



MANSION NOTES

CENTRE FURNACE MANSION

NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTRE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Winter 2008

Bellefonte and the Early Air Mail

by Kitty Wunderly

It's interesting to note that our county's first national fame resulted from what was in the ground (lime stone and iron ore), but its next came from what was in the air: namely, trailblazing efforts to fly the mail on a regular basis, starting in 1918.

In that year, Bellefonte was still the governmental seat of Centre County, but its greatest moments as far as industry, economy, and politics had passed. In most ways, the focus of the county had switched to State College.

Then, almost literally overnight, Bellefonte awoke to find itself of national importance, solely because of the town's location: by happy coincidence, just about where the Post Office Department needed a town to be. The POD's initial scheme called for mail to be flown from the area of Long Island, New York, to Cleveland, Ohio, and then on to Chicago (with a route eventually to California). Airplanes of the era could fly only so far on a tank of gasoline and a dose of oil, and by happy chance, there was Bellefonte, just about where pilots coming from New York or from Cleveland would be anxiously checking the fuel gauge.

Bellefonte was chosen to be the only scheduled stop in Pennsylvania on the first U.S. westward air mail route, with a permanent airfield facility to provide gas, oil, and mechanical assistance.

The brave and bold pilots of the early air mail were larger-than-life national heroes but also came to be at home in the community. These personal relationships meant that there also was personal sadness when the risky profession led to a pilot's death.

The newspapers of Bellefonte regularly chronicled the events at the local airfields (there were two: the first where Bellefonte Area High School now stands, on E. Bishop St., and the second off Rt. 26 outside Pleasant Gap), providing

compelling eyewitness accounts of mail service and the pilots. An official Pennsylvania historical marker for the first airfield site was placed at the entrance to the high school in 1969.

In 2004, when the American Philatelic Society and its research library moved from State College to the renovated match factory along Spring Creek in Bellefonte, Robert N. Hines of Bellefonte donated an archive of photographs and documents pertaining to air mail to the APS.

The collection represents a lifetime effort by local historian Dan Hines, two of whose brothers worked at the Bellefonte airfields. Many of the photos are spontaneous, capturing moments in a time of which pilot E. Hamilton

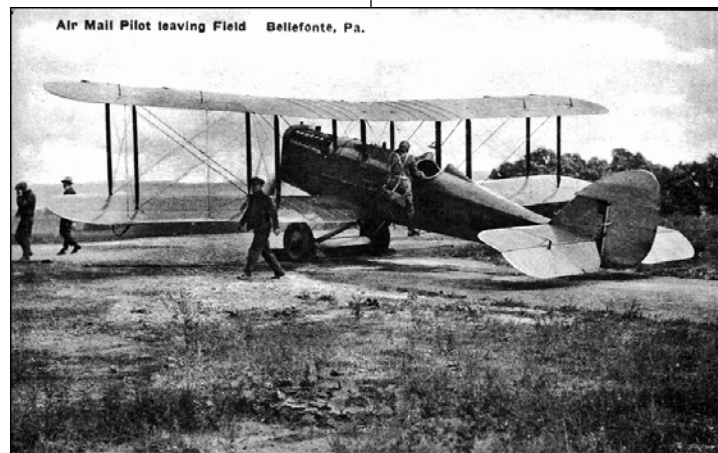
Lee, writing years later to Dan Hines, said firmly, "There never will be a period as interesting in history, ever."

For me, one of the elements of the thrill of the story of Bellefonte's role in the transcontinental air mail is that so many of the environmental elements of that time still exist. Yes, Beaver Airfield is now occupied by the high school and a PennDOT field office, but the basic streetscape is unchanged.

It's not impossible to imagine Slim Lewis "jazzing" up High Street in his mail plane to spin the trout weathervane on the courthouse cupola (yes, it's the same trout). The Brockerhoff House was one of the pilots' favorite places for overnight stays. There are still towers of some sort atop high points on our mountains that once had air mail beacon warning lights.

And there are markers at several places where mail pilots crashed to their deaths in Centre County, including a granite marker on the APS property, next to Spring Creek, honoring all the pilots lost in the mail service.

It was a great period in our national history, and Centre County should be proud of it!



About the Centre County Historical Society

Centre County Historical Society
Centre Furnace Mansion
1001 East College Avenue
State College, PA 16801
814.234.4779
info@centrecountyhistory.org
http://www.centrecountyhistory.org

The Centre County Historical Society operates the Centre Furnace Mansion as an historic house museum. The Mansion is open to the public for tours and library use on Sundays, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. and by appointment. The Society's hours of operation are Mondays through Fridays from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

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Founded one hundred years ago, the Centre County Historical Society (CCHS) is the oldest and largest history organization in Centre County. It is a community and volunteer based non-profit educational organization that works collaboratively with local, regional, county, and state organizations in helping to preserve and promote the area's historic, cultural, and natural resources.

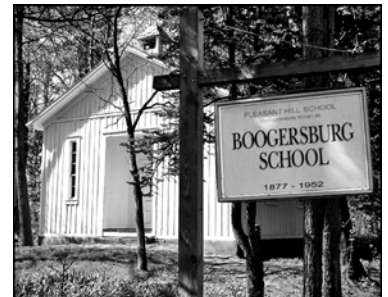
CCHS is headquartered in the Centre Furnace Mansion, a restored and furnished ironmaster's home listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This historic mansion and nearby iron furnace stack represent the 18th century beginnings of the charcoal iron industry in this area, and the 19th century beginnings of Penn State University, originally located on furnace lands. The site offers more than eight acres of landscaped grounds and gardens.

CCHS disseminates historical information about Centre County; offers programs and exhibits of historical and cultural interest for children and adults; marks and helps preserve and protect the Centre Furnace Mansion property and grounds, our newly acquired Boogersburg School, and other historical sites and landscapes in Centre County; maintains a collection of artifacts, books, manuscripts, maps and photographs; and publishes and promotes interest in historically significant publications relating to Centre County.

Society members and others in the community are invited to support these activities by contributing to the Centre County Historical Society Endowment Fund, managed by the Centre County Community Foundation.

Mansion Notes is published as a benefit of membership in the Centre County Historical Society, which is made possible through the Keatley Fund.

The Centre County Historical Society (CCHS) is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization, under Section 501(c)(3) of the I.R.S. Code. Donations are tax deductible. Official registration and financial information about CCHS may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, (800) 732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.



Upcoming Events

February

☛ Docent Meeting

Thursday, February 7 at 3:00 p.m.

☛ Bellefonte and the Early Air Mail

Wednesday, February 20 at 7:00 p.m.



Please join us at the Centre Furnace Mansion for a special presentation by Kitty Wunderly on the history of Bellefonte's air mail service.

March

☛ 10th Annual Easter Egg Hunt

Saturday, March 22 at 11:00 a.m.

There will be two age-group areas: (1) pre-kindergarten and (2) K-3rd grade. Each area will have one golden egg, which can be exchanged for a special prize. As always, there is no admission fee, but donations are warmly welcomed. Parking is available in the Mansion lot off Porter Road and in our overflow parking areas along East College Avenue.

☛ Spring Creek Canyon

Sunday, March 30 at 2:00 p.m.

CCHS will host a special program relating history to the Spring Creek Canyon and the contemporary issues we face. More information, including location and contributing organizations to be announced at a later date.

President's Corner

*History is the memory of a society
just as progress is its imagination of the future.
Neither can exist safely without the other.*

In writing those words a number of years ago, Philip S. Klein, Penn State's highly respected historian and past Centre County Historical Society president, was referencing the larger society in which we live. But, I believe, those same words could be adopted by the Historical Society as it enters 2008, its 104th year, contributing to the County's sense of community as it actively imagines the future while reflecting the memories of its past.

CCHS had an exceptionally active and successful year in 2007. In accordance with its bylaws, it continued to serve as a county-wide community and volunteer-based non-profit educational organization working collaboratively with local, regional, county, and state organizations in helping to preserve and promote the area's historic, cultural, and natural resources. The Mansion was used often as an educational center, as were its more than eight acres of landscaped grounds and gardens, and hundreds of youngsters stepped back in time while pretending to be one-room school students at Boogersburg. Historical information about Centre County was shared with students, residents, researchers; programs and exhibits were offered not only to local residents but to state-wide conference visitors. And CCHS was actively involved in helping to mark, preserve, and protect historic sites and landscapes such as the Harmony Forge/McCoy Dam location. The Society's collection continued to grow; and a particularly fine issue of *Centre County Heritage* was a publication highlight.

As the community's collective imagination for the future unfolds, the Society will not only continue these ongoing efforts, but planning is underway to develop new initiatives, new opportunities, and new challenges. Long-range imagining and planning have already begun and will continue into the new year. The CCHS Board will be sharing these thoughts with you.

But, support for the Society and its efforts come from a variety of sources, with our most significant source being the voluntary service and financial contributions of our more than 500 members. Like all of us, the Society has significant monetary needs of the every-day variety: ongoing programming; mailing and office expenses; insurance; building repair and replacement; and the upkeep of the grounds, such as the trimming and cabling of the mansion's historic trees. We continue to need your support for our ongoing programming.

Equally important are the Society's needs to establish a strong future economic base, one way made possible by your support of its endowment program through designated gifts or through specific contributions to the Centre County Historical Society Fund in the Centre County Community Foundation. Other gifts can be made directly to the Historical Society.

Most importantly, all of us have the opportunity to continue to provide progress and imagination to this, the oldest and largest historical organization in Centre County. You are enthusiastically invited to offer your ideas and suggestions, your inspiration and imagination.

Warmest good wishes to you all for 2008.

~ Jackie Melander

Historic Preservation Awards

The Centre County Historical Society held its Annual Meeting and Historic Preservation Awards Ceremony at the Centre Furnace Mansion on Sunday, January 6, 2008. John Ziegler, Bob Gruver and Bob Hazelton, members of the Preservation Awards Committee, presented six awards to individuals and groups for outstanding preservation work in the county. Since 1988, CCHS has recognized individuals and groups across the county for preservation work. The Historical Society extends its sincerest appreciation for all of the hard work these individuals have done to preserve and interpret Centre County's history.

The 2007 Excellence in Historic Preservation Awards were received by:

- **Joyce Adgate**, for her contribution to the preservation of Centre County's history and heritage through her years of involvement with the Centre County Library & Historical Museum. Having just retired from the Centre County Library & Historical Museum after 25 years of service, Joyce's many tasks included conserving copies of local newspapers and journals, ordering books, and modernizing cataloging.

- **Dr. John E. Baylor**, a Penn State professor of agronomy extension, for his contribution to the preservation of agricultural history through years of leadership with the Pasto Agriculture Museum's Hay Exhibit Committee. The exhibit, 300 Years of Haymaking in Pennsylvania: 1640-1940: From Seed to Feed, was on display at the 2006 Ag Progress Days, as were demonstrations of the antique haymaking equipment Baylor collected as part of his work.



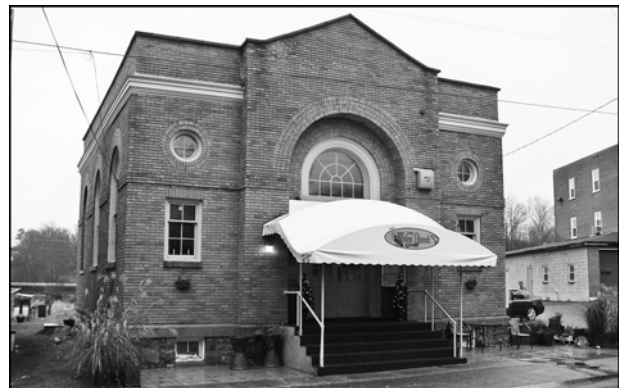
John Baylor and John Ziegler (photo courtesy of Bob Gruver)

- **Pat Daugherty**, for his involvement in the conservation of the historic Erbtown site. Having purchased 205 acres off state Route 45 in Ferguson Township, Daugherty, with help from retired engineer and CCHS board member Bob Hazelton and longtime resident Butch Mehalick, uncovered the foundations of a mill and other buildings that constituted the once-vibrant community known as Erbtown. Four years later, he is still uncovering the remnants of Erbtown.

- **Dr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Davidowski**, for their efforts to preserve Centre County's architectural history through the sensitive restoration of a small stone house along PA Route 45 on the western edge of Pine Grove Mills. The house, dating back to 1810-20 was left to decay when Dr. Davidowski and his wife, Evelyn, acquired it in 2001 and carefully restored it.

- **Ann Glaser**, president of the Penns Valley Conservation Association, for protecting and conserving Penns Valley's waters, farmlands, forests and heritage. This year the PVCA completed a 200-foot-long boardwalk at the Cooke Tavern Wetlands Education Center. The association works with the school district and allows children to visit the center twice a year to learn about the local environment.

- **Daniel K. Schleiden**, for preserving the original First National Bank of Spring Mills building, built in 1925, and converting it into The Water Street Grill. The old lead doors of the bank's vault are still preserved inside the quaint eatery, located at 118 Water Street.



CCHS Volunteer of the Year awards were presented to **Arthur Anderson** for his help in the design of the newly built ice house; **Mary Osborn** for her involvement in the Stocking Stuffer sale and for serving as an ambassador to the Centre Furnace Mansion; and **Mary Sorensen** for her leadership and service in the gardens and for her contributions to the library and Stocking Stuffer sale.

The President's Award went to **Dave Lembeck** for outstanding contributions over the years to the artistic development of CCHS presentations – its exhibit materials and publications – and particularly *Centre County Heritage* and the iron industry and Civil War exhibits.

The Benner Mansion and Spring Creek Canyon

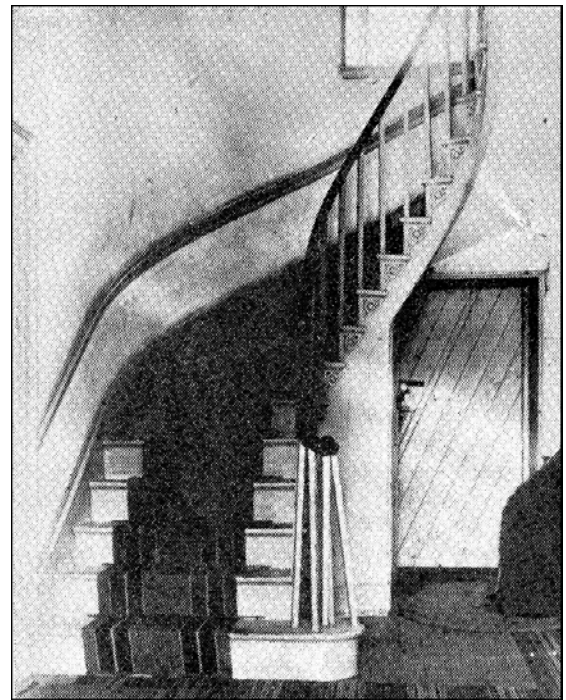
by Angela Breeden

"There is something tragic in the demolition of a house. Doubly so when it has been built by the blood and sinews of a past age and has been the Mecca of a clan. It is not only stone and iron and wood; it is the shadowy sum of all the souls that have lived therein. We feel their joys, their sorrows, their honor and their trickeries when we breathe its moldy air. Tearing down a habitable house is like defaming a good character."

By the time Myrtle Magargel wrote this in a series of articles for the *Centre Daily Times* in 1940, the Benner Mansion had been standing for 128 years and was a shell of its former state of beauty. It had been abandoned and robbed of its character by vandals who removed the doors, windows, fireplaces, and stove. Still, there were some in the community who felt that the history of the house and the site on which it was built was worthy of rescue and several interested citizens wrote letters to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Historic Landmarks asking for help in its restoration. Despite their best efforts, as well as those of Pennsylvania Representative Kenneth G. Haines, the Benner Mansion was razed that same decade by Rockview crews and inmates closing an important and integral chapter in the history of Centre County.

Said to have been modeled after a house in Fairmont Park in Philadelphia, the limestone mansion was built in 1812 by General Philip Benner (1762-1832) who was known as one of the richest and most influential of Pennsylvania's early ironmasters. Benner came to this wilderness in 1793 with approximately 100 ironworkers from Chester County, and during the next seven years built two forges, a furnace, a rolling mill, nail factory, grist mill, and a saw mill. The mansion was perched on a knoll overlooking Spring Creek and the craggy rocks from which Benner's business took its name, seemingly a testament to his success.

This two-story, five-bay, one room deep I-house in the Georgian style, had a two-story ell addition. The front of the mansion was finished in rough coursed stone while the stone used for the back and sides was uncoursed. The hooded entrance had a double pair of sidelights on either side of the door; windows, all with a three-



keystone lintel of cut stone, were six panes over six panes. Each of the two front rooms was approximately 21 x 17 feet; the front hall was 10 feet wide, making the house more than fifty feet in width.

The highlight of the mansion was the wainscoted main staircase in the great hall. Its mahogany handrail curved from the main floor all the way to the attic, undoubtedly making a lasting impression on visitors. In the photo above (date unknown) we see a striped carpet fastened with brass rods, and it is possible to detect some of the detail work along the edge of the staircase. A drawing of this detail is included in the Historic American Buildings Survey which was compiled in 1935 and is available on the Library of Congress website. The Benner Mansion was one of only 12 structures in Centre County to be included in the survey, and a photo from that project clearly shows the terrible state of the staircase at that time.

The land on which the mansion once stood became the property of the State Correctional Institution at Rockview in 1912 and remains to this day, but recent events have awakened the public's interest in this vital piece of Centre County history. It is possible that clues to our understanding of the past lie in the archeological remains that may be resting there, promising the chance to author a new chapter in our understanding of Benner and his home. On **Sunday, March 30** CCHS will host a special program relating history to the Spring Creek Canyon and the contemporary issues we face. More information will be available shortly.



Centre County Historical Society & OLLI at Penn State Become Partners

Last December, Sarah Benton, Executive Director of OLLI at Penn State (formerly known as CALL) and Angela Breeden, Executive Director of CCHS met to discuss partnering opportunities. We are pleased to announce that we have officially entered into this relationship and will be aiding in each other's efforts to provide educational resources to our unique community.

OLLI began as the Community Academy for Lifelong Learning (CALL) when in 1996, the Penn State College of Health and Human Development received an outreach grant and decided to use the funds to develop a lifelong learning institute in State College. An initial task force was formed and consisted of representatives from the Centre Region Senior Center, Office of Aging, Penn State Continuing Education, Penn State Gerontology and community members who were familiar with the concept of lifelong learning institutes.

In the spring of 1997, CALL offered its first set of 9 courses to 62 members. By the end of that year, CALL had 167 members. In 1998 a Bellefonte committee was formed to plan courses in the Bellefonte, Pleasant Gap and Centre Hall areas. In 1999, a Special Event committee (now known as Trips Committee) offered its first series of trips for CALL members. In 2001, the Social Committee began offering social activities to help CALL members build friendships outside of the classroom.

In 2006, CALL began exploring the Osher Foundation, which supports lifelong learning institutes throughout the United States. At this same time, CALL was working with Penn State Continuing Education to reestablish a relationship for the benefit of both organizations. In May, 2006, a formal affiliation agreement between Penn State Continuing Education and CALL was signed by representatives of both organizations.

In 2007, CALL celebrated its 10th Anniversary and an all-time record of 836 members. This same year, Penn State Continuing Education and CALL applied for and received an Osher Foundation grant. CALL legally changed its name to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Penn State in the fall of 2007.

We will continue to update CCHS members of the activities at OLLI and on occasion host classes at the Centre Furnace Mansion. We hope you will all enjoy the exciting opportunities that this partnership presents

to both organizations as we look forward to working together in the coming year.

With that in mind we are asking our members to consider teaching a class for OLLI at Penn State, which provides educational and social activities for mature adults who desire to enrich their lives. If you have a subject matter or hobby you would be willing to share with OLLI members, please contact Sarah Benton at (814) 238-3020.

We also encourage you to join OLLI if you are interested in participating in a rich variety of educational, cultural, social and physical activities, courses and programs. Membership costs \$40.00 per year. Course fees and fees for other activities are separate. Non-members can still participate in many OLLI activities, but they must pay a higher fee and will not receive preferred placement in programs.

More information about OLLI at Penn State, including a full list of courses can be found by visiting their website: <http://olli.centreconnect.org>.

CCHS Selected to Participate in Public Humanities Scholars Program

The Centre County Historical Society will be participating in a joint venture of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the Pennsylvania State University's Institute for the Arts and Humanities that matches non-profit organizations with Penn State scholars in order to plan high quality events and programs. This year, CCHS will mount an exhibit relating to the 2008 celebration of the 75th anniversary of the New Deal. We will be using images of industry, found all across Pennsylvania in post office murals and sculpture, to explore how the Depression affected the dominant industries in Centre County. Through our participation in this program, historian Bill Pencak will help to understand the complexities of this time which will be realized in our exhibit, scheduled to open next fall.



Civil War Exhibit to Close in February

Centre County and the Civil War will close on February 4 after a 6 month installation. Visitors from across the Commonwealth visited the exhibit which was planned in anticipation of the 2011 commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War. This highly anticipated event will allow organizations such as CCHS to be part of a nation-wide movement to truly investigate the details of the war.

This exhibit was made possible through the support of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the Central Pennsylvania Civil War Round Table.

Traveling Oil Exhibit to Visit CCHS

Oil and the Pennsylvania Valley that Changed the World is a traveling exhibit organized by the Oil Region Alliance that briefly tells the story of how the world's oil industry began. It includes text and images that will be available to the people of Centre County during the month of May at the Centre Furnace Mansion. More information will be available in the next issue of *Mansion Notes*.

A Central Pennsylvania Nutcracker

The Centre County Historical Society would like to give special thanks to **Alex and Andrea Hill** for the Ballet Theatre of Central Pennsylvania's incredible production of *A Central Pennsylvania Nutcracker*. It was such a pleasure to see the Thompson family and other famous Centre Countians come to life on the Eisenhower Auditorium stage in the beloved story of *The Nutcracker*. From the live orchestra to the beautiful costumes and choreography, this unique production delighted those interested in both dance and history, all while showcasing local talent. We very much look forward to working with the BTCP for next year's performance, and are thrilled to be a part of this new holiday tradition. Thank you to all who attended!

Stocking Stuffer Antiques, Art & Fine Craft Sale

The Stocking Stuffer Antiques, Art & Fine Craft Sale has become an important holiday fundraising tradition for the Centre County Historical Society, and we are extremely pleased to announce that we raised over \$6,000, far exceeding previous years' profits.

The Stocking Stuffer committee worked incredibly hard this year to take the Stocking Stuffer to another level. For the first time, we invited professionals to decorate the Mansion to help create an atmosphere of celebration and elegance. Guests responded with overwhelming support and enthusiasm.

We must thank our committee members for all of their hard work and great ideas this year: **Angela Breeden, Honey Jaffe, Rhiannon McClintock, Jackie Melander, Mary Osborn, Beth Ricker, and Mary Sorensen.**

The overwhelming success and extra touch of class to this year's event are largely due to the decorators and local businesses who graciously donated their services. We would like to thank **Avánt Garden, Bridget Donnelly Benner, The Cat's Meow, Daniel Vaughn Designs, Interiors by J&O, and Wesley Scott's** for the interior decorations; **Tait Farm and Tuckaway Tree Farm** for donating trees; **The Penn State Master Gardeners** for the exterior decorations.

We would like to thank the local restaurants who provided food for the Preview Party: **The Atherton Hotel, Delectable Delights by Heather Luse, Gardner's Candies, Giant, Harrison's Wine Grill & Catering, Kelly's Steak & Seafood, Perkin's Restaurant, Perk's Coffee Service, Sam's Club, The Tavern Restaurant, Texas Roadhouse, Toftrees Golf Resort & Conference Center, Ye Olde College Diner.**

The event was sponsored in part by **Nittany Bank.**

Finally, a sincere thank you goes out to all of our members and friends who generously donated their collectibles, those who baked and donated desserts and volunteered their time to help create our most successful event to date:

Jill Aller, Davies Bahr, Keith Barry, Jody Bland, Jeff and Rosalie Brooks, Shirley Coploff, Lorie Dolan, Bob Donaldson, Julie Gomboc, Bob Hazelton, Susan Hochreiter, Barb Hunziker, Tina Hyduke, Bill Jaffe, Barb Kasales, Felicia Lewis, Lou Mayer, Janet Meister, David Miller, Joan Hunter Miller, Ann and George Moellenbrock, Bill Moyer, Brandy Newell, Gloria Nieweg, Dick Pencek, Ann Marie Rehmert, Dorothy Schumacher, Ralph Seeley, Leslie Shellemann, Grant and Sue Sherritt, Betty Shields, Barbara Smith, Lois Smith, Jeanne Weber, Denise Wood, John Ziegler.

Thank you to everyone who helped and to those who came out to the event. We hope to see you next year!

