



CORNER OF WEST RD. & ROUTE 11, EARLY 1900'S

# Portage Lake Historical Society Quarterly Newsletter

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1 OF 2016

## A Brief History...of Us!

by Corrine Routhier

As towns in New England go, Portage Lake is actually pretty young. It was settled in the 1840s by woodsmen following the lumber trade. On March 24, 1909, the 6-square-mile area officially became the Town of Portage Lake. Fast forward 100 years to 2008-2009 when a group of Portage Lake residents and enthusiasts began working on a publication for the Town's Centennial celebration that included actual historical events and the histories of the families that made and make Portage Lake what it is, along with some great and never-before-seen photos. That publication, "Portage Lake: History & Hearsay", proved to be the launching pad for an historical society for this little town.

Over the years, there have been many attempts and failures to start up an historical society. There was definitely interest, but for one reason or another it never really took off. Until work began on "Portage Lake: History & Hearsay". Meeting at least once a month, the group of people working on the book spent hours together poring over newspaper articles, pictures, and

personal memories. And when it was all over, there was a consensus feeling that more needed to be done. After the Centennial celebrations in July of 2009, a core group from the original History Book Committee continued meeting once a month. In June of 2010, the Portage Lake Historical Society was born and officially incorporated as a 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization. With this incorporation, the Society is required to have 4 officers and 3 Board members to be elected at an annual meeting. The original founding officers were Rachel Stevens as President; Sarah L. Brooks as Vice President; Ella Stevens as Treasurer, and Corrine M. Routhier as Secretary. Founding Board members were Wilza Robertson, Jim Dumond and Ray E. Cyr.

June of 2015 marked the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of this great little organization. This new quarterly newsletter is meant to highlight some of the successes (and difficulties) the Society has had, along with information on what is in store for the future. We hope you the reader will be as excited about the newsletters as we are!



### Willys Jeep Returns Home

Former Portage Lake Fire Department 1947 Willys Jeep returns home from Bangor Museum (page 2)



### Annual Society Events

Learn more about events hosted by the Portage Lake Historical Society, and learn how to become a part of them! (page 3)

## Blast from the (recent) Past

by Corrine Routhier

Many moons ago, the Portage Lake Fire Department was blessed with a rare piece of equipment: a 1947 Willys Jeep. This is one of the only, if not THE only, Willys Jeep owned by a Fire Department and still in working condition.

The Jeep was used for a short time as the only source of fire-fighting equipment this small town's fire department had, before the purchase of a larger tanker around 1971. A trailer with a water tank was hauled behind the Jeep, and the hoses attached were used to draught the water either from the tank or directly from the lake in order to put out a fire. Since the vehicle was a lot smaller than the bigger trucks, it remained in use to fight fires at camps along the lake or grass fire—it could "fit" into smaller areas. The Jeep was repainted and cleaned up in the late 1970's in Fort Kent, when Louis Michaud was fire chief. It was around this time that gold lettering was painted along the side to designate it as belonging to the Portage Lake Fire Department. It was kind of phased out of regular use in the 1980's, used mostly for parades. Then



around 1985, the Jeep was loaned to the Hose 5 Firefighting Museum on State Street in Bangor as part of their display. In the spring of 2015, a letter from the curator of the Hose 5 Museum asked for the Town to reclaim its treasure, as they were changing their display. With only a few weeks before it had to be done, the Town of Portage Lake, its Fire Department and the Historical Society worked together and hired Marcel Theriault to bring the beloved Jeep back home, just days before the Memorial Day parade. It was quickly cleaned up, the battery was charged, and Chief Brian Cote drove the Jeep again in a Portage Lake Memorial Day parade for the first time in over 30 years (see above)! It was

again driven in the Portage Lake Summer Round-up Parade in August of 2015 by former chiefs Wayne Gagnon and Herb McPherson. In the fall of 2015, the Fire Department members voted to gift the Jeep to the Portage Lake Historical Society.

### WANT TO LEARN MORE?

For more information about the Hose 5 Firehouse Museum, visit <http://hosefive.mainmemory.net/page/2151/display.html>



*Candles burning in memory of Wilza Robertson in August of 2015 at the Luminary Memorial Ceremony held at the Portage Lake Centennial Pavilion*

## Lost Treasures

by Corrine Routhier

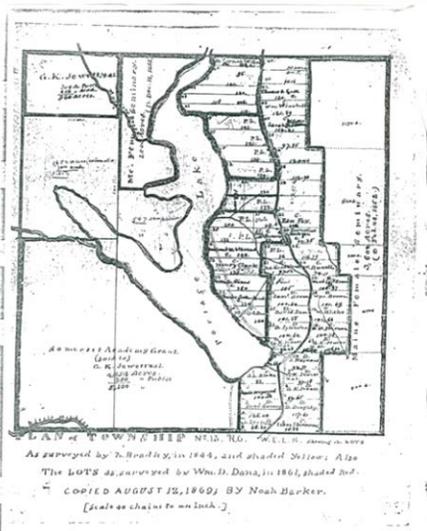
One of the definitions of the word "treasure", according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is "a person who is greatly loved or valued especially because of being very helpful". Since the inception of the Portage Lake Historical Society in 2010, our group and larger community has lost two great treasurers. One was Ms. Rachel Stevens in May of 2014 and the other was Ms. Wilza Robertson in early March of 2015. Both of these ladies understood the importance of preserving our Town's

history for future generations. Rachel (or Ms. Stevens to anyone who had her as their elementary school teacher) volunteered to become the head of the Historical Society as its president without a second thought about it when we were newly-formed. And Wilza was integral in the wording of our Society's Mission Statement, was an original Board member, and stayed on as such for 5 years. We owe both of these women our gratitude for their dedication to Portage Lake.

## FUN FACTS ABOUT PORTAGE LAKE

**Happy Birthday!**

Portage Lake was incorporated as a town on March 24, 1909. Before that it was called Portage Lake Plantation.

**How did we get here?**

Portage Lake was first settled by Matthew Stevens and his family in the 1840s. He traveled from his home in Litchfield, ME, to this area to make his mark on the land. The Stevens family farm was built on the main road, now Route 11, going north toward Eagle Lake, just across from where the golf course is now.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

[www.townofportage.org](http://www.townofportage.org) or visit the Portage Lake, Maine Historical Society page on Facebook



*Luminary bags set up for the Memorial Luminary Ceremony in August of 2014 at the Portage Lake Centennial Pavilion on West Road.*

## Creating Traditions

by Corrine Routhier

We all have our traditions. Every year for Christmas, you may gather at the same family-member's home for a celebration. Or on your anniversary you may go to the same spot where you first met to celebrate the special day. Our Historical Society is no different; we like traditions because they can create a rich history for those involved. But a tradition has to start somewhere! Since the Portage Lake Centennial in 2009, the Historical Society has kept up at least two traditions that were originally held as part of the Town's festivities that year. One is the annual Canoe Carry and the other is the Memorial Luminary Ceremony.

**Canoe Carry**

Jim Dumond gets the credit for the annual Canoe Carry. When the community was asked to come up with some events to celebrate Portage Lake, Jim thought a Canoe Carry was a no-brainer! After all, "portage" means to carry [a canoe or boat] from one navigable body of water to another. Back in the early days of this area, the area's Native Americans, and later French loggers, would haul their canoes from Little Machias (which is part of the Aroostook River chain) to Portage Lake (which is part of the Fish River chain) and vice versa in order to reach different areas using the different bodies of water.

Jim's idea was simple: carry a big canoe

through the logging roads from Little Machias to a launch point on Portage Lake, and paddle it to the shore near the Seaplane Base. This idea got a lot of support, and Jim quickly had a good group of able-bodied men to take turns carrying their canoes. More canoes met the group at the launch point, which is just across the end of the Fish River Road, and together they all paddled their canoes to the Seaplane Base. On this first trip, the group then walked up to the playground of the Municipal Building, where Wesget Sipu Native American tribe members were waiting for them, drumming them in with their ceremonial drum to signify the friendship the French in and around Portage Lake had with the Native Americans of the area.

If you have never stood on the shore of the Seaplane Base to

watch as the paddlers come to shore, you should make this your year! The Wesget Sipu tribe members are still on hand to drum them in, except now they sit right outside the Seaplane Base to perform for the crowd that gathers. And when the paddlers come across the water, the timing is perfect. The event



now takes place in mid-August, so by the time they row across the water there is a spectacular sunset in view! And they are greeted on shore by an "authentic" French logger in a fur coat (ask Sarah Brooks how hot it can get wearing a fur coat in August!) It really is a sight to see!

### Memorial Luminary Ceremony

As a Historical Society, we are always looking for ways to preserve memories. Again for the Town's Centennial in 2009, some community members helping to plan some of the events wanted a way to remember people who were instrumental in building the Town, both from its beginning to its more recent times. One suggestion was to hold a

memorial ceremony with luminary bags and candles; some had seen other such events and they thought it was very simple but very moving. Plans were made, bags and candles were bought (and a lot of kitty litter to hold the bags down!). The event was to take place at the new Centennial Pavilion, immediately following the Community Pot Luck supper. There were about 80 bags sold that first year, with names ranging from our Town's first settlers (members of the Stevens' family) to people who had recently passed away, to people who had never been to Portage Lake but were remembered by family members who attended. The names were listed and read aloud, with a

bell tone following each name.

Not much has changed in 5 years since this first ceremony, except that the number of bags increases each year, which shows us that this an important event to many people. In 2015, the bags were placed on make-shift shelves for better viewing, instead of on the floor in the center of the Pavilion. This event is a fund-raiser for the Society, but we don't make much money from it. We enjoy it for its simplicity and it's a way for us to give back a little bit to the Community. We have been told many times how moving the ceremony is. And for us, that is music to our ears!

## Preserving our Past

by Corrine Routhier

Sometimes some great things come about in strange ways. In the spring of 2015 one of our local history buffs Judy Moreau visited me at the Town Office (where I work as the Town's Deputy Clerk and Treasurer) and told me to get onto "The Internet" and look something up for her. She had learned about a website called the Penobscot Marine Museum that had old pictures of Portage Lake and she wanted me to get to the site so she could see them. Now, I can spend hours looking at old pictures of Portage Lake, gazing over every detail in every corner of every picture until I can see the most minute detail (for instance, there are men standing in the open porch of the Blanchard's mill in



the photo above). So I was very excited to learn about this website. I spent hours on end looking over pictures of Portage Lake, Ashland, Sheridan, Eagle Lake, and Masardis (where my dad was born); I had a hard time to look away! There were so many great photos of Portage Lake on this website, in fact, that the Portage Lake Historical Society purchased 44 of them, all of Portage Lake scenes that none of us had come across before. The photos ended up costing the Society about \$18 each for 8X10 size, and we are currently having them framed. Each frame will be hand-made by local photographer Stephen

Cyr, and the prints will be ready for display in the summer of 2016 at the Portage Lake Town Hall. This was a big step in the future of the Society; this is a preservation of Portage Lake's past.

The Penobscot Marine Museum's prints are taken from old postcards, the negatives of which PMM is working to preserve. We thank them for their efforts,

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit [penobscotmarinemuseum.org](http://penobscotmarinemuseum.org) to view more pictures of Portage Lake and other Maine towns



## Our Mission

by Corrine Routhier

Every organization has a mission, and ours is no exception. While the original Portage Lake Historical Society Board members and Officers were discussing possible incorporation efforts in 2010, it became apparent that we couldn't expect others to want to be a part of our group if we didn't define what exactly it is that our group *does*. So we began to brainstorm our mission statement. A mission statement is a written declaration of an organization's core purpose and focus that normally remains unchanged over time ([www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com)). If we were to stand the test of time as a group, we needed to decide what it was we wanted to do during that time. Ms. Wilza Robertson, being the avid wordsmith that she was, began immediately to jot down some ideas she had during that meeting. Those ideas, along with some tweaking here and there, resulted in the final mission statement for the Historical Society:

*~To preserve the past, present, and future of Portage Lake*

*~To instill a desire in future generations to explore the rich heritage of our community*

*~To be an educational resource*

*~To show the essence of who we are and what we will become*

With that, the Society officers & board members set out to promote itself through events and word of mouth to our community, always with the mission station in the back of our minds. Each time something was done, there was an emphasis on how it related to Portage and its history. And in doing so, the Society has added to and continues to add to the history of Portage Lake.

## Summer Displays

New in 2015, each summer the Historical Society chooses a theme and creates a display around that theme in the voting room at the Town Hall. In 2015, that theme was "Portage Lake Schools". It showcased some great artifacts from the old schools in our town, including a set of maps in a wooden box that was hung on the wall in one of the classrooms of the old High School (thank you Judy Moreau for that donation!). In 2016, our display will be focused on the lumber & logging industry in and around Portage Lake. We have many great photographs of this theme over the



years, but we NEED YOUR HELP!! We would like to make the voting room into a "mini-museum" complete with actual items used by local lumberman, big or small. If you have any items we could use, or know of anyone who does, please contact any officer or Board Member, or drop off the items (clearly marked as to what it is and who it belongs to!!) at the Town Office. We had so much great feed-back from last summer's school theme; we would like to make this one bigger and better! The summer display, or "mini-museum", runs from June to the first part of September.

## OUR ORGANIZATION



**PLHS Officers for 2015-2016:**  
**Corrine Routhier, President**  
**Sarah Brooks, Vice President**  
**Barbara Pitcairn, Treasurer**  
**Secretary is currently vacant**  
**Board of Directors:**  
**Jim Dumond**  
**Marcelle Gagnon**  
**Betty Benson**

We currently have about 35 members, including the officers and board members. We'd love for that number to grow!!

### MEETING SCHEDULE:

March 28  
 April 25  
 May 23  
 June 27  
 July 25  
 August 22  
 September 26

## OTHER EVENTS



Photo of annual dinner taken in June of 2012

### Annual Dinner

The Portage Lake Historical Society holds its annual Ham & Bean dinner for the community in June of each year, in conjunction with its required annual business meeting to choose officers and board members. The cost of this dinner is a donation, with membership forms available. It takes a lot of work to put on this event, and we are grateful for the support from the community!

# Portage Lake Historical Society Quarterly Newsletter

Po Box 65  
Portage Lake, ME 04768



The Portage Lake Historical Society meets on the 4<sup>th</sup> Monday of each month from March to October. Meetings are held in the Voting Room (we like to call it the History Room☺) at the Portage Lake Town Hall at 6:30 in the evening, unless otherwise stated. All of our regular meetings are open to the public, but occasionally we hold meetings specifically intended for Board members and officers. We do encourage anyone to join! And the membership fee is fairly cheap: only \$10 per person, per year. With your membership, you will receive personal invitations to our events and the last two quarterly installments of the yearly newsletters.

## Membership Form

Name(s) (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Amount remitted: \$ \_\_\_\_\_ (\$10 per person)

Please remit this along with a check or money order to **Portage Lake Historical Society, PO Box 65, Portage Lake, ME 04768**. Make the check payable to Portage Lake Historical Society.

