

# ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ESSEX TOWN-EST.1763 ESSEX JCT.-EST1892 ESSEX COMM. HISTORICAL SOCIETY-EST.1991

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## A Message from the President

I would like to take this opportunity to tell you about some upcoming events and activities that will happen this spring and summer.

June 2 is our annual tag sale where everyone can find great bargains. This is also the day that our museum will open for the summer season. Every Saturday and Sunday it will be open from 1:00 p.m. until 4:00 p.m. We also hope that volunteers will be able to work on our new computer program to inventory our collections while the museum is open.

June 23 and 24 will find members of our historical society in Tunbridge, Vermont. The Vermont Historical Society is hosting the Vermont Historical Expo 2001. Approximately 100 local historical societies around Vermont will be sharing their local history. Our display will feature the history of the Champlain Valley Fair. We hope to inform visitors about the Fair, how it started in Essex Center by our local Grange in 1914, and eventually moved to Essex Junction. Ironically our booth and display will be on the Tunbridge Fair Grounds.

This fall marks our 10th anniversary as an historical society and we are seeking ideas on how we can celebrate this event. Please contact me at 879-0619 with any suggestions.

Work crews will be restoring the 1805 schoolhouse this summer on the Town Commons across from the Essex Free Library. Many thanks to Ray Reynolds and his family for moving the schoolhouse from Chapin Road at no cost to the society.

Enjoy your summer and join us for these various activities.

Respectfully,  
George Clapp, President

## The ECHO

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Essex and Essex Junction, Vermont  
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Upcoming  
Events



# The "Hooky House" ~ The 1805 Schoolhouse

*By Steven Geo. von Schenk  
Arlington, Virginia*

I would like to thank all of the members of the Essex Community Historical Society and the Essex Classical Institute for saving the 1805 Schoolhouse on Chapin Road.

I was in Vermont last August for the first time in many years, and made a special trip to see that dear old sagging structure. I was distressed to find it in a state of near total collapse, but encouraged to hear that your organizations are aware of its historical significance, and prepared to move and restore the building, and place it in a position of honor in the town.

It will be happy there, and glad to continue serving an instructive function in the community for the descendants of the children who once studied there.

I know this little building very well. I used to live in it. The first time I saw it, over 40 years ago, it was full of hay bales. It had no cellar. It sat level, on a foundation of stones carefully piled up a long time ago, but which nonetheless had a temporary quality about them, as though the building had been somehow just stored there, and then forgotten. Time flowed around it and left it alone. It had the atmosphere of an abandoned project about it, as though it had been set aside one day with good intentions that never returned, and it slowly settled into its surroundings over time, over a little gully that ran under it, which was home to a large brown snake that scared the hell out of me when I was kid.

For many years my grandparents, Baron

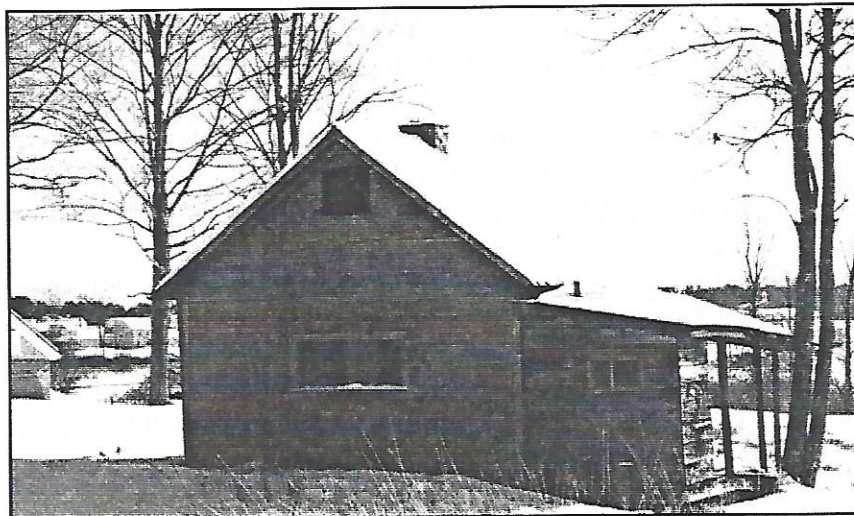
Josef and Baroness Ilse von Schenk, owned the farm on which it stood. They were artists who came to America from Vienna, Austria in 1932, and opened a design studio in New York. Before and during World War II, they were responsible for getting many Viennese artists and intellectuals out of Austria, saving them from an uncertain Nazi future. They gave them work in New York, and got them settled into new and productive lives in America.

The Baron and Baroness became the center of an expatriate European artistic community that

flourished in a new atmosphere of tolerance and freedom. After World War II my grandparents moved to Vermont, finally settling in Essex, where they purchased the property on Chapin Road.

They operated The Vermont Toy Farm for many years there, making Christmas decorations, stuffed animals, dolls and toys, employing many

local families. Perry Towers (of Towers Rd.) was the factory supervisor. His farm bordered the Toy Farm, and he kept all my grandmother's fences up in exchange for the use of her fields for his cows. I remember chasing Perry's cows around the field when I was a wicked little boy. I remember Perry well. He taught me how to roof a barn one summer. I remember Toni, Perlene, and Aaron, her carpenter husband who built so much on the farm and factory. When my grandmother bought the property, there were several large barns on it which she connected to turn the whole complex into the Toy Farm factory.



*The schoolhouse on site off Chapin Road.*



There were also two little freestanding outbuildings between the factory and the mainhouse.

One of these two little buildings was "The Hooky House," which is what we always called the 1805 Schoolhouse. Everybody called it that. I don't remember ever being told how it got that name, or if I even asked, but everybody around knew it was once an old schoolhouse, and I always thought that "hooky" was just a joking reference to the school.

My grandmother turned the Hooky House in to a guest cottage for summer visitors, of which there were many. A porch was built onto the back of it, with a small bathroom on one end. Inside, there was a freestanding chimney off to the right, now gone. It was about 30 inches square, with a pot belled black iron stove in the bottom of it. It was stuccoed brick, and 2 sides of it were covered with old shelving which were originally for the old school books. That column formed the corner of the "kitchenette" area, and the old book shelves were used for the pantry. In the summertime, Toy Farm became an impromptu artist's community with guests from New York and Europe. Some came for a week, some stayed for months, some lingered for years - you never knew who you would find when you showed up. My grandmother had many little apartments and suites of rooms built in the old barns to house all these people. They usually contained a room or two, a small bathroom, and a tiny kitchenette corner. For years every summer this was the house where Kaethe Berl and Vladimir Padwa lived. Kaethe was a world famous Austrian enamelist from Bohemia, with major works in many museums. She was equally famous for her many articles about enameling. She also ran the theatrical design department at the Berkoff School

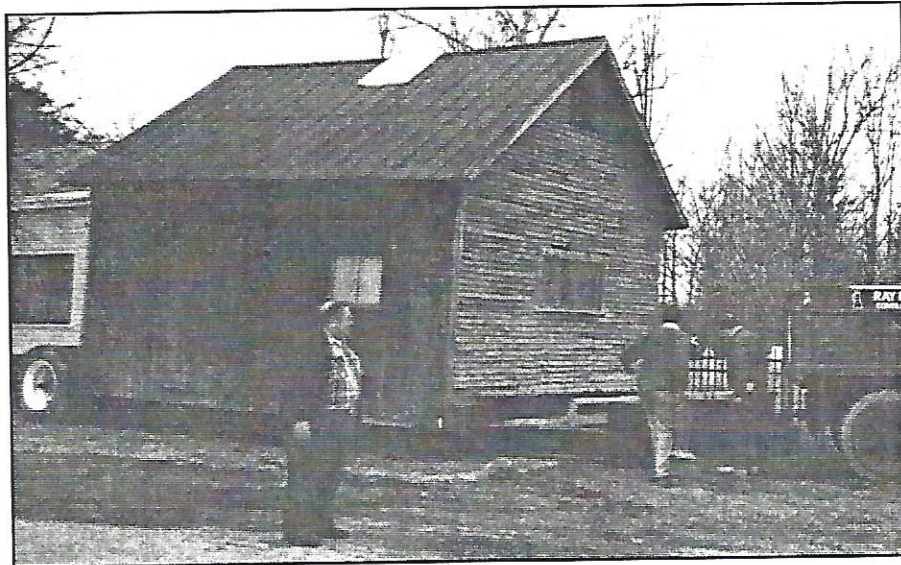
in New York.

Vladimir Padwa was an Estonian pianist who ran the piano department at Columbia University in NY, and was known for many famous symphonies he wrote and performed around the world. My grandmother had a piano installed in the Hooky House for Vladimir to compose on, and give concerts on summer evenings for all of us. Often Austrian friends from Burlington would come for the concerts as well. Sometimes there would be theatrical readings, or recitations, or poetry rounds.

Sometimes there were just long conversations deep into the singing summer night about another world far away that had been swept from reality, and now existed only in the old memories of the old people who gathered in decreasing numbers every summer to share the last golden sinking rays of a distant civilization that somehow still warmed their aging bones and brightened their failing eyes. The Hooky House was the cultural center of the Toy Farm.

It was a remarkable, almost magic time in my life, and I shall never forget it. The animated conversations, the quiet clinking of silver and thin china teacups, and the gentle laughter ringing up like silver bells into the sturdy old hand hewn rafters. During the days we would explore

the woods regularly for mushrooms that were abundant there, and gather apples from the trees that once grew on the low hill behind the house. Kaethe would cut them up and string them and hang them on the porch to dry, and the wasps would go wild, banging on the screen, trying to get to the sweet, winey, withering garlands of apple rings, and rich earthy mushrooms.



*The schoolhouse arrives at its new location on the Common in Essex. Ray Reynolds supervises the work.*



I remember sitting for long afternoons at the porch table with Kaethe and my brothers working on projects for the Toy Farm, sorting and wiring tiny pinecones we gathered in the forest, which would eventually decorate Christmas wreathes and little trees, or designing angels from cones of bright shiny foils, and colored felts, velvets and lace, ribbons and golden cords.

Inside, Vladimir was always working at the piano, and the music would spill through the doorway and mingle with the summer sounds of Vermont beyond the porch - the insects in the field, and the patient cows they pestered, and the swift, swooping birds they attracted. Munch, munch. Buzz, buzz. Chirp. chirp.

The last summer I spent at Toy Farm, I lived in the Hooky House alone, from June until November, 1971. I was in my 20's, about to move to Vienna for a year of study and teaching, and I needed the time to plug into Vermont once again to recharge my soul (and my German) before I left for foreign shores. I spent many quiet hours studying in that cozy little building. During the day, the light would shift across the old wide floorboards, and finally up the walls. When the sun set, I would sit on the porch and read by the light of a kerosene lamp, and hear the gentle bump bump bump of the moths against the screen, and the quiet night song of the summer fields beyond.

Like any student's, my attention often wandered during my studies, and I spent a great deal of time just watching the Hooky House itself. (No TV here). It had a presence, a personality, as though the wood itself had somehow absorbed, and been seasoned by, all the life that had passed through it. It also had a voice - it would shift and creak and adjust itself to wind and weather in subtle changes you would not notice unless you lived there.

I was amazed at how well it had been made. I was always interested in architecture, and I made many drawings that year of the interior construction of the building - the framing, the joints, the beams, the windows and doors. It was such a simple, honest little building, but so confident, so competent. It looked like it had been put together quickly for a utilitarian purpose, but put together by many experienced hands that knew exactly what they were doing. The adz and hatchet and hand saw marks on the wood were sure and strong and even, and quickly, expertly squared off the logs that

became the posts and beams. The joints were carved with such a simple yet delicate precision that the parts fit together like hand in glove, each part supporting the next in a unified whole.

I remember thinking it a marvel of construction, and a monument to the men whose combined, well honed, communal crafts had created it so quickly, so well, so long ago, for the purpose of teaching their children. They probably took time off from their other duties to build this schoolhouse, but they built it well, because they knew, in a very real sense, they were building their own future.

Their efforts were well spent- 200 years later we can still see their handiwork, and everybody in Chittenden County can read. It is to them, and their spirit, and their expertise, that we owe this accomplishment, and the Hooky House is the proof of it. I am happy that in my own life it also had a life of its own, and served a central purpose in being the center of such art and education. I applaud you all, and thank you, for your efforts to save the Hooky House (as I know it), the 1805 Schoolhouse (as you know it). It is a simple, unpretentious, yet important monument to the local Essex community in many ways. I am glad it will be rescued, pulled from its current obscurity and near collapse, restored, and placed in the center of the community once again. I hope future visitors will continue to learn something in this stout little building, that has taught so many people so many things through so many changes over so many years. I am one of them.

I once thought I was its last pupil. I am deeply gratified to learn that, through your efforts at preservation, there will yet be many more to come.

*P.S. My grandparents purchased the property where the schoolhouse stood in the late 1950's. My grandfather died in 1983, and my grandmother died there in January of 1988. The period of time I described covered the 1960's and early 1970's. Although the Toy Farm business was sold, along with the property, in the early 1980's (I believe), my grandmother continued to live there in one of the apartments on the property until her death in 1988.*



# Who Was George Beecher?

By George Clapp

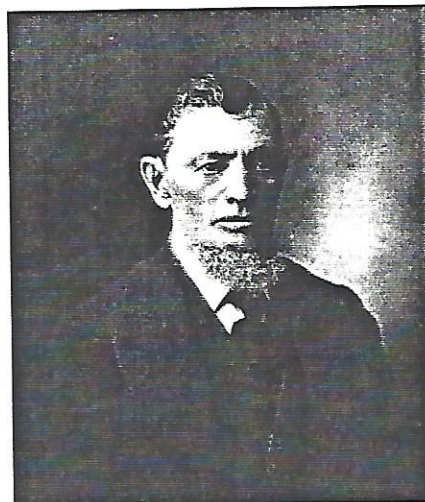
Last fall I received a call from a local resident asking if Bob Wood could come to one of our Board meetings and share some Vermont history with us. Bob lives in Bridgewater, Massachusetts and is an active member of their historical society. My response, of course, was most definitely yes. On the evening of October 26, 2000 Bob came to our Board meeting carrying a small box with a variety of materials inside. After introductions, Bob made his presentation. He explained that his name was Robert Beecher Wood and that his great grandfather had lived in Essex. George Beecher was born in Germany in 1836 and arrived in Essex in 1848. He married Rebecca Fletcher in 1859 and had three children. The Beecher family lived on Osgood Hill Road and later sold their farm and moved to Essex Junction.

George Beecher was a farmer and apiarist (bee keeper) most of his life. He was an active member of the community, serving on the highway commission and select board for a number of terms. Our historical records show that he also served on the Board of the Essex Classical

Institute and held the office of president for a time.

George enlisted in the US Army during the Civil War in August, 1864. He was assigned to Company I, Sixth Regiment, Vermont. He participated in the battles of Winchester, Fisher's Hill, Cedar Creek and the Richmond Campaign. He was honorably discharged in June, 1865.

Bob is currently transcribing his great grandfather's Civil War diary. As Bob shared his family's medals, photographs, and papers. It was very clear how proud he was of his family and his connection to Essex history. The next day Bob toured Essex to see the various locations where his family had lived years before. People still speak of the Beecher School on Osgood Hill Road. Since the fall, Bob has stopped by and given the Historical Society a portfolio of materials so that the Beecher family can be referenced at our museum.



## The Historical Society Needs You

We need volunteers at the Harriet F. Powell Museum this summer, to act as a host for visitors. The museum will be open on Saturdays and Sundays from June to October for three hours each day, 1-4 p.m. Please call any board member to volunteer at the museum.

We are always looking for interesting remembrances of Essex and Essex Jct. to publish in our newsletter and on our web page. It could be about your youth here, an historical site, or some unusual happening in the past. Contact Richard or Lucille Allen at 878-3853.

We are also interested in artifacts, publications, and ephemera that reflect on Essex's past. Feel free to bring anything of this nature to the attention of any board member.

Needed: We are seeking a donation of a TV and VCR to the society. We would like the ability to play several of our videos for museum visitors.

# Essex Community Historical Society

3 Browns River Road  
Essex Jct., Vermont 05452

## Membership Form

Please consider becoming a member or renewing your membership at this time. Or you can pass this on to someone who would like to become a member.

Your dues will help us add to our collection of Essex memorabilia, maintain the museum, publish the ECHO, and sponsor historical programs.

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\_\_\_\_\_ New member                      \_\_\_\_\_ Renewal of membership

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City, state, zip code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

___ Individual membership	\$5.00
___ Family membership	\$10.00
___ Senior membership (60 and over)	\$3.00
___ Student membership (full time)	\$3.00
___ Individual-lifetime	\$100.00

Make checks payable to the Essex Community Historical Society.  
*Thank You.*

ECHO, Spring 2001



# Vermont History Expo 2001

About 100 local historical societies, from every corner of the state, have accepted an invitation from the Vermont Historical Society to participate in the Vermont History Expo 2001. Using artifacts, document, and photographs from their collections, the societies will create unique exhibits that "tell an important story about their community." Once a year, their collective efforts are showcased in a statewide exposition dedicated to the celebration of Vermont's rich heritage. They will be joined by 26 of Vermont's major museums and heritage attractions. Here is an opportunity to visit nearly 125 of Vermont's historic sites at one time and in one place.

Also featured:

- 24 performers in three entertainment areas (adults & children)
- 10 historical presentations
- 16 Hands-on-History workshops (adults & children)
- 14 Meet the Authors/Book Signings
- Genealogy Resource Center
- Civil and Revolutionary War encampments
- Vermont Heritage Animals
- Vermont-only Craft Show & Silent Auction
- Traditional Craft Demonstrations, Antique Farm Equipment
- Viewing of 1890 one-room school house
- Vermont Food Court & Maple Sugar House

PRESENTED BY: The Vermont Historical Society

WHEN: Saturday, June 23 - Sunday, June 24 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

WHERE: Tunbridge World's Fair Grounds, Tunbridge

ADMISSION: Adults, \$5.00

Children/Students (6-18 yrs), \$3.00

Children (5 yrs and under), Free

Group (over 20), discount 20%

INFORMATION: (802) 828-2291

Essex Community Historical Society  
Board of Directors  
2000-2001  
(denotes year of term expiration)

George R. Clapp, President (01)  
18 Sage Circle  
879-0619

Diane Digennaro, Vice President (02)  
47 Brigham Hill Rd.  
878-0276

Lucille Allen, Secretary (02)  
3 Oakwood Ln.  
878-3853

Sherry Norton (01)  
9 Maplelawn Drive  
879-7334

Eva Clough, Treasurer (01)  
42 Brigham Hill Rd.  
879-0849

Tobe Zalinger (01)  
6 Browns River Rd.  
879-1249

David Clough (03)  
42 Brigham Hill Rd.  
879-0849

Janet Wood (01)  
31 Mansfield Drive  
878-5793

Kay Helfrich (02)  
2 Mohawk Ave.  
878-4417

Clinton Russell (03)  
58 Main St.  
878-5887

Ann Yandow (02)  
203 Main St.  
878-5529

Ray Reynolds (02)  
88 Park St.  
878-2193,  
878-2294

Polly Whitcomb (03)  
P.O. Box 5154  
Essex Jct, VT 05452  
878-4479



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## Essex Community Historical Society Tag Sale

### Upcoming Events

Saturday June 2, 2001  
9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Please consider donating your unwanted items to our tag sale. We need items in good condition: furniture, dishes, household items, toys, etc.

Please no clothes, books, tires, mattresses, or plants.

Call either of the following people to arrange a pick up of your items:

George Clapp, 879-0619  
Dave Clough, 879-0849

Or items can be dropped off at the museum on Thursday, May 31 from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

This is our biggest fundraiser of the year. Please help us out.