

# ★ PAXTON TOWN HALL ★

The Paxton Town Hall has seen many generations come and go. It has served as a guide post for our governmental affairs for a full century. Let us go back to the beginning and try to visualize the sense of community this town has provided.

In 1888 the town of Paxton erected a town hall. From the estate of Simon Allen came \$1500.00 along with the \$1000 that was voted by the citizens of Paxton at its annual New England Town Meeting. The land was given by the famed Senator, Orator, and Paxton Selectman Ledyard Bill.

Building began in July and was formally dedicated on November 1, 1888. The dedication address was delivered by Col. William Harding of Worcester, a poem by George Maynard also of Worcester, with remarks by Rev. George H. Gould D.D. and scripture reading and dedication prayer by Rev. Alpha Morton.

Ledyard Bill, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, received keys for the town hall from H. H. Pike on behalf of the building committee. The First Congregational Church Choir presented several selections. A Dedication Ball was held that same evening in Allen Hall.

The town hall has always been known as the Town Hall and is called so in the records of the town. Originally, beginning April 1, 1865, the town hall was located in the basement of the First Congregational Church of Paxton.

In 1888 the town hall was also quarters for the Paxton Public Library. The library originally located in the First Congregational Church for eleven years prior to the building of the town hall. The entrance for the library was located on West Street and the library was located entirely where the two rest rooms are today. The library remained in the town hall until 1925. The library loaned only one book at a time and you could not take another until the first was returned.

The Paxton Fire Department stored all their ladders, buckets and hand chemical extinguishers in the basement of the town hall for many, many years.

When the town hall was first built it also housed the school for a year until the white building was completed.

Through the years the town hall has been the gathering place for many societies and social groups such as the Lyceum Debating Society, The Village Improvement Society, the Grange, The American Legion, the Ladies Social Union, The Helping Hand Society just to name a few. In fact, the Catholic Church held its services in the town hall until around 1952.

The typical New England Town Meetings were reported as quite lively. Citizens would bring a box lunch and the day would end with an evening supper cooked right in the town hall kitchen (located where the Police Station used to be) by the Ladies Social Union. Each warrant article was discussed with great enthusiasm with many outgoing citizens taking to the podium.

Many dances were also held in Allen Hall as the upstairs was named. An original dance card from the December 24, 1888 Christmas Eve Ball listed the dances – a quadrille, contra, waltz, military, gallop, tempest, Virginia reel, jig and Arkansas traveler. Dancing was from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. At the New Year's Eve Ball in 1888 a song and dance was introduced as the *New Town Hall*. It was passed on, through 94 year old Paxton resident Etta Robinson of Maple Street, that the floor

of Allen Hall was perfect for dancing because it was springy and vibrations could be felt downstairs.

The Paxton Lyceum Debating Society presented a musical entertainment benefit on January 16, 1891. Admission was 15 cents for adults 10 cents for children. The program included piano solos, harmonica medley, violin solo and piano duets. Attendance was said to be heavy. Regular evenings of entertainment were held for years by the Village Improvement Society every two weeks with local citizens presenting plays and talents.

February 22 every year for 30 or 40 years was a special event. It was the night of the big dance. In 1902, however, while folks enjoyed the evening, a blizzard raged outside forcing residents to spend the night in the town hall until horse-drawn plows could clear the roads later the next day. Etta Robinson was a little girl at the time and remembers her mother telling her no one slept very much that night, the party just went on.

Another event that was held until the 1950's was the Annual Children's Christmas Eve Party in Allen Hall. A committee was formed from representatives of all town organizations and churches. The Christmas tree was said to be so large that it reached the ceiling and sparkled with a hundred lights. Every child from birth to 14 years of age was on Santa's list. Funds were raised by a house to house canvas and donations from organizations helped purchase the gifts. The party opened with a short program of recitations, songs and playlets by pupils of the grammar school. the singing of "jingle Bells" always brought Santa in with big baskets of kisses that he passed out among the children. Each child was called to the stage to receive a large orange, a box of candy and a gift. Etta Robinson remembers bringing her young son Les to one such party. When he received his orange he ran excitedly back to his parents exclaiming, "Mom, I got a pumpkin."

During the 1950's young grammar school students such as our own Pam Hair of Whitney Drive dressed in her Sunday best, white gloves and all, took ballroom dancing lessons in Allen Hall. Boys looking refined in their suit jackets and ties giggled their way through many a lesson.

Few physical changes have occurred in the town hall over the years. The front porch was changed. In the 1950's a screw rod was placed across the ceiling of the upstairs hall. The front porch was changed. In the 1950's a screw rod was placed across the ceiling of the upstairs hall. The building would occasionally shift necessitating the tightening of the crew rod to hold the sides of the building together. It is still in place today. The stage was removed in 1962 to make room for additional office space. Partitions have gone up on the main floor. Town meetings moved from the town hall, as the population increased, to the grammar school and eventually to Anna Maria College. .

From the gallery on the second floor, a former selectman recalls sitting as a young boy watching some energetic town meetings. I have heard tell that some young citizens would cause a pause or two in the town meeting while paper airplanes flew overhead.

Over the years many people have worked in the town hall. These people have been so dedicated to the Town of Paxton that most of them held more than one position at the same time, whether paid or volunteered services. Some people have spend upwards of 40 years of their lives working in the town hall. The spirit of Paxton citizens has helped bring us to this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paxton's Town Hall (1988)

*Pam Smith*