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entertainment magazine
What's going on here
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Guests mill around Bangs Hallet House during July 24 open house

'Insurance doesn't replace history'

Bangs Hallet House burglary stuns, unites Yarmouth community

By Karyn Bober Kuhn and Bob Snell

Yarmouth suffered a great historical loss late Thursday, July 21, when two men forced their way into the Captain Bangs Hallet House in Yarmouth Port, tied up the caretaker, and robbed the museum of nearly \$100,000 worth of antiques that cataloged local history.

Yet the Historical Society of Old Yarmouth (HSOY), proprietors of the museum, are determined not to let the incident change the group's conception of the museum as a living part of the Cape community.

"This is an ongoing and thriving museum," Jean Gardner, HSOY president, said July 24, during the society's annual open house at the Hallet House, which went on despite the crime. "This museum is going to serve generations and we're not going to stop for anyone." The museum will remain open to the public as it has for years, and the educational programs begun there this fall will continue.

Stolen was a 200-piece scrimshaw collection, on permanent loan to HSOY from the New England Society for the Preservation of Antiquities; several paintings of local sea captains and their wives; several vases; a rare 13th century Chinese plate; and a silver-plated teapot containing about \$100 in cash.

Two portraits of Yarmouth seafarer Captain Bangs Hallet were stolen, as well as one of his wife Anna and one each of Captains Asa Eldredge and Howes Baker. The scrimshaw stolen was from the collection of the Bray family of Yarmouth Port and included rare and valuable black scrimshaw as well as everyday items such as clothes pins and knives.

Yarmouth Police detectives immediately began a wide ranging investigation into the robbery. Three days later, Police Detective Steve Xiarhos said he feels "chances are good" that the two male suspects will be caught and some of the stolen items recovered. In addition to local police, Barnstable County Sheriffs Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have been called to assist in the investigation.

Using brochure to steal

Thursday, July 21, at about 10 pm, as Hallet House caretaker Laila Bean prepared to retire for the evening, she

opened the back door to bolt it. As she did, two men who were waiting outside, one wearing a mask, grabbed her. Quickly, before she could get a good look at the two, they blindfolded her, put her in a chair, and tied her at the wrists and ankles with heavy duty tape.



Once full scrimshaw case, half full at left, empty at right

For approximately the next 20 minutes the two went through the house, often reading from a brochure issued by HSOY, available to visitors, which details all items in the house. They periodically asked Bean where they could find particular pieces.

When the robbers left, they told Bean to remain still for half an hour after they left. She managed to free herself in about 10 minutes and called the police immediately. She then called Gardner, who in turn alerted other society members, including Laura Ware of Yarmouth Port, who came and took Bean to spend the rest of the night with her.

Although she is more optimistic now, Gardner said the incident initially nearly devastated her. She found it difficult to believe that all the work and effort of the society members could be so badly rocked by the greed of a few.

Although the society is insured for the stolen items, Gardner says the money will be of little consequence.

"Insurance doesn't replace history," she noted wryly.

Something good will come of this

And insurance doesn't ease Laila Bean's mind, either. The 63-year-old caretaker still has purple bruises on her wrists and ankles from where she was tied. She says that she was indeed frightened during the robbery, but is no longer scared.

"I was praying when I was tied up," she says. "I was praying that if this was going to be my last day, to make it be quick."

In retrospect she had little to fear from the robbers as they left her unharmed. Now, she says she is not afraid to stay in the house and will remain as long as her services are needed. Always an optimist, Bean says she's sure something good will come out of the experience.

"Maybe I won't be so outgoing, maybe I'll be more cautious and maybe I'll be a little more compassionate to other victims (of crime)," she said.

Hired this past fall, Bean has been outgoing in her

Photos by Karyn Bober Kuhn

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Beefing up existing security

Immediately after the robbery, Gardner called Jeffrey Bairstow of Orleans, president of the Cape Cod Antique Dealers Society. Within a day, he put out the word to his members that the robbery had been committed and to be on the lookout for stolen goods.

He also advised Gardner to notify *The Newtown Bee*, and *Maine Antiques Digest*, periodicals in which stolen goods are listed to warn prospective buyers that they are hot.

Robert Eldred read the list of stolen goods at his July 22 auction, alerting the local antiques community about the theft. With all the communication in the dealership community, Gardner hopes to make the items very difficult to sell.

She wonders what worth some of the items, particularly the local paintings, can possibly have in a commercial market, although she acknowledges that the scrimshaw may indeed be valuable because it can be sold piecemeal.

The museum is equipped with an alarm system, but Bean, who sleeps in a back bedroom upstairs in the house, had not yet activated it for the night July 21 when the robbery took place. Gardner assures that security will be boosted at the museum. She plans to light the back parking lot and cut the shrubbery that shrouds it, making it harder for people to hide in shadows.

"We're going to have security people from all over the country tell us how to keep this house safe," says Gardner.

Little things, such as the way the robbers seemed to know that Bean didn't put on the alarm until she went to bed, coupled with interesting events of the day before the robbery, indicate to Gardner that the robbers had been "casing the joint for several days."

Although Bean was not able to identify her attackers, a series of clues have led police to believe the robbers had visited the historic house just a day before the crime. According to Det. Xiarhos, a young man dressed in a three-piece suit toured the house for nearly an hour July 20, asking particular questions about the scrimshaw collection.

He was dropped off at the house by another man who parked their car across the road and remained in it. Volunteer tour guides at the house remembered the young man at first refused to sign the guest register, but when pressed eventually signed in an illegible scrawl. When the register was examined later, police noticed he listed his address as Deerfield. The couple who toured the museum before him listed their address as Deerfield Road in Ohio. Volunteers also said he refused to donate a dollar for the tour.

A clue in words, phrases

Although detectives were initially intrigued by the mystery visitor, Xiarhos says they became more so after reinterviewing the guides and Bean July 24. It was then police discovered the suspect had used similar specific words and phrases when talking about the artwork both during the tour, and while robbing the house.



Photo by Karyn Bober Kuhn

Historical Society President Jean Gardner

Police have released a composite sketch of the suspect. He is listed as being a 25-year-old white male who stands about 5-foot-8, with blue eyes and black wavy hair. Police are also on looking for the late-model maroon car that dropped the suspect off and waited across the village green, while he toured the home.

Xiarhos says police are in the process of contacting dozens of individuals, galleries and museums which deal in the types of art and antiques that were stolen. In addition to getting the word out across the region so people can be on the lookout for the items, Xiarhos says detectives are getting leads on where stolen artwork has turned up in the past. He says other police departments in the area have provided information on local people who fit the criminals' modus operandi.

Gardner is hopeful that the society will again see some of the stolen items. She said she has not yet met with the society's board to discuss considering a ransom in the event the robbers barter for money, as sometimes happens when stolen merchandise has sentimental or historical but little monetary value.

She has decided, however, that she will offer a reward, out of her own pocket if need be, for the recovery of the goods. She admits she hasn't checked that decision out with the board, but is determined to do everything she can to get the society's property back.

"That's how badly I want these things back," she said.



Police sketch of suspect "in museum two days before theft acting very suspicious"

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duties, leading a series of educational programs at the museum, during which Yarmouth school children learn their history firsthand.

Gardner agrees with Bean's optimism. Some good things have already come out of the robbery experience. The outpouring of community support has renewed her faith in people. Already, people have called to offer to help regain or replace the stolen items.

The success of the museum's July 24 open house seemed to back Gardner up. Over 550 people -- hundreds more than ever -- attended the day-long festivities at the Yarmouth Port museum. Despite faint murmurings about the robbery, guests participated in planned activities, which included tours of the facility, refreshments and musical entertainment provided by local youngsters.

Yarmouth artist Heather Braginton-Smith offered to repaint the stolen portraits from photographs if the society wants. And Gardner admits she cried a tear of gratitude when Ed O'Leary of South Yarmouth called the day before the open house to lend his own maritime paintings to the society to hang on the walls made barren by the theft. She took him up on the offer, happily acknowledging that adversity seems to bring out the best in some people.

Jug of cow blood found as medical debris washes ashore in Dennis

Five syringes and a jug of processed cow blood were found on southside Dennis beaches July 24 with the high tide, but Dennis Health Director Ted Dumas discounts any significant danger. He says he has "no intention of closing the beaches."

Waste from hospitals has been washing up on beaches from New Jersey to the Cape, but the material found in Dennis may not be hospital debris at all. The cow blood, which is a type that is not useful in medical labs, may have been used for chum by a fishing boat.

The blood was bottled by Utica Veal Company of Marcy, New York. It is labeled "Defibrinated," "edible" and "salt added." It is used for making blood sausage and other meat products.

The syringes are a common type for diabetics to use to

inject insulin. They could have simply been litter, according to Ruth Taylor, a spokesman for the state Department of Public Health. Only one of the syringes still had a needle attached.

Local and state officials say there is virtually no chance the debris would infect anyone with either the AIDS virus or hepatitis. Still, they warn beach-goers not to touch medical debris -- they should report it to a lifeguard on public beaches, the health department or police.

Dumas met July 25 with Dennis' four beach supervisors, who now direct lifeguards to comb stretches of beach for medical debris. If they find any, it will be sent to state labs for testing to see if the material is dangerous, and to try to find out where it comes from.

Taylor says tests of medical materials from other Mas-

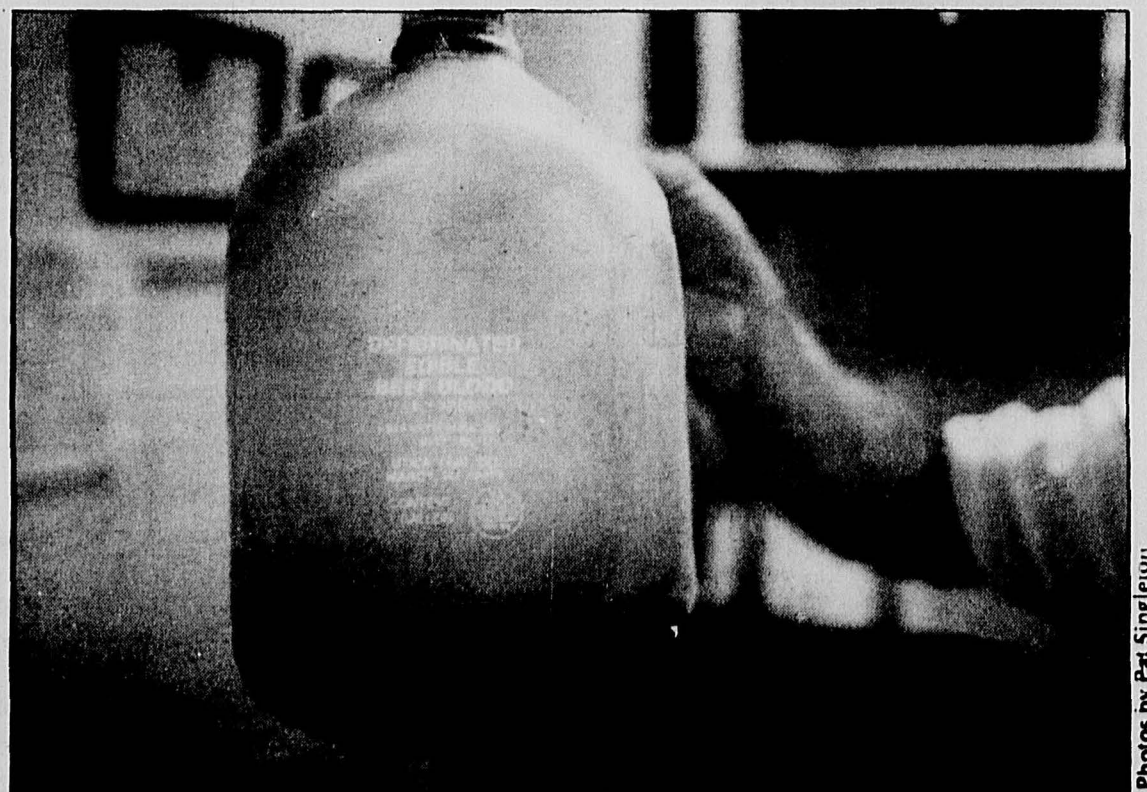
sachusetts beaches have not produced much information -- there was too little blood on them for biological tests, and they had no distinguishing marks.

Taylor stresses her department is not making any assumptions about the source of the materials turned up so far. Public concern about the problem in the mid-Atlantic states may be prompting people to report stuff they otherwise would have simply thrown away.

The state agency issued an advisory about medical waste July 22, noting the amounts found so far are small. In fact, false alarms outnumber valid reports. According to the advisory, some of the supposed medical waste reported to the state has turned out to be cheese wrappers, parts of fireworks, and a panty liner.



Syringes: hospital waste, or a diabetic could have dropped them



Beach blood: probably not medical waste, it's a food product

Photos by Pat Singleton