



Sheldon Historical Society Schoolhouse Museum Newsletter



Volume 5, Issue 1

February 2016

An update on our progress as a Society and a Chartered Museum "A New Look at Old News From our Town"

Welcome to our first newsletter for 2016. We hope you have had a good winter and are as excited as we are to return to our beloved schoolhouse museum and start planning for this new year. Meetings are held at 7:00 pm at the Schoolhouse, on the third Thursday of the month, February through October. Please join us for our next meeting on Thursday, February 18, 2016.

A Short History of Varysburg

by E. K. Cooper

November 30, 1945

(Continued from Sept 2015)

The first school house, built in 1814, was a log cabin situated where the George Conrads now live. The first teacher was a man by the name of Crow. Miss Anna Grinold was the last living inhabitant who attended this school. She was born in 1807 and died in 1891, aged 84 years. She was a daughter of George Grinold, one of the original settlers, and the family home was where the Varysburg Garage now stands. The first church society in Varysburg was founded in 1816.

(Continued on page 6)



Bert Cooper, age 10

Who was E.K. Cooper?

In our September newsletter we began to run a short story of the history of Varysburg, written in 1945 by E.K. Cooper, a man that few remember. But Elbert K. Cooper was quite an accomplished author, photographer and businessman and was well known in his day. He was mentioned frequently in "A Village in the Valley".

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Through the years the Town of Sheldon has seen many fires; flames shooting out uncontrollably are always a fearful sight. Reading this will take you back in time as it tells of a blaze fought without our modern fire equipment but with a town coming together. It surely will inspire an appreciation for our firemen and their dedication in our communities today.

BAD FIRE AT VARYSBURG

The worst fire which ever visited Varysburg broke out about 4 o'clock on the morning of Oct. 23, 1908, and in less than two hours every building on the west side of Main St. between West's residence and the D.S. Davis store was in ashes, entailing a loss of about \$20,000.

It appears to have been a normal fall day in the quaint hamlet of Varysburg. The fire originated in the cooper shop of Orla Lawrence, which sat behind the upper hotel. Mr. Lawrence and Victor Wilcox had been busy making barrels by day for the fall rush of apple picking and by night it was the sleeping place of Frank Danley, a well know countryside character, who was awakened by the sound of crackling flames and stifling smoke just in time to escape with his life.

Across the street in the small framed telephone office, the operator William Salisbury and his wife, nee Carrie Conant, were awakened. Salisbury immediately went to the switchboard sending out the alarm for help for the little village and in a very short time a large bucket brigade was formed. Soon the church bells at the Methodist Episcopal and Free Will Baptist Churches were ringing the tragic news from hill to hill and down the valley calling for help. Already the flames blown by the implacable wind had reached over and were enveloping the hotel. A strong brisk southeast wind was blowing that morning and the dry autumn which had turned the valley into a blaze of color had also made the valley dry and the wells low. The fire gained headway and soon the flames were carried to the roof of the hotel barn, where the sparks were driven through the cracks into the hay.

Quickly the hillsides became animated with the hurrying hill folk, who from high elevation saw the fire in the valley below and heard the roar of its invincible onslaught. They came running through the woods and fields, down the winding dirt roads in every kind of vehicle, knowing as they came that without help the village was doomed to destruction. The alarm had been received in the Arcade phone office about 5 a.m. and a special train was quickly made ready on the B.A. & A. railroad with 16 active firemen, who with their chemical engine, buckets and ladders were hurrying to the scene. In Attica, the hand pumper was hooked to a team for the trip up the valley.

Upwards of 1000 men appeared in a desperate attempt to save their town. Blankets were soaked with water and hung on buildings. Fires were starting all over the village catching from the falling embers, some being blown 4 miles distance on the present day Creek Road. Nearby homes were being evacuated and everywhere were women, children and older folks burdened with their choicest possessions. In the erratic light of early dawn were seen the weird blackened faces of every able bodied man around the area using every amount of energy to save the little village of Varysburg.

Meanwhile help for the fire fighters had arrived from Arcade aboard the train, whose whistle, wide open, made the valley ring. The pumper from Attica had broken an axle and it too had to come by train.

With the coming of daylight it had been only two hours since the first notice of flames. All the fight was fruitless till a final stand was made at the D.S. Davis store, where with hard work and a fortunate shifting of the wind, the fire was stopped. All the buildings across the street were badly scorched and much glass was broken, and all the buildings south of Embt's store had caught fire several times, as well as some houses on Attica Street, but all were extinguished without serious loss.

As near as we can learn the losses and insurance are as follows: O. Lawrence, loss on barrel stock \$200, no insurance; A. J. Klein, loss on stock and furniture, \$1500, no insurance; H. Streicher, loss on hotel property, \$4500, insurance \$3000; J. W. Whitney, barber shop fixtures, loss about \$100, no insurance; Lewis Ward,

residence and contents, \$700, no insurance; Wolf Bros., barber shop, barns and store with contents, \$6000, insurance \$3,750; Thomas Murphy, livery barn, hotel and contents, \$6500, insurance \$4600; D. S. Davis' loss by water and by goods being removed, about \$2000; Mrs. Alice Davis, damage to household goods \$200; J.J. Barnes, damage to building and stock, \$300. Other small losses were sustained which will aggregate several hundred dollars. Most of the burned district will be rebuilt in the spring and probably with more fireproof structures.

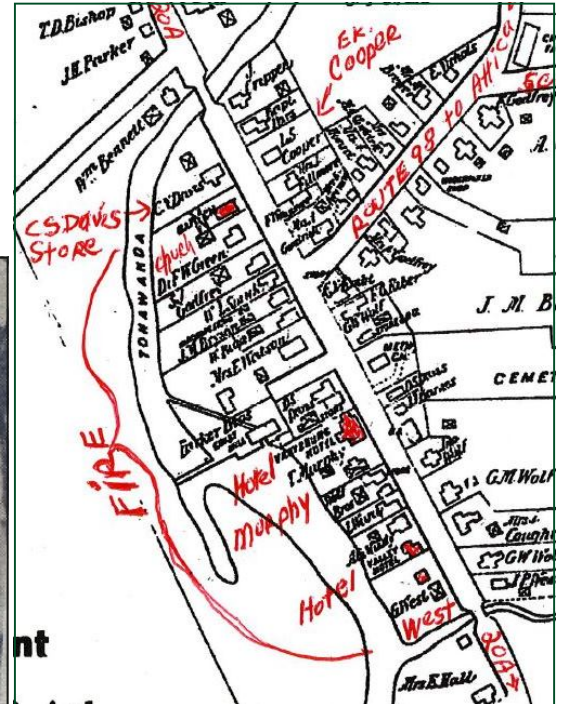
Compiled by Mary Ann Metzger

Facts from a newspaper article dated 1908

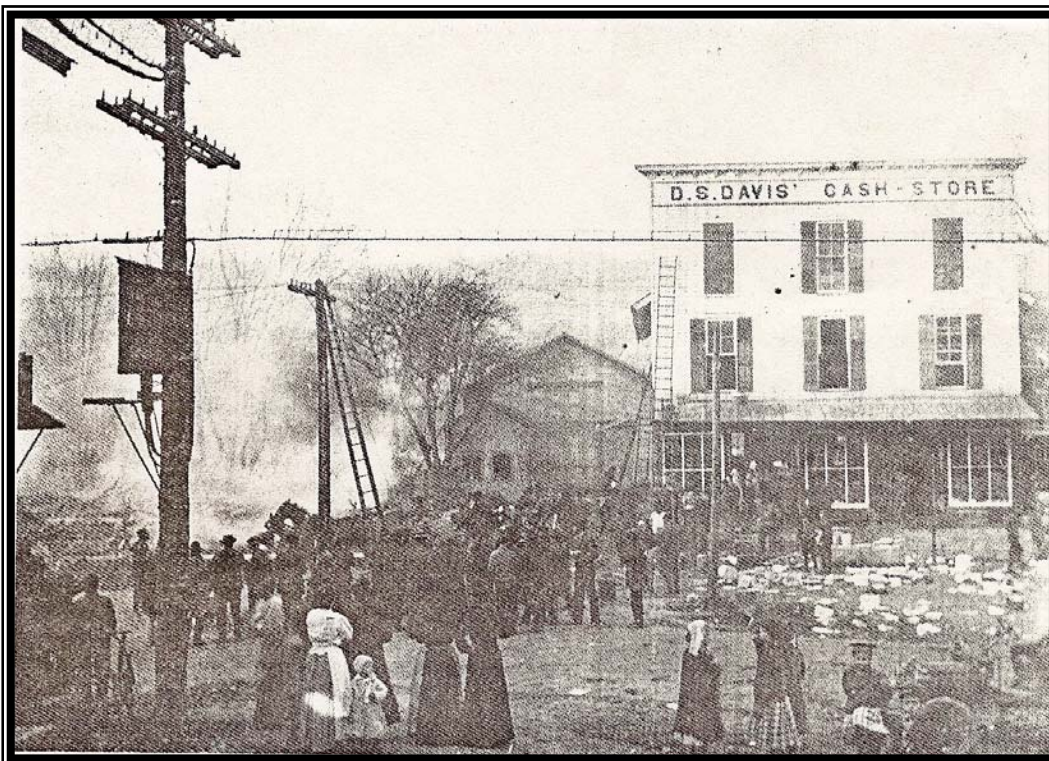
Excerpts taken from "A Village in the Valley" by Anita Ripstein-Hayes, which can be found in the Town of Sheldon School House Museum.



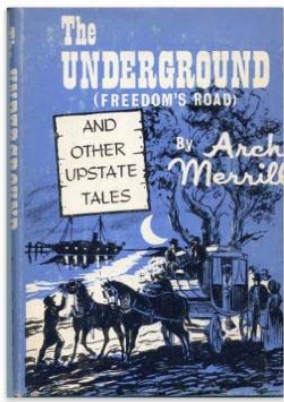
Main St. Varysburg before and after the fire of 1908



Map shows path of the fire



Residents of Varysburg gathered to examine the damage caused by a fire that swept through the village on October 23, 1908. The fire caused extensive damage, destroying most of the business district. However, the Davis's General Store managed to survive.



THE UNDERGROUND - FREEDOM'S ROAD AND OTHER UPSTATE TALES

By Arch Merrill

It has been over 50 years since Arch Merrill gathered his stories into books from years of writing for the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, and they are still hard to put down. In the *Underground, Freedom's Road*, once again he brings to life a time that is hard for us to imagine.

We know about Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery herself and led over 300 of her people to freedom, and Frederick Douglas, who became a famous writer and speaker and one of the masterminds of 'Operation Underground'. But do we know of the escape route that went right through Sheldon and the people here who also risked everything to aid in this effort? This was so dangerous that the secrecy continued for many years after. It made the history of the Underground Railroad very difficult for historians to document. Often people didn't even know their parents or neighbors ever worked with this underground movement.

The Underground Railroad was a not a railroad at all of course, but to quote Arch Merrill, it was a **"vast, silent conspiracy operated by humanitarians who defied the law of the land because they believed in the right of human beings to be free"**. It did not have rails or trains, but it did have hundreds of 'stations' and 'conductors' in Central and Western New York, and it carried thousands of passengers to freedom. As early as 1786, a well-known Virginia planter complained because his Quaker neighbors had helped some of his slaves escape. That irate planter was George Washington. About 1831 a runaway slave fled a Kentucky plantation and jumped into the Ohio River, swimming toward the Ohio shore. His master chased him in a boat, watched him wade to shore, and then lost all trace of him. Confused when he couldn't find him, the man uttered a phrase which was to live in history, "He must have gone on an underground road."

By 1827 every slave in New York State was emancipated by law, yet it was against the law to help others to escape. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 made it illegal to harbor or aid runaway slaves in any way, punishable by heavy fines and imprisonment. When Calvin Fairbank, born in Pike, was studying for the ministry at Oberlin College in Ohio, he helped get a family of three out of Lexington, Kentucky, across the river to Ohio. He went on to help over 50 more to escape, was caught and imprisoned twice, and spent a total of 17 years in Frankfort Prison. While there he suffered terrible abuse, going from 180 to 117 pounds, before he was freed by the Governor of Kentucky in 1864 at the personal request of President Lincoln.

"Harriet Tubman returned south after her escape, to smuggle out her sister & children, leaving on a Saturday night, since runaway notices couldn't be placed in newspapers until Monday morning; turning about and heading south if she encountered possible slave hunters. On one occasion, she overheard some men reading her wanted poster, which stated that she was illiterate. She promptly pulled out a book and feigned reading it. The ploy was enough to fool the men. Tubman had made the perilous trip to slave country 19 times by 1860, including one especially challenging journey in which she rescued her 70-year-old parents". (William Switala, UGRR in NY & NJ)

Sympathy was great in the northern states, and many people risked their own freedom, their reputations,

(Continued on next page)

To learn more about the Underground Railroad, see the National Park Service Network to Freedom <http://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/index.htm>

and their lives to help the weary, frightened slaves along the freedom road. Slaves usually escaped and traveled by night, hiding in swamps, woods, caves and tall weeds. They swam rivers and rode rafts and logs, and at times had only the North Star to lead them. Their goal was Canada, where they could be free. Refugees were hidden in homes, in barns, stables, basement vaults, attics, secret chambers, root cellars, corn cribs, haystacks and churches. The UGRR funneled slaves from Philadelphia through Western New York to Rochester and Buffalo by several routes. The Niagara River ferry at Black Rock was used to get slaves across to Canada, and in places where the river was narrow, rowboats took many across. Mr. Merrill tells many detailed stories about the runaways and the individuals who helped them.

“A chain of underground stations wound through Warsaw, Sheldon, Arcade, Perry, Attica, Pearl Creek, Wyoming and other places. The routes were flexible and the identity of few of the station masters has been established.”

“For generations Humphreys have been leaders in Wyoming County business and public affairs. Lester Humphrey settled in in 1819 in what was known as Humphrey Hollow, east of Sheldon Center in the Town of Sheldon. There he ran a farm and a saw mill – and a station of the underground. Slaves were sent from Sheldon to Arcade and then to Warsaw or Attica on their way to the international border”.

Seth Merrill Gates of Warsaw was a national leader in the anti-slavery movement. There were several “stations” and well-known “conductors” in Arcade. Matthew Eastman hid many an escaped slave on his farm, 3 ½ miles south of Attica, who came there from the Sheldon station.

The Leroy station was on the Covington route, which led through Arcade, Sheldon and Warsaw through Covington, Pavilion Center, and to Morganville, where the trail led to the Niagara. John Wilkes took passengers from Sardinia to the next station in Holland, and on to South Wales.

The last chapters of the book tell of the Civil War and the Klondike Fever in 1896 that drew many

from WNY in America’s last great gold rush. ***Grant’s Indian*** tells of Ely Samuel Parker, a full-blooded Indian born on a WNY reservation, who was the military secretary to General Ulysses S. Grant. Ely Parker was a grandnephew of the great Seneca orator Red Jacket. He studied law for three years but was denied admission to the bar because “Indians were non-citizens”. He joined the Union Army and became friends with Ulysses Grant, who made him his military secretary. On April 9, 1865, he wrote the official copy of the terms of surrender, signed by General Ulysses S. Grant and General Robert E. Lee, ending the Civil War. Recently Ely Parker was portrayed by his descendant, Al Parker, at a program at the Sardinia Meeting House. If you have never read anything by Arch Merrill, you are missing out. We have several copies of his books available to read at our Schoolhouse Museum.



The Lester Hayden Humphrey home in Humphrey Hollow was one of the “stations” of the Underground Railroad.

By Jeanne Mest

Sources: Arch Merrill, “The Underground, Freedom’s Road”; Anita Ripstein-Hayes, “Lewis Humphrey Bishop”, Historical Wyo., July 1981
William Switala, “Underground Railroad in New York and New Jersey”

A Short History of Varysburg

(Continued from page 1)

Melbon Eunice, Jothan Godfrey and George Grinold were the original signers. In February 1836, the "First Free Will Baptist Church of Varysburg" was organized. The building was constructed in 1837 at a cost of \$1800.00. The building has always been well cared for and, recently, modernized and beautified and is an honor to the community. Rev. Daniel Jackson was pastor of the church for many years, and was the only one who owned his home here. He built the house since known as the Andrew Bauer place and lived there the rest of his life. Other pastors whom the writer knew personally were Rev. Edwards, Parker, Shirey, Shoemaker, Lurford, Holland, Streeter, Drake, Osborn; Mathews, Noble and Walker.

The Godfrey family was well represented among the early settlers. I have often heard Joshua Godfrey (grandfather of Glenn Godfrey of Johnsonburg) tell how his grandmother lived in a log cabin near the east edge of Embt Brothers' farm (formerly known as the McCray farm). Neighbors were scarce and wild animals plenty. She told how she would listen to the wolves howling nights and how the bears would come and dig at the cabin door. This spot had been in pasture for many years and the cabin site was overgrown with wild grapes, plum trees and barberry bushes. The only remains of the cabin were the stones from the foundation and chimney. It remained in this condition till recently, when it was cleared off and plowed.

The farm home of the late Noel Matteson was one of the earliest hotels and was operated by Rufus Coates. The hotel barn and shed were directly across the road from the hotel. It was this barn that a bear entered one night and carried off a calf.

The Methodist Church of Varysburg was organized in 1836. The building was completed in 1837. The Society was disbanded several years ago and the building is now used as the I.O.O.F and Grange Hall. Varysburg was always known as a great lodge town. Many have come and gone, among which were the Good Templars, who, at one time, had over 100 members. The Masons and Odd Fellows were the first to come and still remain. West Star Lodge #413 was organized in 1857 with the following charter members: H. G. Parker, C. Bebee, O. Cotton, R. Gardner, Wm. Turner, Amasa Barsett, Harvey Johnson and Dr. Lindorf Potter.

The first post offices were only at Sheldon Center, Warsaw, and Leicester, and the first mail was carried on horseback by Lewis Street. It had to be

made once a week but was generally made every four days. It cost 18 cents to send a letter from Sheldon Center.

The first musical organization, the Tonawanda Musical Association, was formed at Varysburg in 1860. Singers from Attica, Bennington, Orangeville, Java and Sheldon joined.

In 1880, the first line of stage coaches ran from Attica, Arcade and Johnsonburg to Sheldon Center and from Strykersville to East Aurora. The first railroad near Varysburg ran from Batavia to Rochester in 1832. It was called the Tonawanda Railway. The first locomotive on the Erie from Hornell to Portage was called the "Orange". It was the first locomotive to sound a whistle in the Genesee valley. In 1852, the "Orange" drew the official train across what was then "The highest and longest wooden bridge in the world, the Erie Bridge at Portage." It was 800 feet long, 234 feet high, contained 2,000,000 feet of timber, 90 tons of iron bolts and straps and cost \$175,000.00. It burned in 1874, and is now replaced by a steel structure.

At the official and first crossing on the wooden bridge, carriages swarmed the adjacent land and elaborate entertainment was furnished the visitors. Seated at long tables, they were treated to roast ox, soup, fish, boiled meat, game, confectioneries, pastries and desert, but no vegetables.

The first crowds were attracted to Silver Lake by the appearance of a "sea serpent" which occasionally appeared out of the water. Later, the scheme of the "concessionist" was revealed. He had rigged a contraption to mechanically operate from a building the rising of the serpent from the lake.

Sheldon Lodge I.O.O.F was chartered in 1875 with the following members: H. H. Parsons, J.A. Godfrey, H. M. Kittle, E. W. Spencer, H. E. Patrick, and G. C. Parker. The original grounds of the Varysburg Cemetery were given by Wm. Tompkins in 1814 and the first internment of an adult was the same Wm. Tompkins who died in 1816. Among the early businessmen of Varysburg were the Madden Bros., who opened a shoe peg factory, carding mill, cheese box factory and saw mill for many years.

The average output of the cheese box factory was about 20,000 boxes per year, The building was later used as an apple evaporator and burned several years ago. The sawmill burned several years earlier. The original shoe-peg factory burned in 1860. A woman who worked for the Madden Brothers admitted setting the fire.

(To be Continued)



This was taken after the fire, with Tom Murphy in the foreground. Note the cows going down the center of the old dirt road.

the county of Wyoming. Carrie's grand-
 father, Lester Hayden Humphrey was a
 man noted and respected for his energy
 in business and his devotion to his
 church. Firm in the faith of his family,
 he was an active member and supporter
 of the early Hollow church and later the
 Warsaw church. He never sought polit-
 ical office although a staunch Whig until
 anti-slavery days when he became a
 Republican, and an abolitionist. His
 home in Humphrey Hollow was a station
 on the **Underground Railroad** between
 that of Seth M. Gates in Warsaw and
 Col. Woodruff's in Strykersville. In
 1866, he removed to Warsaw where he
 engaged in the tannery business under
 the firm name of L.H. Humphrey and
 Co. The year previous his son Samuel
 B. Humphrey, the father of Carrie, had
 removed to Warsaw becoming a part-
 ner in a tannery with Wolcott J. Hump-
 hrey. During May of 1868 the business

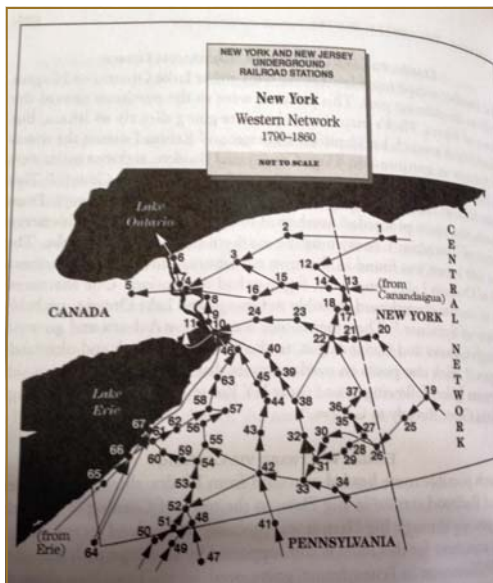
Who Was E. K. Cooper ? *(Continued from page 1)*

Born in Bennington in 1871, the son of Lester and Margaret Cooper, he grew up working on his father's farm. French Road used to be called Cooper Road, in honor of his grandfather, Sanford Cooper, a pioneer of the area. His house still stands, outside the town line. Elbert Cooper served as the Varysburg postmaster for over 20 years. In 1901 he and his cousin Maurice Cooper purchased a store. They had the first ice cream store in Varysburg. Leon West and Elbert Cooper started a Ford business in 1909 and sold their first car to Mr. Ed George in 1910. In 1938 he converted a small building into a Sunoco Station.

Throughout his life, Elbert Cooper made numerous trips to the village of Lily Dale, with his mother or friends, staying for the weekend or for weeks at a time. Lily Dale was and is still known for its mediums and spiritualism. He was a history buff, so he must have enjoyed writing his "Short History of Varysburg". To the best of my knowledge he remained single all his life and passed away in 1958. Elbert K. Cooper is buried in the Varysburg cemetery, along with several members of his family.

Submitted by Jeanne Mest

Sources: Anita Ripstein-Hayes, A Village in the Valley, Historical Wyo. Oct. 1979;
<http://www.fultonhistory.com>



UGRR Stations: No. 22 is Attica

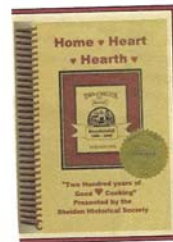


Sheldon Schoolhouse Museum
 3859 Main Street
 Strykersville, NY 14145
 Phone: 585-457-9509
 585-457-3444 or 585-457-3061
 E-mail:
 sheldonhistoricalsociety@hotmail.com or:
 metzgermaryann@gmail.com
<http://www.townofsheldon.com>

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 Newsletter compiled by Mary Ann Metzger and
 Jeanne Mest & other volunteers. Submissions are
 welcome, Send to the email above, or call (716)
 474-3156 for information.

Is anyone in need of a large print version of the newsletter? If so, please let us know.

The Historical Society welcomes new members! If you find local History interesting, we hope that you make a membership contribution and join us. It is open to anyone with an interest in the history of Sheldon, or a desire to volunteer services, without restriction to age or place of residence. We maintain a School House Museum that is state chartered. There is always work to do to maintain this structure and to continue our research of data and archives and preserve treasured artifacts.



We are almost sold out of our award winning Bicentennial Cookbooks, so don't miss out!

IF YOU ARE NOT A MEMBER AND WISH TO RECEIVE A COPY OF THE NEWSLETTER, PLEASE JOIN!

From your editors:

We appreciate the input of our readers very much, so if you think of anything we have missed or that you can add, or you have questions or ideas for some stories yourself that you could share – or things that you would like to learn about – or family or local history research questions, please let us know. Feel free to email or call either of us.

Thank you, Jeanne & Mary Ann

The date on your address label shows the due date of your membership. Dues are paid each July.

Dues are \$5.00 per year or \$50.00 for a Lifetime Membership.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

DATE: _____

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 Mail To:
 Donna Kirsch, Financial Secretary
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