

# Avon Preservation & Historical Society

## Newsletter

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[www.avonhistorical.org](http://www.avonhistorical.org)

WINTER 2008

*Happy Bicentennial Year  
for Avon!*

*Sleigh scene on West  
Main Street Hill? Back  
of the Livingston Hotel?  
Man in sleigh?*

*Help identify for a prize!*



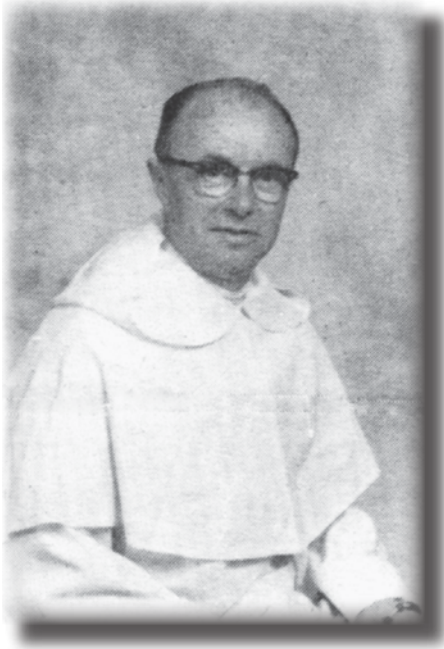
***"Carry into the new year only the choicest thoughts and inspirations.  
Welcome and all hail to the future!"***

~ Newell Dwight Hillis

**2008 Annual Meeting** - Will be held at the Village Hall on **Sunday, January 27th**. Social Reception at 1:30pm, French's Speech at 2:00pm and Business Meeting at 3:30pm. Agenda includes a review of the new bylaws, the renting of temporary headquarters for the Museum and to meet the new nominees for the AP&HS Board. As a special treat we will hear Robert French's personal experiences from Tanzania, Africa. Our own "Mr. Website" has been just about everywhere and knows how to get the most out of an exotic location. All are welcome!

**Bicentennial Committee Meeting - Tuesday, January 22nd, 7:15pm, Community Room of the Avon Memorial Library - The first meeting is for ideas and thoughts on how to involve the town for this special anniversary. Call 226-9424 for more information.**

# A World Famous Composer, a Photographer and an Avon Priest



*Father Henry A. Atwell*

an incurable heart disease and accepted it by saying "my bags are packed."

Father Atwell died quietly on March 24, 1980. Among his many credits, besides being a good priest, was a successful editorship of the Catholic Courier Journal (western New York state's major Catholic newspaper), being the first president of GEM (Genesee Ecumenical Ministry) and aiding in the establishment of the Senior Citizen Nutrition Program in Livingston County. Father Atwell also established the Parish Council for St. Agnes in 1972.

He was not one to refrain from expressing his views. For years he was a leader of a group of priests who discussed contemporary theology. One of his controversial topics related to the "mystery of the 43 missing Catholic men in Avon" (men who were often seen in the local pubs on Saturday night, but were always missing from Mass on Sunday). It seems to have been a smart compromise to hold Mass on Saturday afternoon. Times have changed since the first Catholics in Avon had to walk to Scottsville to attend Mass.

A simple service for Father Atwell was held at Avon's peaceful Catholic cemetery and was ended with a touch of whimsy when his friend, Louis Ouzer, blew soap bubbles over his friend's grave. Father Atwell is buried in St. Agnes Cemetery next to his mother, who also died in 1980. In his honor, Avon's Interfaith Council, Inc. began a Memorial of Human Unity - an annual symposium on human unity to be held in the Rochester area under the leadership of Doris Ryan Gillard.

Father Atwell, within his chosen profession, wished to make the public aware of certain situations that affected the humanity in this area. His annual friendship with a well-known

Jewish photographer, Louis Ouzer, and the famous composer, Alec Wilder, an agnostic, was formed out of their mutual concern for this area's morality.

Encouraged by the same tolerant environment that had nurtured the suffragette and Underground Railroad movements that made this area famous, they were each stuck by the similar injustices. Both knew Louis Ouzer, the local award-winning photographer, who knew a Who's Who of New York State personally. Ouzer pushed for Wilder to meet Atwell to complete the threesome of these common minded men.

Alec Wilder had attended the Eastman School of Music where he was strongly supported and influenced by Rochester's great Dr. James Sibley Watson, a generous patron of the arts and an early pioneer in filmmaking, among many other things. Dr. Watson introduced Wilder to the process of musical scoring for movies.

Father Atwell never was ambitious for himself within the church. All of his searching was made within the framework of Church law. He was simply a good man who would not remain silent when he saw a problem. Thus, Atwell developed a "strained relationship with Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, the handsome, charismatic and best-known evangelist within the Catholic Church," an international celebrity and quite far removed from Atwell's world and those whom he hoped to help.

After a Rochester radio station banned the Council of Churches for taking part in inviting the controversial Saul Alinsky to Rochester, Father Atwell halted his very popular Sunday morning address program, until the radio station withdrew the ban. Called an able interviewer, Father Atwell could often get his guest to reveal much more of their opinions than they had wished to be known.

When Sheen sent him to Avon in 1967, it was in a sense of being "farmed out" for Atwell's frank editorials in the Catholic Courier. Alec Wilder wrote, "Henry is one of the new renegade breed as well as being a very bright, warm, witty, civilized man. His editorials were so daring and off limits that he was removed and shipped off to what I suppose his bishop presumed to be the boondocks. It happened to be a lovely little village south of Rochester." (p. 143 Desmond Stone [Alec Wilder in Spite of Himself](#)) Perhaps it was Avon that Wilder had in mind when he wrote "It's so Peaceful in the Country."

The following year Alec Wilder, "who was disturbed by Atwell's new assignment," decided to bring a little fame to the parish of St. Agnes by composing a choral work, "A Children's



*Alec Wilder*

Plea for Peace," written especially for the children of St. Agnes School. This work came as a direct result from a meeting at the 1850's Avon Rectory. Atwell had handed the musician several quotes regarding peace from famous men and Wilder thought about them and felt he would like to "hear the uncomplicated statements of children."

Father Atwell had the St. Agnes children begin writing essays about peace. One that particularly touched the men was "Peace is a horse with a nose of velvet." It opened in Avon on May 3, 1969 and was repeated at the Eastman School of Music.

Alec Wilder's music is a unique blend of traditional American jazz and basic classical styles, defying any preordained stereotypes. Born in Rochester in 1907, he moved to NYC and was encouraged by Frank Sinatra and Mitch Miller, himself a graduate of the Eastman School of Music. Wilder composed for Sarah Caldwell, Eileen Farrell, Cab Calloway and Kenny Burrell, among many others. One of Wilder's most famous songs is "I'll Be Around."

Unable to attend Father Atwell's service, Wilder had begun to fail in health himself. He died December 1980 in Gainesville, FL. According to his wishes, he was buried in St. Agnes Cemetery, as close as he could get to his dear friend, Henry Atwell. He is undoubtedly the most famous burial in Avon (outside of Avon). (All quotes from Desmond Stone's [Alec Wilder in Spite of Himself](#).)

## Additional Grant Given to Help Restore the Opera House!

\$500,000 became available for Avon earlier this month and an additional \$750,000 is pending through a Save America's Treasures grant from the National Park Service. Bero Architecture is currently working on designs for the renovation with Larsen Engineering suggestions on how to make use of "green technology."

## Almost a Landmark

It is a structure that became near and dear to all of Avon's children and the young at heart. Completely modern when it was built, you weren't encouraged to stay for hours like at "Woody's," but on a hot day, nothing beat Annis Dairy ice cream! The line formed all down the counter and out the door. I remember being delighted at being told by Mr. Annis, when I started working there, to be sure to try all the varieties of ice cream. I did!



Annis Dairy (Dec. 2007) Photo by Carolyn Swanton.

## Past News Events

\*The *Avon News* began publishing about 100 years ago, established by Howard R. Gibson.

### What Made the Journal kept by Will Leighton

- Jan. 11 The trolley wires are strung from Avon to Rochester.
- 16 The first new trolley for the Erie (Railroad) arrived today.
- 22 The new trolley made her first trip to Rochester and back.
- 23 10 (degrees) below zero.
- Feb. 5 They commenced Ice Harvest today - Wadsworth Pond.
- 6 H. Jos. Clark died this AM and his mother died last midnight.
- 7 From 50-60 teams at Wadsworth Pond harvesting ice.
- 11 9th annual Banquet of Chem. Co. Congressman-elect Peter Porter was guest.
- 17 Bill Clark and gang sank 1,300 feet of 12" iron pipe in the lake for the Avon Water Works, but was broken apart in 2 places in the process.
- 19 The men came to do the vault work in the new bank today.
- 22 The water system is out of order today. Flora Albert fell from the baggage car at Mt. Morris and was injured so badly that he died (just after returning to Avon to see his wife who had been called down to the depot.)
- 23 John. L. Westfall was nominated for collector at Republican Town Caucus.
- 25 The vault was completed today.
- Mar. 4 Harry Lacy was run over by the Van Zandt Hose cart at a fire at the High School and was cut about the face.
- 17 William Archibald has a new house.
- 19 The (Champion) Drill Works caught fire and burned down by 11:30pm.

# ***Veteran to be Remembered***

## **John Alexander**

On the way to Caledonia one passes one of the earliest recorded crime scenes in western New York. The equivalent of our CSI investigators had a case to figure out when they arrived at Sylvester Hosmer's Tavern in 1814 on Route 20. Mrs. Hosmer had heard a shot early in the morning and sent her husband out to check on it. He found a soldier with no identification on him. As it turned out, one soldier had killed another, over the pay they had received that day. For awhile, they did not know who had been the killer and who had been the victim, as they both had missed their roll call the next day, but they found the big spender and identified him as the man AWOL from his unit. They were soldiers in the War of 1812 and on their way to Sackett's Harbor.

"The soldier's murder might have soon been forgotten as another sordid, melancholy incident of war but for a strange happening the next summer. Just as wheat was beginning to ripen in the river valley, the settlers noticed a strange flower raising its purple head above the soldier's grave. It had a single stalk which bore a wax-like blossom, the like of which had never been seen before - or since - in the region.

The next year there were two blossoms near the first. For nearly one hundred years, the flowers were an annual wonder of the countryside. They never spread beyond the area of the grave. Then one summer the flowers did not appear. They never bloomed again. They had gone as mysteriously as they had come." (Arch Merrill, *Democrat & Chronicle* 7-10-55)

**"My brave lad, he sleeps  
In his faded coat of blue  
In his lonely grave unknown  
Lies the heart that  
beats so true."**

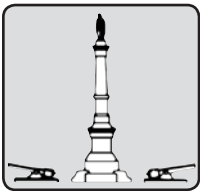


*Photo of John Alexander's monument on the road to Caledonia*

## **Membership**

Membership in the AP&HS is still only \$5 for an Individual/Senior, \$10 for Family membership. Know someone who has moved away from Avon, but still asks what's going on? Know someone who has gone into a nursing home who would like to be a supporting member? Have any last minute Thank Yous to send? Where else can you remind someone 4 times a year, you are thinking of them, for the price of a card? Call Mary Liz Stanton at 226-3443 to join up or grant someone else membership.

We are always looking for new members and trustees for the AP&HS. It is an exciting time to not just read or hear about Avon history, but also be a part of it. The future does depend upon what is done now.



### **Avon Preservation and Historical Society**

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