

SULLIVAN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY HISTORY PRESERVER AWARD 2014



Patricia and William Burns

The stated mission of the Sullivan County Historical Society has been no better exemplified than through the endeavors of “Pat” and “Bill” Burns. Through their historical knowledge and organizational skills, the Society has developed an excellence in the preservation of Sullivan County history, from the management of archival material to the day-to-day tasks of operating the County Museum. Because of their stewardship, the Society continues to remain viable, even in these days of economical and technological challenges.

For almost the last quarter of a century, Pat and Bill Burns have been the lifeblood of the Sullivan County Historical Society. Their reverence for history, both within or beyond the borders of Sullivan County, quickly becomes obvious when you engage either in conversation. Their vast historical knowledge is diverse, their recollections engaging and their passion easily conveyed. Their tireless volunteer commitment to the Society’s mission can be easily found by the improvements made over the years within the Society’s operations. Acquired skills and knowledge that has shaped their early lives, along with a deep sense of volunteerism, has benefited not only the Society, but our entire community.

Though Bill’s ancestors were amongst the earliest settlers who migrated to Sullivan County, both Pat and Bill’s beginnings were in New York City. Growing up in the Howard Beach section of Brooklyn, Pat spent a great deal of time wandering through rooms and halls of the Brooklyn Museum, visits that would be the spark for a life-long interest in fashion. Visiting other historic houses, she learned about early fashion and furniture through knowledge of docents, museum guides who are trained to educate visitors to the collections and significance of that institution.

Though Bill was raised in the Bayside section of Queens, he spent many summer vacations with his relatives in Sullivan County, developing an appreciation for the rural way of life and his ancestral heritage at Fraser Settlement in the Town of Bethel. Upon turning eighteen and with the United States in the midst of World War II, Bill enlisted into the Army Air Force. With recent development by the armed forces of using radio detection in tracking enemy ships and aircraft, Bill was sent to the University of Wisconsin to receive training in the new technology. At the end of hostilities, Bill continued on with his education by enrolling at Paul Smith’s College and later at Hofstra College, majoring in business administration and management. Afterwards, he found employment with Cities Service Company, the oil and gas concern that today operates under the name of Citco, as purchasing agent.

In 1953, Pat and Bill were married and because of Bill's work, they moved to northern New Jersey. In addition to raising a family of two sons and a daughter, Pat pursued her interest in fashion by working and volunteering at many of the historic houses and landmarks of northern New Jersey. Pat's first employment was that of docent at the Von Steuben House, a Revolutionary period landmark and cornerstone of the historic district of Hackensack, New Jersey. After the Burns family moved to Wyckoff, Pat did volunteer service for the Hermitage House and Museum where she worked on textiles and vintage clothing under the tutelage of June Bove, who was associated with the Metropolitan Museum Costume Collections. Later, as a docent working at the Zabriskie House in Wyckoff, Pat developed an understanding of "collection furniture."

Though the Burns were immersed with family activities and work obligations in New Jersey, they continued to find time to regularly visit Bill's ancestral home at Fraser Settlement. In 1959, they acquired the old house on the Van Vactor homestead, the Van Vactor family being amongst the earliest of settlers at Fraser Settlement. Built well before 1850 by Isaac Van Vactor and now being in need of extensive work, Pat and Bill repaired and updated the house over the twenty years. Upon retirement, they decided Sullivan County is "where they belonged" and made the move into their refurbished Fraser Settlement home in 1991.

Both Pat and Bill immediately took an active part in the affairs within the community of their new home. Bill answered a newspaper ad requesting an individual to teach basketball to Town of Bethel youth. As a result, he revived the town's youth and adult basketball program and wound up serving on the Bethel Youth Board for the next twenty years. Other organizations in which Bill has been involved are the Bethel Lions Club, Bethel Literacy Center, Sullivan County Beekeepers Association and the Ruddick Trowbridge VFW Post No. 73. The latter he serves as post historian. Both Bill and Pat became members of Bethel First, doing beautification work in the White Lake area in conjunction with Sullivan County Renaissance program. Both Bill and Pat have also volunteered at Fort Delaware Museum, the Mongaup Valley Fire Department and Ladies Auxiliary and on weekends during the summer selling produce at the Kauneonga Lake Farmer's Market. They joined the Sullivan County Historical Society within a year of their move from New Jersey.

To better understand Bill Burns' contribution to the Society, one only has to look at his office desk. The top is clear of unnecessary clutter. What few articles that are there are neatly arranged and well organized. The desk drawers also lack clutter, bearing only what essentials are needed for the tasks to be performed at the desk. This commitment to order and neatness has become evident throughout the Sullivan County Museum during Bill's involvement with SCHS, serving the Society through many roles. While he served as the Museum's curator and archivist, Bill transformed the museum's archival room, organizing the hodge-podge of archival material that had accumulated over the years, into a workable, searchable library. Archival items can now be easily located and shared with those who visit the Museum to do research. He has begun the seemingly endless process of identifying and cataloguing the Society's large collection of archival photographs, videos and tapes. During his tenure as SCHS president, Bill organized the Society's business, financial and operational files into a coherent and orderly system. Bill's eye for managerial detail has benefited the volunteer staff and museum guests alike with access to records and documents becoming more readily accessible.

To better understand Pat Burns' contribution to the Society, one only has to look at the desk-top calendar pad she maintains in her office desk. Month after month, scribbled notations are filled-in on dates throughout the calendar month, indicating the proposed dates for upcoming meetings, building functions and programs, many of which that had been planned by her. Fundraising projects have always been the foundation for the Society's survival, and over the years Pat's imaginative skills for both the planning and promoting programs has helped keep the Society on a sure financial footing. To help offset the Society's operational costs, Pat has been successful in applying for and receiving numerous financial grants. She also has shared her knowledge and talent by assisting in the creation of the many displays the Museum has performed over the years. One of Pat's proudest accomplishments is the discovery of "Lizzie."

Stuffed away in a box in the textile collection room, "Lizzie" proved to be a dress woven in the late 1700's. Because of Pat's earlier connections with fashion experts, their research had been able to date the garment and proved her value to the Society.

Both Pat and Bill have never shirked from taking on new roles and responsibilities. Here at the Museum, the Society shares space with the Frederick Cook Society, Pat having long-time responsibility in managing that society's local operational business. Though world-wide interest of the famed Arctic explorer remains at a steady level, interest in the Frederick Cook Society has decreased. With the passage of time, board of director members have passed away and there appears little interest in replacing them. With much of Dr. Frederick Cook's archival material already located at the Museum, Pat and Bill have taken on the responsibilities of that organization, Bill serving as president of the society while Pat serves as curator and administrator of the Cook material.

The Sullivan County Historical Society has been indeed fortunate that Pat and Bill Burns have come and shared their knowledge and talents to help the Society in accomplishing its mission. Over the years, there have been only a handful of Sullivan County historians who, during their era, have left a long-lasting legacy of preserving Sullivan County history, sharing their timeless and tireless work for all future generations to learn from, study and enjoy. The contributions of Pat and Bill Burns to the Society, and Sullivan County, will certainly qualify them to join that elite group.