



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

October 2016

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Calendar of Events

*Westerly Historical Society
presents*

Quonset Air Museum

Its Collections, Past, and Future Plans

November 6, 2016 2:00 P.M.



Don King

is our featured speaker.

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Web Extra: See our Classic Cars Photo Album at
<https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/calendar/>
Scroll Down to "Past Events" and look for October 2, 2016

*Babcock-Smith House Museum
presents*

Coopering:

*The Art of Making
Barrels*

Nov.13, 2016 2:00 P.M.



Presented by Sam Pierson,
Volunteer Cooper at Mystic Seaport

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**Sunday Programs are held in the
Carriage House of the
Babcock-Smith House Museum
124 Granite Street, Westerly, RI
Free Admission**

to Westerly Historical Society Members and
Members of the Babcock-Smith House Museum
Admission for Non-Members: \$5.00

Memberships Available at:

<http://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/>

Editor's Notes

Ann L. Smith

For years following the close of World War II, a story about German and American soldiers celebrating Christmas Eve together during the Battle of the Bulge was told and retold. The story had made the rounds so often that it took on the tone of all the many popular urban legends of our time. If you've never heard it, it concerns three GIs looking for shelter on a freezing Christmas Eve along the Belgian-German border. One of them is wounded. Desperate, they knock on the door of a small cottage. Inside is a woman and a small boy. Risking deadly punishment by German authorities, they allow the soldiers to come in from the cold. A fat hen is ready to be cooked for Christmas dinner. Within a short while, four German soldiers also come knocking and the woman lets them in. There is a condition, however: all the weapons brought by those present had to be put into the care of the woman.

The legend ends with the men enjoying a Christmas of peace, without a harsh word spoken among them. In the morning, when the wounded American had semi-recovered, the German soldiers directed the American soldiers back to their lines, telling them how to avoid all the areas that the Nazis had recaptured.

In 1995, a baker from Hawaii named Fritz Vincken claimed to be the boy from the story. The popular television series *Unsolved Mysteries* featured the details of his search to find any of the men with whom he spent Christmas in 1944. It was not long before an American named Ralph Blank who had served with the 121st Infantry, 8th Division, during World War II had contacted the show and the two were reunited. The reunion took place at the Northampton Manor Nursing Home in Frederick, Md. In 1996. "Your mother saved my life," Blank told Vincken. Later, upon returning to Hawaii, Vincken was quoted as saying, "Now I can die in peace. My mother's courage won't be forgotten and it shows what goodwill will do."

In 2002 the TV movie *Silent Night*, starring Linda Hamilton and based on the soldiers' story of Christmas at the Belgian front was released. Ralph Blank passed away in 1999 and Fritz Vincken died on December 8, 2001 in Portland Oregon at the age of 69.



RALPH BLANK AND FRITZ VINCKEN IN 1996
PHOTO: UNSOLVEDMYSTERIES.WIKIA.COM

It is stories like this that remind us how alike we are even in war. When the guns are quieted and truces are signed, mothers, fathers, wives and siblings mourn the same regardless of the side they were on. Men have died in the forests and in jungles, some in the desert, others at sea. Almost all were young. The most painful of sorrows is for those we lost from friendly fire, human error, or lack of judgment. Such is the case for the sailors lost off the coast of Rhode Island in May of 1945.

Through the eyes of Captain Bill Palmer, a local diver and maritime historian, we saw how the needless aggression of the German U-boat 853 caused the loss of life of all of its crew and several Americans as well. For more on the *U-853*, turn to Page 3 where we bring you "The Sinking of *U-853*." We hope you will enjoy this review of our informative program presented by Captain Palmer and Greg Pettys on September 18.

Later we recap the wonderful talk given by Bob DeGoursey of the Westerly-Pawcatuck Region of the Antique Automobile Club of America. Bob was kind enough to bring more than a dozen classic cars to the Carriage House on October 2 where guests were treated to a spectacular exhibit followed by an informative lecture on the restoration and history of classic cars. See "Classic Cars" beginning on Page 4.

Our next program takes place on Sunday, November 6 at 2:00 P.M. We hope you will join us for the history of the Quonset Air Museum presented by Don King. Details appear on Page 1 of this month's newsletter.

Program Review: *The Sinking of U-853*

By Ann L. Smith

When he's not out on his charter boat *Thunderfish*, it's anybody's guess where Captain Bill Palmer can be found. A storehouse of knowledge on local shipwrecks, Captain Bill divides his time among his charter business, historical research, restoration of artifacts, writing, and most recently, the production of a short film on his exploration of the *U-853* wreck.

Captain Palmer's book, *The Last Battle of the Atlantic: The Sinking of the U-853* came out in 2012. Since then, with the help of producer/editor Greg Pettys, a video showing the sunken remains of this lost U-boat provides an eerie glimpse into what is left of the crew and shell of the *U-853*. Attendees of Captain Palmer's talk were treated to a showing of the new film in its entirety.

"This is a story which must be told," said Captain Palmer. "Few people realize that U-boats roamed up and down the New England coast practically unmolested for a period of time." According to Palmer, these patrols were part of Germany's "Operation Drumbeat," or as the nickname was known, "The (Second) Happy Time," primarily from January to June 1942.

Throughout the Battle of the Atlantic, German U-boats attacked U.S. and British merchant ships crossing the Atlantic. The Allies would move their ships in convoys, escorted by Liberty Ships (and later the Victory Ships), but the Germans would send out their U-boats in flotillas of four or six. Admiral Karl Dönitz, commander of German the U-boat fleet, referred to these marauding groups of submarines as "wolf-packs."



Vizeadmiral Karl Dönitz, commander of German U-boats (BdU), 1935–1943; Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, 1943–1945.

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Historians estimate that more than 100 convoy battles took place during the war. They cost the Merchant Navy more than 30,000 men, and around 3,000 ships. The equally terrible cost for Germany was 783 U-boats, and 28,000 sailors. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill would later write, "...the only thing that ever frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril."

The last of the U-boats ever to sink in World War II was the *U-853*, which went down off the coast of Point Judith, RI on May 6, 1945. The *U-853* had been sent to the New England coast in February 1945 to harass U.S. shipping. On April 1, 1945 she was ordered to the Gulf of Maine. Under the command of Lieutenant Helmut Frömsdorf, she fatally torpedoed USS *Eagle Boat 56* near Portland, Maine on April 23, 1945. Only thirteen of the 67 crew members survived. The U.S. Navy attributed the sinking of the *Eagle* to a boiler explosion, but the Navy reversed its findings in 2001 to acknowledge that the sinking was due to hostile fire. It then awarded Purple Hearts to the survivors and next-of-kin of the deceased.

The day after the *Eagle* sank off of Maine, the USS *Muskegon* made sonar contact and attacked *U-853*, but failed to destroy her. Two weeks later, the elusive "Moby Dick," as the *U-853* was known, was lying in wait off Point Judith, RI. On May 5, 1945, Admiral Dönitz issued the command for all offensive operations to cease, but the command was never heeded by the young Lieutenant Frömsdorf of the *U-853*. The U.S. Coast Guard maintains that Frömsdorf did not receive Dönitz's command, but the possibility exists that the order was received and ignored. In either case, human error or deadly pride resulted in the needless loss of all 55 men on board the *U-853*.

On May 5, 1945, the *U-853* torpedoed and blew the stern off of the SS *Black Point*, a 368-foot collier underway from New York to Boston. Within fifteen minutes *Black Point* had sunk in 100 feet of water less than four nautical miles south of Point Judith. She was the last U.S.-flagged merchant ship lost in World War II. The U.S. Navy immediately launched a "hunter-killer" group that included four American warships: the *Ericsson*, the *Atherton*, the *Moberly*, and the *Amick*.

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Program Review: Classic Cars at the Carriage House

By Ann L. Smith

Imagine being able to choose among 2,600 brands of American cars—without a computer. It may be hard to believe, but it seemed like the birth of the automobile saw more makes than there were cars themselves. Bob DeGoursey and Ken Carr of the Westerly-Pawcatuck Region of the Antique Automobile Club of America brought this and many interesting facts to life in their October 2nd presentation on antique and classic cars. Guests arriving at the Carriage House of the Babcock-Smith House Museum were treated to a spectacular show of over a dozen twentieth-century cars from the *Model A* to the *Bel-Air* wagon. It seemed as if everyone remembered riding in at least one car like these in the days gone by of their youth.

Once settled in, our program attendees enjoyed an informative talk full of historical automobile facts. Mr. DeGoursey took us back to a time when the automobile was nothing more than an experiment. The combustion engine was but one of three engine types with steam and electric-powered types being favored equally as well. As the twentieth century dawned, steam-powered vehicles were prevalent, but the major drawback was that a full head of steam was necessary before getting started. Although clocked at speeds of up to 127 mph, steam engines proved cumbersome and eventually died out. Electric cars were efficient but costly to run. In the end, the combustion engine won favor over all.

Before being made well-known by Henry Ford, the assembly lines were in use by R.E. Olds, maker of the Oldsmobile. The first mass-produced car was the *Oldsmobile Curved Dash* in 1901. By 1914 Ford began to turn out its *Model T* by the thousands. It was simple, cheap, and reliable; the car for “every man.” By the time the “T” finished its long run in 1926, over fifteen and a half million of them had been produced. In its six best years of production the *Model T* accounted for 50 percent of all cars sold in the United States.

Manufacturers raced their cars as a way to gain notoriety for their brands. Narragansett Park Speedway in Cranston, RI (formerly the site of the Narragansett Trotting Park) was the nation’s first super-speedway in 1915. It was a one-mile banked oval with asphalt pavement, both extremely novel for the day. Also popular were the Vanderbilt races on Long Island, NY and competitions at the Indianapolis

Motor Speedway which held its first race in 1909. The gravel track proved to be treacherous and was hastily replaced with brick. Barney Oldfield was a racing celebrity of the time and made history by being the first person to lap the Indianapolis Speedway at more than 100 mph. (*Oldfield also set the land speed record by taking his Blitzen Benz to 131.724 mph at Daytona Beach, FL on March 16, 1910, ed.*)



(PHOTO BY ADAM SMITH)

Over time, many improvements were made to the automobile, most of which we now take for granted. Cadillac introduced the electric starter in 1912 and by the end of the 1930s hydraulic brakes had been developed. The quality of rubber tires was greatly improving. On-board heaters, radios, and certainly air conditioning were virtually non-existent in the 1930s, but all eventually became standard equipment in our lifetimes as did the seat belt.

By the start of World War II, the Great Depression had reduced the number of American car companies from some 2,600 to just 44. Many people do not realize that automobile production for consumers virtually stopped for the duration of the war. The car companies continued manufacturing, but all efforts were in support of the war. Consider that a typical tank might have carried two Cadillac six-cylinder engines, or that Chevrolet was turning out 14-cylinder engines for use in bomber airplanes. When peacetime once again returned, the look and feel of the ordinary car had not changed in over four years. It wasn’t until 1948 that any distinctly new design concepts would hit the mass market.

Ken Carr of the Antique Automobile Club of America walked us through the second half of the twentieth century by starting where fellow club member, Bob DeGoursey left off. He noted how the war effort ended the success of some manufacturers
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Classic Cars

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like Hudson, Studebaker and Rambler. While these makes may not have died out immediately, it was their inability to retool efficiently that eventually put them out of business.



PRESENTERS BOB DEGOURSEY AND KEN CARR
(PHOTO BY ADAM SMITH)

Preston Tucker brought the *Tucker '48* to market and touted it as the “car of tomorrow.” Equipped with safety features, modern styling, and a hydraulic drive train, Tucker’s new car was originally called the *Tucker Torpedo*. When he realized that the name “Torpedo” would bring to mind the horrors of war, the name was dropped in favor of *Tucker '48*. Preston Tucker’s story was made into a movie in 1988 called *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*.

By the 1960s America had entered the Space Age. Car designs featured fins and sleek lines in an effort to mimic jet airplanes, or rockets, as a sign of the times. “Bullets” protruding from radiator grills were becoming commonplace. America was entering an age of prosperity and all manner of gadgets and customizations soon appeared.

Today, owning an antique car is a luxury for most, but enthusiasts on a limited budget can still enjoy a good deal of nostalgia with only a modest investment. Collectors nowadays trade in everything from license plates to road maps, and even old photos or postcards of service stations. Our presenters brought out several vintage car magazines which were enjoyed by many at the end of the day.

We are grateful to have had this informative presentation. All in attendance learned that antique auto enthusiasts have a truly fine way of preserving our memories of the past.

Sinking of the *U-853*

(Continued from Page 3)

The popular Internet encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, gives the following account of what followed the sinking of the *Black Point*.

The [“hunter-killer”] group discovered *U-853* bottomed in 18 fathoms (108 ft), and dropped depth charges and hedgehogs during a 16-hour attack. At first the U-boat attempted to flee, and then tried to hide by lying still. Both times it was found by sonar. The morning of 6 May 1945 two K-Class blimps from Lakehurst, New Jersey, K-16 and K-58, joined the attack, locating oil slicks and marking suspected locations with smoke and dye markers. K-16 also attacked with 7.2-inch rocket bombs. Numerous depth charge and hedgehog attacks from *Atherton* and *Moberly* resulted in planking, life rafts, a chart tabletop, clothing, and an officer's cap floating to the surface... *Atherton* and *Moberly* received credit for the kill.

In the days that followed, U.S. Navy divers tried to salvage the *U-853*'s safe and log book but to no avail. The remains of a single crewmember were brought up in 1960, but this action raised the concerns of the U.S. Navy and local clergy that the dead should not be disturbed. The lone seaman is interred in the Island Cemetery Annex in Newport, RI. An unknown person periodically lays flowers at the grave.

Captain Bill Palmer has dived the wreck of the *U-853* countless times and has retrieved numerous artifacts from the wreck. He interviewed Charles Prior, captain of the *Black Point* prior to his passing. The *Black Point* skipper's interview appears in Captain Palmer's video and can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyXgvIGSR6M>

To obtain more information about Captain Bill Palmer or to view additional videos of his work, visit <http://www.thunderfishcharters.com/>. Excerpts of his book are also available on his website and copies of *The Last Battle of the Atlantic – The Sinking of the U-853* can be ordered by contacting Captain Bill via the “Contact” link on his webpage.

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED
The Westerly Historical Society
P.O. Box 91
Westerly, RI 02891



<p><i>A Potluck Dinner and Research Sharing Afternoon</i></p>	<p>Membership Renewals are Due!</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">~Members Only~ <i>Potluck Dinner and Research Sharing Event</i> <i>January 15, 2017 2:00 PM</i> <i>Babcock Smith House Museum</i> <i>Carriage House</i></p> <p>We are looking for interested parties to speak (5-10 minutes) on their current historical research or projects. Our winter potluck dinner was an informative (and delicious!) event last season, but we need <u>your help</u> to make it even better!</p> <p>Please contact Pamela Scott, Program Director, with your topic. Email: whsprogram@gmail.com or phone (401)-741-8705.</p> <p>Looking forward to a wonderful afternoon!</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">October is Membership Renewal Month</p> <p>Just a reminder to watch for our membership renewal envelope arriving later this month. New this year: Save time and money by renewing online at https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/</p> <p>Individual: \$20 Family \$30 Sustaining \$50 Patron \$100 Benefactor \$250 +</p> <p>Membership Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free Admission to Westerly Historical Society programs • Free Admission to the Babcock-Smith House Museum and programs • Subscription to monthly newsletter, <i>Westerly's Witness</i> (printed from September to May) • Voting privileges at the Annual Meeting