



# The Hitching Post

Ravena Coeymans Historical Society Newsletter

Vol.17. No. 2

Fall 2019

**Nancy Wolfe Bruno**

## Spirited Coeymans Resident ~ Of Time and the River

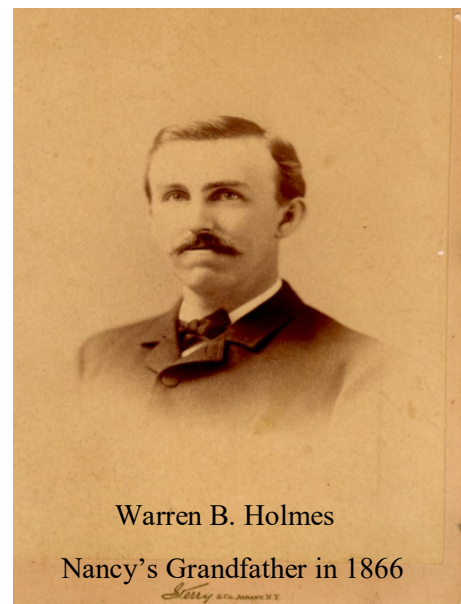
Where can she be found? Helping to mentor first graders in a Pieter B. Coeymans Elementary classroom. Selling tickets at Coeymans Fire Department fundraisers. Attending meetings of the Ravena Coeymans Historical Society and The Little Red Schoolhouse. Arranging goods at the Church of St. Patrick's Thrift Shop. Preparing sandwiches for children during the summer for the Matthew Project sponsored by the Living Water Christian Family Fellowship in Ravena. And those are just a few places.

You will see her exercising at the Ravena Senior Projects and then playing cards there twice a week. You will see her reserving books or watching a current movie at the RCS Community Library. How does a lifelong resident of Coeymans continue to retain a strong community presence and her health? "A person has to be active. That is the reason I volunteer," Nancy Wolfe Bruno stated with conviction.

Nancy's philosophy underscores the active community lives of the Wolfe, Holmes and Smith families who had businesses and homes in Coeymans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the late nineteenth century, Benjamin Smith, her great-uncle, owned and served as an engineer on a tug, while his brother Philip had a grocery store on Main Street. Jacob B. Holmes, Nancy's great-grandfather, owned a tin and hardware shop, and his son, Warren B. Holmes, became a Wire Chief and Electrician [telegraph operator] for the New York Central & Hudson Railroad and then served two terms as town supervisor, 1898-1899 and 1906-1907.



Nancy Wolfe Bruno



Warren B. Holmes

Nancy's Grandfather in 1866

## RAVENA COEYMANS

### HISTORICAL

### SOCIETY

2019-2020

#### OFFICERS/TRUSTEES

##### PRESIDENT

JOSEPH BOEHLKE 2021

##### VICE PRESIDENT

ROGER WILBER 2021

##### TREASURER

MARIE STURGES 2021

##### SECRETARY

CATHERINE RICCIARDI 2020

##### TRUSTEES

JOHN BONAFIDE 2022

NANCY BRUNO 2022

PAUL LAWLER 2020

DAVE ROSS 2021

JANET SWEENEY 2022

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### MUSEUM HOURS

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM  
IS OPEN EVERY MONDAY AND  
THURSDAY (EXCEPT HOLIDAYS)  
FROM 1 - 3 P.M.

FOR AN APPOINTMENT, CALL  
518-936-4397

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### VISIT US AT

[COEYMANSHISTORY.ORG](http://COEYMANSHISTORY.ORG)

WILLIAM MEYER, WEBMASTER

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### MISSION STATEMENT

To recall the past by preserving,  
sharing and educating.

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### The Hitching Post

MARIE STURGES, EDITOR

CATHERINE RICCIARDI,

COPY EDITOR

## President's Letter

Dear Members,

Our fall program year began with two outstanding presentations. Bob Hallock explained the evolution of baseball and John Scherer, former curator at the New York State Museum, spoke about the importance of preserving heirlooms, highlighting the local Tompkins family collection. The Society is fortunate to have received a similar collection of local importance, approximately 100 items from the Blaisdell family, which include a dinnerware set, linens, glassware, a nineteenth century table, and secretary bookcase.

We are grateful not only to the Blaisdell family but also to all families who have donated their family treasures for future generations to enjoy. As John Scherer mentioned in his October talk, often these items are sold by family members and their history is lost. We always welcome donations of local history.

Upcoming programs will include presentations about the Albany Trolley System (January), the traditional craft of tinsmithing (February), and the Hudson River Museum and Mary Powell Exhibit (March).

This past spring we hosted a tour of the museum for members of the Bender Family Foundation. They have awarded the Society with two sizeable grants that have allowed us to restore important artifacts, most recently, a portrait of Coeymans entrepreneur Albert N. Briggs and an original 1854 Gould map of Albany County. We are appreciative of their support.

Our area is rich in history, and we were recently reminded of that with the passing of local hero Francis S. Currey, one of three surviving World War II Medal of Honor recipients. The historical society also mourns the loss of two longtime members, Henry Mormile, Jr. and Robert McCabe.

Mark your calendars for our upcoming Holiday Open House on December 8, 2019, from 1-4 p.m. that will feature an art exhibit by local artist Sara Pruiksma of historic buildings in the Coeymans Historic District.

Planning is underway for a new exhibit marking the centennial of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, which granted American women the right to vote.

We hope you take the opportunity to attend one of our programs, visit the museum or possibly even volunteer.

Regards,  
Joseph Boehlke



On the porch of W. B. Holmes 's residence (First Street) are Gladys Holmes and her two sisters.

Nancy's father, William Winne Wolfe (often called Winne Wolfe) purchased a house on Church Street next to the Dutch Reformed Church after he had married Gladys Gedney Holmes in 1916. He became a banker, first at the Ravena First National Bank and then at the National Commercial Bank. After Winne's father had passed away, Mary Louise Smith Wolfe moved in with the family, helping to care for Nancy and her siblings, William Jr. and Susan.

Born November 10, 1931, Nancy grew up during the Depression in a close-knit family of Dutch, English and German ancestry. Life in the hamlet was one of ordinary activities, of predictable expectations, of enduring friendships. Whether greeting neighbors by their names, keeping houses unlocked, walking down a hill to the post office, or swimming in the Hudson River, many Coeymans residents in the 1930s and 40s adhered to the simple routines of daily life as did the Wolfe family. In her spacious family home, Nancy shared a large bedroom with her sister. As she grew older, she was expected to do household chores like washing windows, sometimes as many as four or five in one room, and washing or drying dishes. As the youngest, Nancy was constantly teased by her siblings, but she had moments of solitude, sitting on her back porch, reading a book or knitting dish towels, and beholding the river.

Nancy's childhood activities were carefree and adventuresome: roller skating, playing hop scotch, knitting, and reading. Sometimes, Nancy and her

friends rode their bikes to New Baltimore "where there were nice boys." However, the river became her retreat. Nancy and her friends spent hours on Barren Island, particularly where the north end had "a nice beach." Swimming in the river and climbing a tiered observation tower on Baerena Park--a vestige of an amusement park in the late 1880s and early 1900s--were exhilarating. When she and her friends climbed the tower, they had to be cautious, given the broken steps of each ascending level. But when they had reached as high as they could go without falling, they espied the river's expansiveness and beauty.



Main Street Coeymans circa 1930s

In the afternoons, Nancy walked to the post office to pick up mail but also to buy penny candy. She recalled the day she chose a red penny candy and later became quite sick. "It was the last time I bought candy there! From then on I bought penny candy at Johnny Cronk's." She walked past businesses—Frangella's market, groceries stores, barbershop, shoemaker, Robbins funeral and furniture store, Gedney Hotel, and grills. Unless her mother accompanied her, she was not permitted to enter her great-uncle's store which catered to male patrons, but if her mother accompanied her, she could. On one particular day, Nancy picked up a stereoscope in his store and began to look at pictures. Within a few seconds, her mother realized Nancy was about to view scantily dressed women and quickly retrieved the stereoscope, not aware Nancy had already seen an image.

At night, members of the Wolfe family ate supper around a large dining room table and then played cards with Grandmother Wolfe until the late hours when candles had to be lit. At other times, the family played games of ping pong in the cellar, croquet on the lawn and baseball in the backyard. On each Fourth of July, Nancy's father invited all the neighbors to fireworks in their backyard. During other holidays, the Wolfe home was filled with Holmes relatives and other friends.



50th wedding anniversary of Winne and Gladys Holmes  
November 1966

On weekends, the Wolfe family took road trips to New Baltimore, Coeymans Hollow, Coxsackie Beach, Greenville and Albany. When she was young, Nancy could not have imagined that in her later years she would take a cruise to Alaska, visit the San Diego Zoo, tour the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, walk through Disney World, and stop in Seneca Falls where the first women's rights convention was held.

When Nancy was about ten, she started to earn money babysitting, spending it on candy, ice cream, but not soda. She admitted, "I don't drink soda even today." As a teenager, and before school started, she began work at 5:30 a.m. to sort papers at Ed Uthe's law office where she earned fifty cents an hour. At that time, she noted, a teenager did not need working papers. Her other jobs included mowing lawns, cutting hedges, picking up people's mail ("sometimes getting a nickel and feeling wealthy"). She couldn't walk to Ravena unless her mother accompanied her. There she went to the movies on Van Buren Avenue, purchased yarn for knitting at a Ben Franklin store, and shopped at a department store that "had everything."

Walking was an expected and daily activity. Walking to the Coeymans School to sit in Miss Strevell's first grade class began Nancy's love of reading. She described classrooms filled with rows of desks where "you didn't get up, walk around or talk unless your hand was raised, and you could only go to the bathroom at certain times." As a STAR (Seniors Teaching and Reaching Out to Students) volunteer in a first grade classroom at Pieter B. Coeymans Elementary School for the last nineteen years, Nancy has recognized that the modern classroom configuration, where students sit at a round table, engage in conversation with others, and ask questions without always raising their hands, is a more ideal teaching and learning environment than the strict atmosphere she experienced.

Nancy enjoyed school, proud of being a winner of fifth grade spelling bees. She recalled a competitor trying so hard to sound out the syllables of *vegetable*. When she had entered Ravena-Coeymans High School, she engaged in a

Dancing Club, Chorus and College Club. Her favorite subjects were English, that Mr. Lubey taught, and science; however, mathematics was so disliked, she walked out of the Algebra Regents without completing the exam. Nancy has noted the irony of that exit, because years later her math skills were needed when she sold goods at the store she owned with her husband Anthony.



Nancy Wolfe

1949 Ravena-Coeymans High School

A love of reading remained a keen interest, so keen she planned to become a librarian. The 1949 Ravena-Coeymans yearbook states: *Quiet and conscientious almost perfectly describes Nancy. She has made plans to enter college and become a librarian.* And she was accepted at Geneseo College, today SUNY Geneseo. After a semester, Nancy returned home and started working at the New York Telephone Company. She remained employed there until after marriage and the birth of her first child.

No houses existed behind Nancy's family home on Church Street, as there are today. The land behind the Wolfe house was used by Italian immigrants to grow flowers, fruits and vegetables. Grandmother Wolfe wanted to share water with the gardeners, enlisting Nancy to carry buckets of water. There she

met Rose Bruno and her son, Anthony. Years later on November 14, 1953, Nancy married Anthony.



Anthony Bruno ~ Circa 1970

As Italian immigrants, Dominic, Rose and three-year-old Anthony settled in Coeymans where employment would be found in the brickyards. Eventually, they opened a store where people purchased bus fares to Albany, bought newspapers, and enjoyed confectionaries. About 1950, Rose and her son purchased the 1884 J. Wolf building on Main Street and opened a grocery store. Then in 1966, Anthony and Nancy became proprietors of Bruno's Store.

On the bottom floor of the building was the store with the family's kitchen in the back. On the south side were living quarters where the Brunos lived with their children Dominic, William and Rosemary. They imparted the values of punctuality, responsibility and kindness.

While Anthony worked as a N.Y.S employee, Nancy was in charge of the store, which opened from 7 a.m. until 9 p.m. each day except Saturdays and Sundays from 9 to 2. Groceries, household goods, cigarettes and beer were sold. Among Nancy's tasks were ordering goods, stocking shelves, shoveling snow, sweeping sidewalks and taking care of her granddaughters, Amanda and Jennifer, who were dropped off at 6:30 a.m., and a few hours later, placed on their school bus.

After being open for thirty years, the store closed in 1997, when Nancy moved to her current home on Main Street in Coeymans. Nancy referred to those years as “hard work but good.”



The Anthony and Nancy Bruno Store  
Main Street in Coeymans



Nancy and Anthony at the Tricentennial in 1973

Because of Nancy's unwavering dedication to the Coeymans Volunteer Fire Company #1, both of her sons, Dominic and William, have taken an avid interest in fire companies, becoming volunteer firemen and eventually Fire Chiefs. From 1983-85, Dominic served as Fire Chief and from 1989-1998, William did also. Today, each is a fire commissioner in the organization.



Interior of Bruno's Grocery Store

During her time managing the store, Nancy became active in the Coeymans Fire Company Ladies Auxiliary, serving as president in 1961 and 1962 and then receiving a 55-year pin in 2013. She now has served that organization for sixty-one years and has recently been named chaplain. Nancy is also a member of both the Ladies Auxiliary of the Albany County Volunteer Firemen's Association and Ladies Auxiliary of the Firemen's Association of the State of New York. On April 29, 1989, Nancy was presented with a plaque from the Coeymans Fire Police in appreciation “for your many dedicated years of traffic control.”



2013 Ceremony for Nancy's 55--year pin

Since 2004, Nancy has played an active role as a member of the Society's board of trustees, and being present for the ribbon cutting of the new museum in December 2017 gave her a great deal of pride and satisfaction. For the last ten years, she has also served as trustee of The Little Red Schoolhouse and as volunteer at both the Senior Projects of Ravena and the thrift shop of The Church of St. Patrick.



1999 RCHS Membership Drive at Ravena Grand Union  
Nancy, Bonnie Ruso and Dennis Whalen

The ordinary activities, predictable expectations and enduring friendships of Nancy's youth have changed. She no longer knows everyone, drives to pick up her mail and groceries, keeps her doors locked, hears foul language once considered taboo, and observes children's inordinate fascination with phones and tablet computers rather than that of outdoors activities.

Remaining positive and committed to her community, Nancy has become accustomed to the norms of the day and technological advances. She encourages her grandson Kevin, a 2019 RCS graduate, in his pursuit of videography at Hudson Valley Community College. Each day Nancy finds comfort in her close-knit family, in her diverse volunteer organizations, in her voracious reading, and in her love of the river.

Sitting on her deck, reading a book, and gazing at the infinite beauty of the Hudson River are key elements of her portrait.

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*Interviews October 2019 ~ Marie Sturges*

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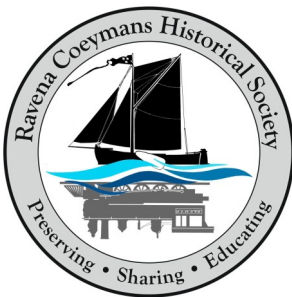
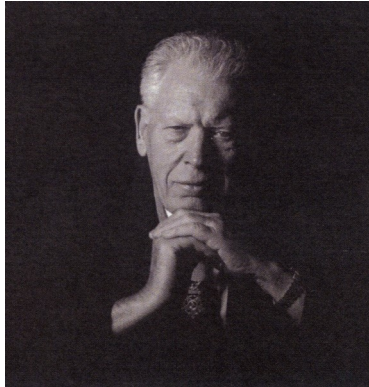
*Editor's Note*

*The Ravena Coeymans Historical Society praises Nancy Bruno's years of dedicated service promoting membership drives, serving on the Board of Trustees, donating family ephemera, attending monthly programs, accepting donations for museum memorabilia at annual Open Houses, and buying refreshments for our Sunday programs. We thank her.*



December 2017 Grand Opening of RCHS Museum

The Ravena Coeymans Historical Society  
Honors the Courage and Patriotism  
of  
World War II Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient  
Frances S. Currey (1925-2019)



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