

The BallardVale Gazette

Newsletter of the BallardVale Historic District Commission

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RUTH DAVIS SHARPE 1911-2003

Ruth Sharpe lived in the heart of BallardVale all of her 91 years, but to those who knew her, Ruth Sharpe was the heart of BallardVale. She remembered when Dascomb Road and Tewksbury Street were pasture; when apple orchards covered much of the land past today's Hall Avenue; when the Fourth of July was celebrated with bonfires and the "horribles parade"; when one could ice skate on the Shawsheen River all the way to Tewksbury; and when everyone knew each other in BallardVale. And though Ruth seemed to remember everything about BallardVale and everyone who ever lived here --- "a walking encyclopedia" one friend smilingly recalled --- she by no means lived in the past. "She was the ultimate life-long learner", says friend and colleague Julie Mofford. "She always had something she was interested in."

Ruth Davis was born in 1911 on River Street, and raised by parents who worked in the BallardVale mills. She and her younger brother attended the local schools, and Ruth also studied elocution and took dance lessons in Lawrence. She graduated from Punchard High School in 1929, and three years later married Ralph Sharpe. While raising three sons --- Ralph, Clifford and Roy --- Ruth taught Sunday School and directed community plays.

Ruth is remembered as the last librarian of the BallardVale Library, a position she held for 22 years. Housed in the BallardVale Community Building, since torn down, the library served local residents. Former library page Elisa Derby remembers that Ruth never said "I don't know" to any question about BallardVale. She was friendly to everyone, but did not hesitate to "put an unruly teenage (or occasionally adult) patron in his place". It was very infrequently that "Mrs. Sharpe would say 'Now listen here...' but it was always thrilling" when she did. Richard Bowen remembers sending



his children to her story hour at the library. "She taught them how to make stone soup", he said, referring to their favorite folk tale, Stone Soup, heard from Ruth at the library.

"She had an incredible memory and was one of the funniest people I ever knew. She told simple but wonderful stories," said Bowen. "She was a name-dropper, but of regular ordinary folks."

In addition to working at the BallardVale Library, Ruth was very active working for the church during her life. She was a member of the Women's Guild

of the BallardVale United Church, served the church in many capacities, and held every office over time. She thought of the parish as "her church family".

For almost thirty years, until just days before her death, Ruth worked as a volunteer at the Andover Historical Society. "She was here every Wednesday and Friday, sometimes other days too, walking in the door, just like clockwork...it just doesn't seem right that she's not walking in the door right now," remarked a colleague from Andover Historical Society.

Long-time friend Bernice Haggerty notes that there were many things that were very important to Ruth. "She was very proud of her family and her work at the library. She was proud to have been appointed by the Town Manager to be a member of the BallardVale Historic District Study Group" which met every week for 3-1/2 years to plan the historic district. "We were both active for many years in the Library Committee and then the Coffee Committee at the Historical Society, which presented 6 programs every year on local history."

"Another thing she loved doing was playing Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus with her husband Ralph. They

dressed up for the church fair every Christmas", recalls Bernice "and she hammed it up beautifully. I think she had at least two Santa outfits somewhere in the house." After her husband's death, in order to remain independent and to maintain her busy schedule, Ruth got her driver's license --- she was 69 years old. And though she didn't drive for the past few years, it was not because of poor health or lack of energy. "Her car broke down, and she never bothered to get it fixed." Friends and family were happy to escort her to the Historical Society, church or any of her numerous activities.

Her house was full of things of beauty and interest. Ruth and Ralph Sharpe both had auctioneers licenses, and collected what interested them, including a collection of canes, fans and bottles from Lithia Springs in BallardVale. When asked if she would leave any of her treasures to the Historical Society, Ruth waved off the question with a smile saying, "I'm not planning on going."

Sadly, Ruth Sharpe passed away on January 5, 2003. Another of Ruth's admirers noted, "She was lucky. She lived in her own home until the end and that meant a lot to her." And home to Ruth Sharpe was the heart of BallardVale.



Ruth with friends,
from left to right:
Gladys Smeltzer,
Ruth Sharpe,
Ginny Marruzzi,
Edna McIntyre and
Bernice Haggerty

WE'VE BEEN ASKED...

Is it true that the bridge in the center of BallardVale is going to be rebuilt?

The Andover Street Bridge Safety Improvement Project is scheduled to begin sometime in 2003. According to Jack Petkus, Director of the Department of Public Works, the concrete bridge that crosses the Shawsheen River, built in 1959, is slated for repair. The town of Andover approved funding for repairs in a warrant article at last year's town meeting. Repairs to the substructure and superstructure include painting the steel that holds up the deck; rebuilding the rails; replacing the abutments and guardrail; and making safety improvements to the approaches. In addition, sink holes in the bridge's walkway and gaps and height changes between the sidewalk and bridge will be filled and leveled to make walking and bicycle riding safer.

The town hopes to award a contract in April, allowing construction to start in May or June of this year. Andover Street will not be completely closed to traffic, but bridge traffic will be reduced to one lane as crews work on one side of the structure at a time. Petkus expects the bridge to be under construction for more than four months, or well into the fall season.

SPRING CLEAN UP

Join neighbors and friends to celebrate this year's much-anticipated spring with "Spring Clean Up" in BallardVale. We'll be sprucing up the Vale from 8:00 am until 1:00 pm on Saturday, May 17 by picking up trash and litter, weeding and raking the playground, the Green and other historic district public areas, planting flowers and bulbs, and painting fire hydrants and signs. Bring your tools (some supplies will be provided by the town) and your energy for a morning of work and fun. Last year's spring cleanup was a washout because of rain... Keep your fingers crossed that this year will be sunny and pleasant, but mark your calendars with the rain date, just in case. Meet at the BallardVale Green on Saturday, May 17 (rain date is May 24) at 8:00am for coffee, doughnuts and work assignments!

THE STORY OF STONE SOUP

In Memory of Ruth Sharpe

Once upon a time there was a terrible famine in the land. People were hoarding their food and hiding it from their friends and neighbors. One day, a wagon carrying three old women came rolling into a village, and the women began asking questions as if they meant to stay the night.

"We have most everything we need", said one of the old women. "In fact, we were thinking of making stone soup and sharing it with all of you." They pulled a big cauldron from the back of their wagon and built a fire under it, right in the center of the town. Then, with great ceremony, they drew an ordinary-looking stone from an ordinary-looking bag and dropped it into the water.

Soon the rumor of food had spread throughout the village. Many began to gather in the center of the village to watch. As the old women began to sniff at the broth and lick their lips in anticipation, hunger and belief began to win over the skeptical crowd. "Ahhh", one of the women said rather loudly, "I do love this stone soup. Of course, stone soup with a little cabbage is hard to beat."

Soon a villager approached hesitantly, holding a cabbage he'd retrieved from its hiding place. He gave it to the women to add to the pot. "Wonderful!" cried one of the women. "I once had some stone soup with cabbage which had some onions in it that made it fit for a king!" Soon a second villager appeared with some onions and garlic for the soup, and on it went, through "If only we had a few potatoes..." and "How delicious it would be with some carrots..." and so on. At last, there was a delicious meal, enough to feed everyone. The villagers offered the old women a great deal of money for the magic stone, but they refused to sell it, and traveled on the next day. They made stone soup in the next village and the next. Soon the famine ended, but the people of the village always reminisced about the finest soup they had ever eaten.

AHS MEMORIAL LECTURE

Jim Batchelder, from the Andover Preservation Commission, will present "Les Moveables", a slide presentation documenting the relocation of Andover houses throughout the history of the town. The talk will be held on April 15 at 7:30pm. Please call Andover Historical Society 978-475-2236 for location and details.

CALENDAR

- Mar. 5 (Wednesday)** BallardVale Historic District Commission monthly meeting
Town Offices – 2nd Floor Conference Room – 7:00PM
- Mar. 25 (Tuesday)** Town Election
- Apr. 2 (Wednesday)** BallardVale Historic District Commission monthly meeting
Town Offices – 2nd Floor Conference Room – 7:00PM
- Apr. 15 (Tuesday)** "Les Moveables" slide presentation – Location TBA – 7:30PM
- Apr. 28 and 29** Annual Town Meeting at Andover High School
- May 5 and 6** Annual Town Meeting at Andover High School
- May 7 (Wednesday)** BallardVale Historic District Commission monthly meeting
Town Offices – 2nd Floor Conference Room – 7:00PM
- May 17 (Saturday)** Spring Clean Up in BallardVale (Rain date: May 24)
- May 22 (Thursday)** Preservation Awards - Memorial Hall Library – 7:00PM
- Jun. 4 (Wednesday)** BallardVale Historic District Commission monthly meeting
Town Offices – 2nd Floor Conference Room – 7:00PM

BallardVale Historic District Commission

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Andover, MA 01810*

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*See you at the Spring Clean Up on May 17!
Rain date is May 24...*