country. When one has passed through the residence section of the town, with its electric lights and paved streets, the Italian tiller of the soil is encountered. His home as a rule is a dilapidated old house surrounded with a vegetable garden, and the environs have a neglected appearance so far as any apparent attempt at tidiness is concerned.

(cont.)



SOCIETY DOINGS

The men and women from the first peep of day until darkness falls are engaged wholly in forcing of the land they control. Not a foot of ground is wasted. Wherever there is room for a row of vegetables to be planted they are put in, and the space between rows is filled with garden stuff that will grow there without detriment to the main crop. They use the soil as a molder turns his sand into a new mold before it cools after service in an old one. As fast as they take out one crop they put in another. They devote their attention almost wholly to raising tomatoes, beans, peas, lettuce,



and similar produce that is readily marketed and quickly converted into money. Fertilizers are used generously by them and with excellent judgement. They make everything count, and when the farm does not require the constant attention of all hands, the women and children gather dandelions, barberries, wild grapes and cherries, chestnuts and other growing things to be gathered in the surrounding country. Their success is in no small measure due to this faculty for making the most of these little things, which their neighbors are prone to neglect.

Taken from the Providence Sunday Journal of October 18, 1891. The second half will be reprinted in the next issue.



Our society held an open house on Sunday, November 5. A small, but excited, group of members socialized, with the smell of hot cider in the air. We looked over what restorative work has been accomplished and discussed future plans for the continuing restoration of the house. All present seemed very pleased with the quality of the work. Warren has told us that he will be returning after the holidays to finish the two front rooms. On his agenda will be the painting of all surfaces, the installing of Norfolk latches on the interior doors, and building & installing a reproduction, 19th. century fireplace surround in the parlor. It is thrilling to think of what the house will look like when he has finished that portion of the job.

We will again be searching for a tenant as our last one has moved out due to unforeseen circumstances.

Plans are set for a members' Christmas Party on December 3rd. at 2:00 p.m. The rooms will not be finished, but we will decorate and, besides, it is the good companionship that makes a party. Hope to see you there.

CLEMENCE/IRONS OPEN HOUSE

On Sunday, October 29, Louis McGowan and Robert Burford spent a very busy afternoon at the Clemence/Irons House. The building was open along with 49 other historic structures around the State as part of a drive to alert the voting public of the importance of the Historic Preservation Referendum on the November 7 ballot. The effort was successful as the referendum passed easily. Thanks to a front page photograph in the "Lifebeat" section of the Providence Journal, we had an overwhelming response at the house. There were about 20 people waiting for a tour an hour before the event started and for the next four hours the house was filled with people. Most signed the guest register but a percentage did not, and we guess that about 200 or so people showed up. Interest in the house was great and many were thankful that they were able to see the house "at last." Oh, the power of a photograph in a major newspaper!

AROUND TOWN



Hiram Kimball Jr.

The small obituary notice that was in the paper announcing the death of Hiram Kimball Jr. certainly brought me back to my very young childhood. It was, in my judgement, not enough for a man of his caliber. I was only a small child not more than nine or ten when I first remember him. At the time we were living on Irons Avenue off George Waterman Road.

I guess you could say he was the first patrolman for the town of Johnston and to this day I can picture the man driving the black police car in the Manton section of the town. In the early days of law and order, the town, as I remember, had a police chief and one patrolman. It was in both cases a Kimball. Hiram Junior's dad was the chief and young Hiram Jr. would drive the car for the treks around the town on police business. If my memory hasn't deserted me, I believe the car that brought the only two officers on the Johnston police department to the scene of the crime or accident at that time was a Reo.

Very vivid in my mind was Hir-

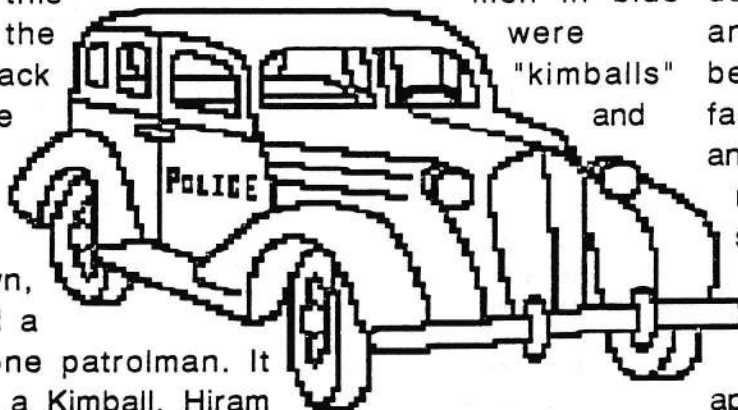
his Dad surveyed the happening, asking questions and exercising the proper police procedure. He was a large man as I remember with a rudy round face and a soft voice. Most of the parents used the name "Kimball" to keep the youngster in line in those days and no matter what part of the state we were in, all

men in blue

were

"kimballs"

and



not the law. The police station was in the heart of Thornton on Plainfield Street almost across the street from Fletcher Ave. A TV store occupies the site today. Also a street in the Simmonsville area of

the town is named after the family.

One episode stands out in my mind from my childhood days. It was the police car raising a dust storm as it came down Irons Ave at a high rate of speed. Evidently there was a crap game in the gravel bank area at the end of the street and the Kimballs were about to raid it. I do not believe anyone was arrested at the scene but about a dozen men sure scattered helter-skelter as the car came into view with us children following it. A crippled man we knew was indulging in the doings and to this day I still believe he ran the fastest and farthest of any in the crowd. I also remember father and son returning up the street smiling and laughing as they drove back to their appointed rounds.

Perhaps they were thinking of how this unfortunate man with bent stems led the gamblers away successfully from their grasp.

Louis Illucci I

THE JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Society is a non-profit organization devoted to preserving the history of the town of Johnston, Rhode Island. Members of the Society are interested in studying and maintaining town history however it may survive, ...the written word, photographic and other pictorial renderings, aural recordings, artifacts, historical sites, architecturally important buildings. Membership is open to all adults at \$5.00 per year, \$7.00 for a family group. Payment of annual dues is expected on January 1st. The "Historical Newsletter" is printed every other month and is mailed to all active members. General Meetings and Open Houses are as announced, at the Society's home, the Farnum/Angell House, 101 Putnam Pike, Graniteville R.I. 02919



Heaven
give
you
many, many
merry days!

*William Shakespeare
The Merry Wives of Windsor*

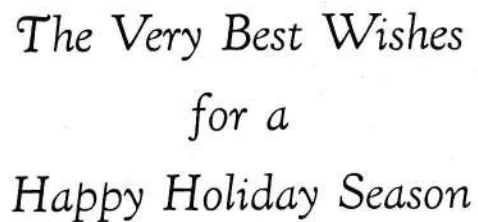
Contributors sustaining
this newsletter:

Wouldn't you like to see
your name here? \$25 is
all it takes for one year.
Help us out.



EDITORIAL POLICY

This publication is to provide:
1) timely information to the members of the Johnston Historical Society, while 2) fostering the study of local history by sharing data and reasonably researched articles about town history. Five issues will be published per year. Back issues are \$1.00 per copy. The editor eagerly solicits manuscripts and notes of any length, style, and grammatical quality (generally not to exceed 2000 words). Topics can range from history and preservation of old houses (general or specific buildings) through biographical sketches and genealogy of local families, to facts and recollections of Johnston organizations and clubs, events, geography, archaeology, industries, folklore, crafts and local heritage from past decades. Documents and diaries of historical significance will be considered for reprinting.



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