THE MUNCY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By T. Kenneth Wood, M.D.*

The Muncy Historical Society had its inception in the persistent appeals to me of a Williamsport lady to accept the gift of her husband’s Muncy homestead on condition that I establish therein a local historical society. During my first year of a three-year term as president of the Lycoming Historical Society at Williamsport, she came to me many times, and each time I declined the honor. I tried to explain that I was happy where I was, and that Muncy, having but three thousand inhabitants, could not possibly support such an institution. As she was a wealthy woman, I gently asked her whether she contemplated endowing the projected Muncy Society, and just as gently she said, “No.” It was a fantastic idea, I told her, and I would not undertake the job. I continued declining for three years, and she continued to make her offer. I finished my allotted three years with the Lycoming Historical Society, unmoved by her generous offer; and I retired to my medical practice in Muncy, where I amused myself by reviving J. M. M. Gernerd’s Now and Then, which he had initiated in 1868.

Then came the 1936 Flood. The first floor of the old house in Muncy suffered the effects of five feet of muddy water. After the waters had subsided, I was again called upon by my temptress, accompanied this time by her two adult sons. She carried a sagging knitted reticule, which she set down by her side with a sound resembling the crash of twenty pounds of hardware. She told me that her house down the street was a complete flood-casualty, and that she had decided to abandon it. Would I not please take it over and form a Muncy Historical Society there, in her husband’s birthplace, built in 1824?

“No, no, a thousand times no!” I was more adamant than ever, and promptly changed the subject. But then I made the fatal mistake of asking her what she had in the bag, for it sounded full of

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something heavy. She replied that she and her sons had removed twenty pairs of small brass door knobs from the house, and now intended to hand the building over to a wrecking crew.

"But to take away the door knobs," I said, "would be sacrilege." Indeed, they were the only things I liked about the old ruin. Brightly and eagerly she replied that, if I would accept the gift and her conditions, she would give me the knobs then and there. At last she had touched me in my most vulnerable spot. Before I knew what I was saying, I had capitulated and undertaken what I knew was a herculean, if not impossible, task, just for forty pieces of brass (not silver). My wife was aghast at my folly but bravely promised to help me, and so she did.

To make a long story short, I then took up a little honest planning, and found that, by deeding the property to the borough and taking it back on a ninety-nine year lease for a nominal rental, I could secure a WPA project on a fifty-fifty sharing plan. It was a non-profit affair, technically known as a "civic improvement." Certainly it did improve the looks of the neighborhood. I think the Borough Council must have gone through with the transaction in a trance, for they sent me a tax notice right afterwards. I pointed out to them that they could not collect taxes against their own property, and should not expect to. The truth of this they came to
realize, but not until after several years of discouragement in try-
ing to collect.

Meanwhile the work of restoration went ahead. Of the WPA
workers, all working valiantly, two old men fell dead on the job,
a stone mason and a paper hanger. Sometimes the feebleness of
workers who were old or ill wrung my heart, but I never saw one
“leaning on his shovel,” as the cynics used to say. I raised from
all sources eight thousand dollars, matching the wage score, and
the men worked all winter.

In every town there are detractors and obstructionists. Our
project was nicknamed “The Muncy Hysterical Society.” Signs,
“No Hunting” and “Game Preserve,” were attached by night to
trees and even to the house. Somehow I was never discouraged
by these pseudo-comics, but I suppose my personal stock in Muncy
was never so low. People would constantly ask me, “And how are
you going to support it?”—meaning, of course, that I need not
look to them for one red cent. My answer was, “I don’t know,”
and I did not. But money flowed in from near and far. At almost
every meeting of the building committee I was able to announce
a list of new and astounding contributions, ranging from one
hundred dollars to fifteen hundred dollars, as well as many smaller
sums. The detractors became stilled and their wit was hushed.
Newcomers to Muncy began asking for apartments in this spick-
and-span colonial house.

We joined the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies,
and I came into contact with its officers, who were half amused
and half elated at our success. At the end of our organization’s
first year, the State Historian, Dr. S. K. Stevens, announced a
contest among the ninety-some societies which then constituted
the Federation to see which had accomplished the most in the
previous year. The wording, in the previous year, emboldened me
to appear at the annual spring meeting at Harrisburg and present
our accomplishments. Some ninety speeches were made by persons
representing societies from the greatest to the least in size—which
was us. I was overwhelmed when the three judges brought in the
verdict that Muncy took second place, following the great York
County Society, one of the most wealthy and history-conscious in
the State.

We are now in our nineteenth year. Now and Then, the Society's
official publication, has added seven and a half volumes to Gernerd's original three. We have 650 members, including thirty-four college libraries, research libraries, and genealogical societies stretching across the country from the American Antiquarian Society of Worcester, Massachusetts, to the Huntington Library in California. We support the Muncy Garden Club as well as Muncy's First Public Library, both under our hospitable roof.

The Muncy Historical Society holds eight meetings a year. The papers presented at those meetings are printed, each in its turn, in Now and Then. Our meetings have an average attendance of well over a hundred. The first members were Muncy people exclusively, contemporaries of mine. There are only a few of these left. Many have died or been disabled, but the latter are still reading Now and Then, and, from the former, membership has been passed on to their children or near relatives.

After personal leadership with its constant inspiration, we place Now and Then first among the means of securing new members and keeping them on our mailing list. Prospects used to say, as an excuse for not signing membership blanks, "But I cannot get to the meetings," and that usually ended the solicitation. Now they join if only to read the papers that have been presented. This
printing of all important papers has drawn many talented men and women to appear at our meetings. When these are from a distance, we usually entertain them overnight or for the week-end.

To offer a word of counsel to our fellow societies, we believe that the most worth-while elements in local societies like ours are these: first, a quarterly magazine to print all papers read before the society; second, six or eight get-together meetings a year, each followed by a social hour; and, third, programs of *varied character*. We think, too, that local historical societies should remain local in scope and refrain from nationwide topics. You had better leave those to the big societies. Dig up nuggets of local and unrecorded history in your own back yard, and refuse to equivocate and accept romantic speculation.

About ten years ago someone (we claim no credit) got a bill through the Pennsylvania Legislature permitting county commissioners to contribute, if they so choose, to secondary historical societies that were regularly printing county history. We applied for aid under this act, as we needed help because of mounting printing costs, and our County Commissioners have been allotting us four hundred dollars yearly for that purpose. This, together with income from two pages of advertisements in *Now and Then*, almost takes care of the printing. We have put the three Commissioners on our complimentary list to show our appreciation.