



Westerly's Witness

www.westerlyhistoricalsociety.org

October 2022

Westerly Historical Society Executive Board 2022-2023

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Presentations/Lectures

Wednesday, October 12, 2022 6:30 PM – 7:30 PM *“The History of Education in Westerly”*

This presentation will include a discussion of the history of education in Westerly and describe in detail what it was like to be a student in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Speaker Jane C. Perkins taught first grade in Westerly before becoming the Lower School Principal at Claiborne Pell Elementary School in Newport. She later returned to Westerly to work as a math interventionist in the Westerly school system and serves as a Professor of Education at the University of Rhode Island.

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Wednesday, November 9, 2022 6:30 PM – 7:30 PM *“Haunted Legends and Lore of Westerly”*

Courtney McInvale Reardon, founder of Seaside Shadows in Mystic, Connecticut, is an author, storyteller, historian and guide who will lead a discussion of some of the unexplained and unusual occurrences that have occurred in Westerly. Many of her stories are mentioned in Frederic Denison's 1878 book, *Westerly and Its Witnesses*. Courtney provides an exciting, thought-provoking, and spooky presentation while providing historical information that corroborates the strange and haunting events of Westerly's past.

*Wednesday Programs Are Held
at the Carriage House
of the Babcock-Smith House Museum
124 Granite Street, Westerly, RI
Free Admission ~Complimentary Refreshments*



WESTERLY'S WITNESS

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year in January, March, April, June, September,
October and November

The mission of the Westerly Historical Society is to
research, study, and preserve the local history in
our community. We are a dedicated, all-volunteer,
non-profit organization that owns numerous
historical artifacts and an extensive photographic
collection.

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<https://www.facebook.com/WesterlyHistoricalSociety/>

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr.

Hello friends,

Fall is quickly pushing summer to the side and we
are back to being in full swing here at the Westerly
Historical Society. With a highly successful history
fair behind us we turn our attention to the trivia contest
scheduled for November 4th. There is plenty of time to
sponsor this event, form a team, and put your
knowledge of Westerly's history up against others
for great prizes, great fun, and bragging rights. Don't
worry, we will help you do all the bragging that comes
with being champions of our first fundraising contest!

Sponsorship forms and participant registration
forms will be available on our website and on our
Facebook page in the coming days. Participants can
also find registration information on Page 5 of this
month's newsletter.

Our program co-chairs, Becky Jacoinski and Bob
Peacock, have a wonderful lineup of programs
scheduled for your enjoyment through the fall and
winter. I hope to see you at our first fall program on
Wednesday, October 12th and at our trivia contest
next month!

Warm regards,

Tom



EDITOR'S NOTES

Ann L. Smith

This month we are pleased to bring you Part One
of a two-part feature by Zachary J. Garceau about
Westerly native, Ronnie Gardiner. Ronnie was in
town recently and sat for an interview with Zack at
the Savoy Bookstore. This golden opportunity
resulted in the profile of a twentieth-century Westerly
legend who went from athlete to musician to author.
The feature begins on Page 3 of this issue.

Our programs committee co-chaired by Bob
Peacock and Becky Jacoinski have slated two great
speakers for this fall. We will be back at the
Babcock-Smith House Museum's Carriage House for

these presentations, and Trivia Night, scheduled for
November 4th at the Windjammer Surf Bar in
Westerly, is fast approaching. Please refer to Page 1
for the dates and times of our speaker presentations,
and see Page 5 for Trivia Night ticket information.

Just a friendly reminder, October is dues renewal
month. We are pleased to announce that there will be
no increase in the membership fees this year and
renewals can be done by mail, in person at any of our
events, or via our website. If you have recently started
or renewed your membership, you might still receive a
reminder notice due to timing issues. All inquiries
regarding membership status can be directed to our
membership chair, at WHSMembership@gmail.com.
A renewal form appears on Page 6 of this newsletter.

Ronnie Gardiner, A Westerly Legend

By Zachary J. Garceau

On Labor Day, I had the distinct pleasure of sitting down with Ronnie Gardiner for a lengthy interview when we were able to meet at Savoy Bookshop and Café. I was also joined by three of Ronnie's former classmates from the Westerly High School Class of 1950 and for more than an hour, the four longtime friends shared numerous stories from their lives in Westerly and beyond. Throughout the course of the interview, I listened to many memories about both Ronnie's life and the life of his father, Buzz. For those who are not familiar with Ronnie Gardiner, his life story reads almost like a Hollywood movie.

Ronald Edwin Gardiner was born in Westerly on 25 July 1932 to Ralph "Buzz" Gardiner, a World War I veteran, and his wife, Maude. Ronnie graduated from Westerly High School as part of the class of 1950 and during his time there, he excelled at both football and baseball. Shortly after we sat down together at the table to start our interview, Ronnie pulled out a framed cartoon that appeared in the Providence Journal showing him and his father celebrating his selection to the Rhode Island All-State baseball team after he batted .376 in his senior season. When asked how he got to be so good, he recalled practicing in his yard on Pierce Street using a ball he made of cork which helped him to time his swing perfectly. Growing up, Ronnie was a big baseball fan, which is why he was so pleased to find out that, like him and his father, I am a Red Sox fan. In the 1940's and 1950's, the members of the Gardiner family were among the only Red Sox fans in their neighborhood. At that time, many Italian-Americans who lived on Pierce Street were devoted Yankees fans due to the prominence of fellow Italian Joe Dimaggio.

While he was undoubtedly a superb athlete, Ronnie's true passion always was music. While in high school, he was a part of the band, but he also held concerts on weekends at Riverside Restaurant in Pawcatuck to make extra money. His parents were very encouraging of their son's obvious musical aptitude. As Ronnie told me: "My father and mother, they knew I liked music...They really encouraged me and helped me into shaping my career." He then went on to tell of how in 1946 (when he was just fourteen years old) he would perform at the Harbor View in Stonington on Wednesdays and Saturdays for five dollars a night. Because the venue served alcohol, Ronnie's father had to stay with him while he performed. These concerts went on despite the protests of Mrs. Gardiner who did not like the fact that her son was playing midnight shows on Wednesdays when he

had school the following day. It is clear that Buzz was proud of his son's musical talent. As Ronnie recalled "If somebody liked music, when he [his father] was at the Elm Tree Inn, he'd say 'Oh, my son's a drummer,' and I used to have the drums set up and I'd put a Gene Krupa record on and it's like twelve o'clock at night...and I started playing...and all the lights on Pierce Street would come on.... 'Shut up, it's twelve o'clock in the morning!' and my father would come out [and say] 'Only five minutes!'"

RONNIE GARDINER WAS FEATURED IN A LOCAL NEWSPAPER ITEM ON DECEMBER 10, 1949.

IMAGE: ZACHARY J. GARCEAU



After graduation, Ronnie attended the Henry Adler Drum School in New York City where he studied from 1951 to 1955. While honing his craft, he also worked days at the New York State Society of Public Accountants on 53rd Street. He stressed to me that although some biographers claim he attended Julliard, this was not the case. Ronnie returned to Westerly in July 1955 to be with his ailing father and he would remain there until 1962. He also worked a variety of jobs in Westerly including working at the Cottrell Company in Pawcatuck, teaching music at Westerly High School, and delivering mail. While working these day jobs, Ronnie continued to play in several bands at clubs in Southern Rhode Island and Eastern Connecticut. In 1960 and 1961, he regularly played shows at the Fiddler's Three in Groton. This club would host three winter concerts and three spring shows on Sundays and this is where Ronnie first performed with many of the most well-known stars of the New York Jazz scene at the time including Buck Clayton, Charlie Shavers, James Moody, Zoot Sims and several others.

Ronnie's mother, Maude, passed away on 29 November 1960 (his father, Buzz, had passed away on 15 February 1957) and she left money to each of her

(Continued on Page 4)

Ronnie Gardiner

(Continued from Page 3)

four sons. Ronnie used the money he received from her estate to take a five-week journey across Europe. He visited the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. At each stop, he would visit the local jazz clubs and ask to sit in and play a few numbers. According to Ronnie: "Meeting musicians opened doors for me. The musicians informed me about the best restaurants to eat at and the best places to see on my short visits to their cities. I was invited to the musicians' homes."

Unfortunately, the trip left Ronnie with very little money remaining and he took up jobs as a reserve postman and teaching drums at Westerly public schools. In mid-March 1962, Ronnie received a phone call that would leave him in a state of shock. When he answered the telephone that day, on the other end was John Birks Gillespie, better known as Dizzy. As Ronnie recalled: "I could hardly believe my ears, Dizzy Gillespie calling me. His drummer was going into military service and Clark Terry who I had played with at Fiddler's Three a few weeks earlier told Dizzy about me and he recommended me. I did not think I was good enough to play with one of the greatest creative jazz musicians in the world. I said no."



GARDINER AS HE APPEARED IN AN UNDATED PHOTOGRAPH FROM HIS EARLY YEARS AS A MUSICIAN.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ZACHARY J. GARCEAU.

Clark Terry would also play a role in another fateful decision in Ronnie's life. He had asked Terry, as well as Zoot Sims and Toots Thielemans if he went to Europe, where would be the best place for a jazz drummer. They all said without question that he should go to Sweden or Denmark, specifically Copenhagen. With this information in hand, on 19 August 1962, a day Ronnie remembers quite well, he booked the cheapest one-way second-class ticket on

the *MS Gripsholm* on the Swedish-American line and he departed from New York on 19 September 1962 bound for Gothenburg, Sweden by way of Copenhagen. While crossing the Atlantic, the crew of the ship approached him saying they had heard he was a musician and Ronnie and fellow jazz musician Joe Cravinho were asked to provide entertainment for the guests. The men agreed to the proposal and as Ronnie recalled they were "very popular" on the ship.

While he had initially planned to only stay in Copenhagen for a few hours on his way to Sweden, something inside told Ronnie to stay in Denmark and he followed that urge. Ronnie and Joe only had four hundred dollars to their names when they got off the boat, an amount he expected to last for several months. This would turn out to be a very wise decision.

Ronnie made his way to the jazz club Montmartre where he befriended a Danish drummer who let him sit in for several songs. Ronnie remembers: "In Scandinavia, they celebrate Christmas Day and the day after Christmas and mostly everything is closed. On the 27th everything opens up. I was down to my last fourteen Danish Kronor (about \$1.50). I went to Montmartre. I am not sure, but I think they charged [a] ten Kronor entrance fee...I arrived around midnight. Dexter Gordon [famed tenor saxophonist (and one of this author's all-time favorite musicians)] waved to me and he put up one finger. It was clear he wanted me to come to the stand to play and I thought the one finger indicated that he wanted me to play the last number of the set. All the musicians waved for me to come up to the stand including the drummer. The drummer had been celebrating too much over the two Christmas holidays. Anyways, Dexter said "Billie's Bounce" a famous Charlie Parker bebop composition. There were exchanges with Dexter and me playing twelve bars each. It turned out very well and the public liked it." After the performance, a Danish waiter named Kell approached Ronnie and told him a man would like to speak to him. Ronnie recalls the man said he liked his drumming (as translated by Kell, as Ronnie did not speak Danish). The man was named Poul Hansen and he had just bought a restaurant to be known as Adlon. Mr. Hansen wanted a rotation of three bands for his new club and he had already contracted a Danish orchestra and an Italian orchestra and asked Ronnie if he had his own orchestra. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity, Ronnie told Poul he did, which according to Ronnie was "a big lie." To buy himself some time, he told Poul he planned to spend the holidays with his girlfriend (who did not exist) and that they would meet on 2 January 1963. (To be continued in our next issue.)

Review: Regional History Fair

By Robert A. Peacock

The Westerly Historical Society hosted a Regional History Fair on September 14th in the Terrace Room of the Westerly Library. Approximately 150 people attended the two-hour event which was created to showcase the numerous historical societies and museums in the region and to allow a unique opportunity for the public to meet and greet the members of these various organizations while learning about their membership opportunities and viewing some of their favorite treasured artifacts.

The participants included representatives of the Westerly, Charlestown, Richmond, Hopkinton, Block Island, Quonochontaug, Stonington, Ledyard, North Stonington, Noank, Mystic River, Exeter, and Narragansett Historical Societies.

The participants also included representatives of the Babcock Smith House Museum, the Westerly Armory Peoples Museum, the Denison Homestead Museum, the Stonington Lighthouse Museum, the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Museum, the Captain Nathaniel Palmer House Museum, the Stanton Davis Museum, the Nathan Lester House & Tool Museum, and the Living Sharks History Museum.

In addition to the hundreds of historical photos and documents on display, a wide variety of fascinating local artifacts were displayed during the event including a hand written Westerly Police Log Book from 1879-1890, a Bradford Dyeing Association World War II Security Badge, a pewter Watch Hill Yacht Club trophy from the early 1900's, a chair from the Larchmont which sank off of the Westerly shores, a wooden-tined clam and quahog rake, a one-armed bandit gambling machine, military uniforms, late 19th century clothing, granite carving tools, glassware from a long gone hotel, a cradle from the late 1800's, various antique tools, and many other unique items.

In keeping with the mission of the Westerly Historical Society, the Programs Committee intends to continue our efforts to expand our programs to include other free events such as this.

A special thanks and appreciation to Westerly Historical Society Board Members Tom Gulluscio, Becky Jacoinski, Bob Peacock, Bob Boucher, Brenda Linton, Ann Smith, Steve Cersosimo, and Ed Fazio for working diligently for several months to plan and present what appears to have been a very successful educational historical event.



The Westerly
Historical Society
Invites You To

TRIVIA NIGHT

*A night of competition to test your
knowledge of our local history!*

Friday, November 4 @ 6:30 PM
Windjammer Surf Bar
321 Atlantic Avenue
Westerly, RI

- Entry fee is \$180 per team
- Limit six players per team
- Light buffet included
- Cash bar available
- Tons of fun, fabulous people, and BIG PRIZES

A packet of six tickets will be mailed upon receipt of order. To enter, return this form with check or money order for \$180 to:

Treasurer, Westerly Historical Society
P.O. Box 91
Westerly RI 02891

Team Nickname or Captain:

Mail to:
Name _____
Address _____
City, State, Zip _____

Corporate Sponsors: Please contact
Thomas J. Gulluscio, Jr. at
WHSPresident@gmail.com

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



It's Time to Renew!
Westerly Historical Society Membership Renewal Form

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual | \$20.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> Patron | \$100.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family | \$30.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> Benefactor | \$250.00+ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining | \$50.00 | | |

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Renew online at <https://westerlyhistoricalsociety.org/membership/>

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Thank you for your continued support!