
GROTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

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Groton, Vermont

Spring 2024

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Brothers Harold (left) and Gene Puffer (right) share some time in the broadcast booth. The two brothers, along with a third, Gordon Puffer, and Gene's son, Stephen Puffer, were active in Puffer Brothers Broadcasting from its beginning in 1976. Gene bought his brothers' share of the business after just a few years and was a prominent voice on the airwaves and in the community until his retirement in 2004.

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How you can participate

Please join us May 20 for our annual Peter Paul House clean-up day. Everyone is welcome! Email us at grotonvthistory@gmail.com to let us know if you can make it.

Open houses are scheduled on the first Saturdays of June, July and August. Enjoy the opportunity for a leisurely look around and some conversation.

Consider becoming a GHS member! Check out our website for information on annual and lifetime memberships.

The Story of WYKR: Family History, Local Legacy

LOUISE REYNOLDS

Almost six months ago, when Groton native Josh Smith officially signed the papers for the purchase of Puffer Broadcasting Inc, he hoped to continue a "legacy of community service and local pride," he says. The business, which owns stations WYKR and WTWN, has long stood as a beacon of Upper Valley culture and connection.

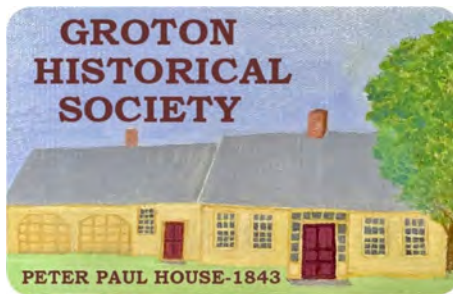
The story of WYKR begins in Groton with Gene Puffer, whose roots run deep in the community. Gene, born in 1929, had a long-time love of baseball. He was the catcher for his high school team, and after graduating in 1947 he enrolled in Arnold College, a small school in Milford, Connecticut, that educated its students primarily in physical education and health.

Gene left Arnold after two years,

returning home to work on the Montpelier and Wells Railroad. Later, he and his wife, Clara, purchased the general store in South Ryegate, which they ran for several years. The Rutland Herald, in a 2004 article marking Gene's retirement from broadcasting after a 40-year career, reported that when Clara saw a newspaper ad for the Career Academy School of Broadcasting offering a home study program, she sent away for the coursework, and Gene began his journey.

In 1967, he passed the exam for his Radio Telephone Third Class Operator license, granted by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). A few years later he was hired for a part-time radio announcing position at WLTV in Littleton, New Hampshire.

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President's Report Spring 2024

I feel so proud of everything we accomplished in 2023. Our annual membership drive was one of the most successful we have ever had. We received so many donations... including two large and beautiful



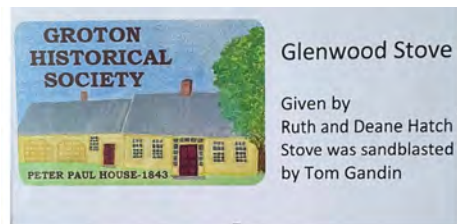
archival dress storage boxes from Jim Bostrom.

These boxes are just the start of our 2024 focus on preserving our precious collection of Groton artifacts while keeping them accessible to the people of Groton.

We learn about the marvelous treasures in the Peter Paul House by visiting, poking around and reading the little signs which tell the "origin stories."

This year we will update the current signage and add new descriptions as part of our work day, May 20th. Please—please—join us on Tuesday, May 20th; everyone is welcome. And LET US KNOW if you can make it. Email us at grotonvthistory@gmail.com or drop us a line: PO BOX 89 Groton VT 05046.

**Here's to spring!
Deborah Jurist**



The old (left) and the new: Plans are underway to update the object/donor signs throughout the PPH. Please join us May 20 to help with this effort—it's an interesting way to learn about the many artifacts we have in the collection.

GHS News

Members of the GHS met February 24 at the library to participate in a Zoom session as part of the Vermont Historical Society Virtual Roundtable. The subject was "Collections Conundrums." The group discussed topics that ranged from finding aids for genealogy research to preserving information and how different groups responded to last summer's flooding.

Managing and cataloguing digital information was also a focal point, as the GHS online archives continue to grow and the online newsletter pdfs have a new search function. (Thank you, Terry Miller!)

Open Houses

Saturday, June 1; 9:30-12:00
Saturday, July 6; 9:30-12:00
Saturday, August 3; 9:30-12:00
Saturday, August 24: open house and annual meeting; 9:30-12:00

Correction: The caption for the photo of the doll's sled in the Winter 2023 issue should have read, "This little sleigh was made for Jean Foster Malnati in the early 1920s. It was handmade by George Page, who was hired man to Jean's grandfather, Jim Smith."

Treasurer's Report

We reviewed our membership fees and categories and changed from annual individual or family memberships and individual lifetime memberships to annual household or household lifetime memberships, with a modest increase in rates.

We had an impressive number of new annual memberships and renewals, at 46. We also had 14 new lifetime memberships, while and a strong uptick in donations.

As of December 31, 2023, below is a summary of our 2023 activity:

Revenues totaled \$6,269 as summarized below:	
Membership revenue, including 14 lifetime memberships	\$3,135
Book, puzzle and merchandise sales	1,425
Donations, including \$100 in memorial donations	<u>1,709</u>
Total revenue	<u>\$6,269</u>
Expenditures totaled \$3,901 as summarized below:	
Insurance	\$1,318
Operating expenses (postal, electric, mowing, etc.)	1,620
Purchases (books & merchandise for resale)	829
Website hosting, domain and monitoring	<u>134</u>
Total expenditures	<u>\$3,901</u>
Excess of revenues over expenses for the year ended 12/31/2023	<u>\$2,368</u>

as of February, 24 2024

Checking account balance	\$9,601.53
12 month CD at Wells River Bank	\$15,274.05

Respectfully submitted,
Susan Pelkey Smith, Treasurer

“WYKR,” *cont.*

He became a familiar voice throughout the area, and soon he had a full-time job as a morning announcer at WCVR, a new station in Randolph, Vermont. But Gene Puffer had bigger dreams: he wanted to establish his own station. It was to be a community hub, a place where locals could turn for news, entertainment, and a sense of belonging.

Building the station from scratch

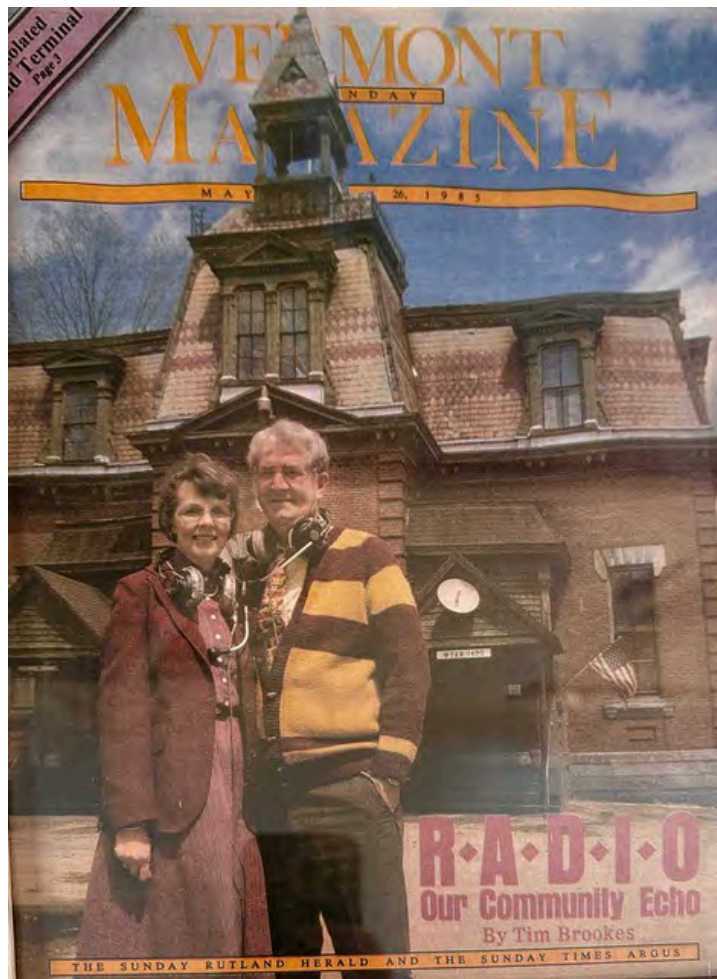
In 1976, brothers Gene, Harold and Gordon Puffer, aided by Gene's young son Stephen (who would pass the FCC exam for his own Operator license the next year), launched Puffer Brothers Radio in the former Wells River High School and Graded School. Retrofitting the 1874 building with the updated electrical system and soundproofing a radio station required was a lot of work. Initially, Gene told the Herald reporter, the local people thought the idea was “crazy.” But, he recalled, “When the antenna came through town, the eyes and ears perked up.”

Janet Puffer, Harold's wife, remembers the period well. “We were very excited,” she said in a phone interview. “It was a great thing for the three brothers to be doing something like this together.” Harold and Janet owned the Puffer Motel at the time, and the engineers and FCC technicians who came up from Washington to make the station operable would stay there. They became part of the community, Janet said.

The station began with an output power of 1,000 watts and the signal WYKR-AM, at 1490 on the dial. Long-time Groton resident Lawrence Daniels remembers sitting in his car on the back lawn of his house on Mountain View Drive when WYKR first came on the air with the sound of Harold Puffer's voice. Daniels recently told Brent Smith, the father of current owner Josh Smith, he offered a



Engineer Warren Chase works on equipment in the broadcasting booth. Technicians and advisers from the Federal Communications Commission came from Washington to help get the station up and running in 1976.



In May, 1985, Clara and Gene Puffer were featured on the cover of the Rutland Herald/Times Argus Sunday magazine.

prayer for the success of the station.

With its reach into the Upper Valley, the station soon became a “cornerstone of community engagement,” WYKR's website reports. “The station really brought our little towns—Groton, Wells River, Woodsville, Ryegate, Newbury—together,” Janet said.

Gene and Stephen oversaw the technical aspects of running the station; Harold was in charge of sales. The production spaces and broadcast studios occupied the ground and middle floors of the building. For a time, Gene and Clara lived on the upstairs floor of the former school, while Stephen and his wife, Teresa, had an apartment in the basement.

“Clara was my No.1 fan and supporter,” Gene told a Caledonian Record reporter in a 2004 article. “She got up with me every morning and answered the phones, wrote up logs, compiled the daily schedule by hand and helped with programming and administration,” he said.

Gene and Clara worked together seven days a week for nearly the next 30 years. WYKR broadcast shows Saturday morning and evening; on Sunday mornings listeners could tune into a broadcast of the neighboring Wells River Congregational church service.

Gene was also on air live every weekday morning from 6-9 with the “Early Bird” show, a blend of news, music, and community announcements. The show would come to include local listeners' birthdays and anniversaries, as well as the P&H Truck Stop menu specials. On Fridays, Gene interviewed local business owners. He told the Rutland Herald his goal was to stay upbeat, avoid controversy and always do his best. The station's music was a mix of genres until the mid-1980's, when Gene decided to go all country.

How did radio broadcasting intertwine with Gene Puffer's early enthusiasm for athletics? Gene had an extensive knowledge of college football and professional baseball. For twenty years, beginning at WCVR in Randolph, Gene—and later, Harold for several years—broadcast Norwich University football games, both home and away. Stephen joined his father

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"WYKR," cont.

from 1981 until live radio coverage ended in 1989. Many local basketball and baseball games, even occasional community baseball games, rounded out the station's menu. Sports coverage sometimes took a very local angle. Janet Puffer recalls being in the broadcasting booth for live coverage of BMU basketball games; Harold did the play-by-play and she provided the color. This was especially fun when their sons, Nathan, David and Matt were playing on the team.

The Bridge Weekly's Bernie Marvin wrote news articles for the station from 1988 to 2008. In a recent email interview, he suggested one reason for Gene's success was 'the very personable way in which [he] delivered news stories.' Over the years, Bernie wrote, people told him "Gene was talking to them personally... Listeners liked that down-home kind of close conversation." He also had a long list of personal and family friends and tended to attract people on the street for a chat about the weather, the community, or sports, Bernie added.

Stephen Puffer credits his dad's popularity to his ability to relate to the community. "He was himself. He did this his way," Stephen wrote in an email interview.

Gene's crew was often out and about in the community. Bernie, who at that time owned the North Country News Independent, recalled the "P&H Truck Stop Forum," a monthly program broadcast live from the dining room of the Wells River restaurant. The show was popular, and the room would fill with diners who came to see the action and hear the interviews, especially when the topic was politics.

One time, Senator Bernie Sanders asked Bernie Marvin and his "Forum" partner, state Representative Rick Hausman, if he could make an appearance, and they agreed. When the Senator (characterized as "prickly yet cap-

tivating" in a 2015 Politico article) arrived, they hoped the interview would go well. What they didn't know until a camera and sound crew showed up five minutes ahead of show time, was that their Truck Stop Forum would be part of a "60 Minutes" segment featuring Sanders. But Gene, Steve and P&H

business, and his son came to play a more prominent role, assisting with the technology that was necessary to keep the station running and on the air. Although the station had an engineer, ultimately—day or night—Stephen was the one who would fix things when the equipment had a glitch. He also prepared the programs and dealt with studio visitors. Together, Stephen and Gene managed advertising, from sales to production.

Stephen met his wife, Teresa, 18 months after the inception of Puffer Brothers Broadcasting, and in 1980 the couple joined the family in ownership of the station.

The business expands and the station grows as "Puffer Broadcasting Inc."

Advertising and programming for the station, now under the name of "Puffer Broadcasting Inc.," continued to expand. In 1986, ten years after it began broadcasting, WYKR changed its frequency and amplified its reach. The Puffers filed paperwork with the FCC to build an FM radio station and in February of 1990, with a bigger tower, located in Haverhill, New Hampshire, WYKR went on the air at 101.3 FM, where listeners can hear it today. The station's output power was now 3,000 watts—three times the initial power with which it had started.

In 1998 Gene Puffer was inducted into the Vermont Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame. The Puffers sold the old school building and moved WYKR to the now familiar small house right on Route 302. Stephen and Teresa gradually took over the ownership of the station. After a long professional career in the insurance industry, Teresa joined Puffer Broadcasting full time. For more than 24 years, she's been an essential partner in the business, helping to manage the finances, answering the phones, editing, and programming the daily logs. Gene signed off from the station in 2004.

Today, Stephen John Puffer is the voice

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**Puffer
Broadcasting, Inc.**

COUNTRY 101.3
W Y K R • F M

www.wykr.com



After 46 years in the broadcasting business, Stephen Puffer was initiated into the Vermont Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 2022.

owner Nelson Baker accommodated the extra bodies and equipment, and the show went off perfectly.

In a 2022 "Bernie's Beat" column in the Bridge Weekly, Bernie Marvin revisited his time at WYKR. The station broadcast live throughout the day, and Bernie reported and wrote the news stories for Gene's morning show. Major stories—state, national or global—came through the Associated Press newswire, a machine that printed developing events "quickly and loudly 24 hours a day."

After the initial few years, Gene bought out his brothers' share in the

“WYKR,” *cont.*

of WYKR on Fridays, from 6 to 9 a.m.— that same “drive time” slot that his father enjoyed. His 46-year career has included announcing, engineering, sales, management and “everything in between,” his station bio says. In December of 2022, like his father, Stephen was honored by the VAB with a place in their Broadcasters Hall of Fame.

Over nearly fifty years of Puffer Broadcasting history, a few things have changed. “I saw the station advance from a staffed station with a DJ running the shows, to where they are now, with all-night broadcasting done electronically without someone being there in the studio flipping switches,” Bernie Marvin writes. Most of the programming now comes through satellite and is recorded digitally.

The original 1976 tower broadcasts WTWN-AM 1100, a family religious station whose feed is from the Moody Bible Institute. The Haverhill tower broadcasts WYKR programming, and listeners can tune into country music on both frequencies. Both stations operate out of the studios on Route 302.

A new era, with a promise of continuity and digital ‘innovation’

Perhaps, however, the biggest change won’t be a big change at all—at least not for listeners. In fact, it might be a bit of a nostalgic embrace of the past. Recently, Stephen and Teresa Puffer, approaching retirement age, began looking for a suitable buyer for Puffer Broadcasting Inc. In that quest, they found Josh Smith, a 47-year-old Groton native (and the son of GHS Vice President Brent Smith).

After graduating from BMU and attending college in St. Louis, Josh served in the Peace Corps in Nigeria and worked for global NGOs before returning to Vermont and New Hampshire, where he found employment with several non-profits.

Josh has created podcasts and an internet radio station featuring Vermont authors, and he certainly brings a global outlook and a deep appreciation for community to his latest venture. He’s also the same age Gene Puffer was when he and his brothers built the station.

The the official signing of the paper-



Teresa Puffer joined her husband at Puffer Broadcasting more than 24 years ago. She helps manage the finances of the business, answers the phones, edits, and programs the daily logs.



Groton native Josh Smith (at right) purchased WYKR-FM 101.3 and WTWN-AM 1100 on the dial from Puffer Broadcasting on the same date 47 years from the day Gene Puffer began the business, as “Puffer Brothers Broadcasting.”

work and purchase of Puffer Broadcasting Inc. was completed October 3 last year, 47 years to the day when WYKR first went live. The five-month-long FCC permitting review was completed several weeks later, and Josh Smith’s Yankee Kingdom Media Corporation was officially on the air. Josh says his vision for WYKR is “rooted in its history—honoring the legacy of its founder while embracing the future through digital innovation and expanded online engagement.”

What does that mean for listeners? The station will still send a shout-out to local folks celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. Stephen’s Friday morning show will continue. A new Sunday

segment, “Pastoral Ponderings,” two minutes of thoughts from local pastors, will offer “a modern nod to our roots,” the station’s homepage says. And listeners now can get a daily dose of the “Old Farmer’s Almanac Radio Report” along with their country music. They can also listen digitally, wherever they are, via the new app.

Perhaps most telling is a line on the programming section of the homepage that sounds like both a blast from the past and a hope for the future: “No matter how far you roam, WYKR remains your country, your station, and your home.”

Thank you to Josh Smith, Stephen Puffer, Janet Puffer and Bernie Marvin for your generous help with this story.



Josh Smith says with Yankee Kingdom Media Corp, he intends to honor Gene Puffer’s legacy and commitment to the community. The station’s new app for digital listeners debuted in early March.

Remembrances

Reg Welch, 1938-2024

Reg Welch was an active member of any community he belonged to

WILLARD BENZIE

Reginald David Welch was an active member of the Groton Historical Society for many years. Reg was born December 19, 1938 in St. Johnsbury to Gordon and Ruth (Gibson) Welch. He died February 15, 2024 at Central Vermont Hospital of pneumonia, following treatments for blood infection and lung infection over the last few weeks.

Reg is a direct descendant of Jonathan Welch (1761-1828), an early settler in Groton. Jonathan and his brother Edmund came to Groton with their families in the late 1790's and are listed in the 1800 United States Census of Groton. Their descendants include a large proportion of the families in the Groton Historical Society's family records. Reg was also a descendant of James Whitehill (1753-1835) and was very active in the Whitehill Family Organization that maintains the Historic Site of the Whitehill Stonehouse on the Groton Peacham Road in North Ryegate.



Reg researched and maintained a large genealogy of the Welch and related families in Groton and the surrounding area. He also kept an up-to-date copy of the Groton Historical Society Family Records. He worked with many local, state, national, and international historical societies and record repositories to collect details of his family tree. Reg even traveled to Scotland to visit ancient family homesteads, surprising and endearing the current residents with his unabashed and sincere curiosity.

Reg grew up in Peacham, Canaan, Island Pond, Newbury, and St Johnsbury.

He attended Keene State College, the University of VT, and graduated from VT Technical College in 1962, with an Associates of Applied Science degree in Highway Technology.

After college, Reg served his country in the United States Army as a radio technician from 1962 to 1965. During his spare time in Korea, he taught English classes to middle school children and sponsored a deaf-mute boy to attend the only school for the deaf in Korea. Following military service, Reg was a career employee of the VT Agency of Transportation. He worked in the construction, design, and utilities sections and traveled to every corner of the state until his retirement in 1996.

Reg was involved in the community as an active member of Bethany Church in Montpelier, where he served as president, historian, and deacon. He coached youth baseball and flag football, and was a Boy Scout leader. He was also a member of the Capital City Jaycees, VT JCI Senate, and the St Andrews Society of VT.

Reg will be greatly missed by his family, friends and all who knew him.

Theresa Cassady Shepard, 1928-2024

Groton native Theresa Cassady Shepard loved the local historical societies and especially the Peter Paul House

PHYLLIS BURKE

The daughter of Henry Cassady and Meroa Emery Cassady, Theresa Cassady was born January 11, 1928 at Cassady's Summit Farm on the Great Road in Groton. She graduated from Groton High School in 1947, and enjoyed telling how, for a couple of years, she drove the students from her neighborhood to school in the village in a Model T Ford "school bus."

After attending Burlington Business College, she married Stanley L. Shep-

ard of Orford in 1948. They lived in Piermont and then moved to Bradford in 1952, making it their permanent home.

The Shepards had four children: Jack, Henrietta (Powers), Annette (Barry), and Meroa (Benjamin); four grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren. They travelled extensively in the U.S. and Canada and were active in the Bradford community. Theresa was a member of the Groton Historical Society, the Bradford Historical Society, and was an assistant leader of Girl Scouts and 4-H.

Theresa lived most of her 96 years in Bradford, but Groton retained a special place in her heart. She loved to be brought back to her home town, and always enjoyed visiting the Historical Society's Peter Paul House while she was able. She died on February 10, 2024 at the Jack Byrne Center in Lebanon, NH.



Mike Blair, 1947-2024

Mike Blair was civic-minded; a former Marine and Groton Selectman, he built the Veteran's Park bandstand

DEBORAH JURIST

On January 7, 2024 when Mike Blair passed away, the Groton Historical Society lost a founding member and a most accomplished Civil War expert. He was a "larger than life" man; a Marine, a Select Board member, a business owner, and a Deacon of the Baptist Church.

By the time I got to know Mike he was already suffering from Posterior Cortical Atrophy, a form of dementia which was the cause of his death. But as was his way, he taught us so much as he shared his collection of Civil War artifacts. He set up a display when the GHS hosted its first event and concert in the gazebo (built by Mike) in Veterans' Park.

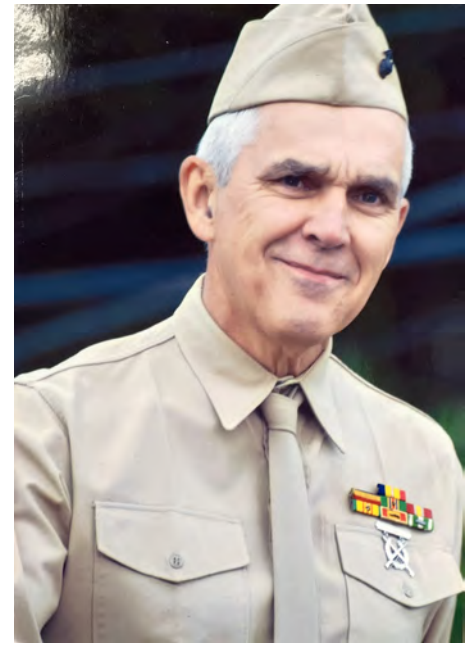
William Scott, the Sleeping Sentinel, was the subject of that event and here again Mike was closely connected. For decades he faithfully mowed the William Scott Monument property, which was located one mile from his home in West Groton, where William Scott grew up.

Mike and Sally Blair were married for 54 years. They raised four children and worked together in the company they started, Northeastern Log Erectors.

These are Sally's words:

"One of his favorite quotes was, 'Do not regret growing old, it is a privilege denied to many.' After serving in the Marine Corps loading the dead and wounded onto choppers as they hovered in the air, he felt blessed to be able to come home to a family and lead a productive life. Many were denied that privilege."

We send our heartfelt thoughts to Josephine French, Sally's Mom, who is in hospice care in Florida.



Colin Morrison, 1947-2023

Colin Morrison was an Air Force Veteran and a member of the Groton Gremlins state championship basketball team

DEBORAH JURIST

Colin Morrison, age 76, of Concord, NH, passed away after a brief illness on December 18, 2023. He was born in St. Johnsbury, the son of the late Wesley and Lillian (Darling) Morrison.

Colin grew up in Groton. He skated with classmate Allen Goodine on the Wells River, just above the dam, and loved shooting hoops with Allen and Butch Gandin in his barn, where the hoop height was low and the floor was made of uneven barn boards.

His practice surely paid off: Colin played in the forward position for the Groton Gremlins when they won the state championship in 1962. He graduated from Groton High School in 1964.

After high school, Colin joined the Air Force. He later worked for Blake's Creamery, in Manchester, New Hampshire, for more than 40 years, until his retirement.

Colin is survived by his wife of 52 years, Bonnie (Sanborn) Morrison of



Concord; his children, Brenda (Stuart), Barbara (Hawks) and Scott Morrison; seven grandchildren; two sisters, Sharon (Stumpf) and Shelley (Lauzon) of Groton; and brother, David Morrison.

Catching People's Stories

Jane Beck will speak at the Groton Free Public Library, June 6 at 5:30 p.m.

Jane has used the recorded interview as her major source of material for exhibits, media and written materials throughout her career. This technique puts the focus on people, personal history, family stories, experiences, values and attitudes—ordinary people often doing extraordinary things.

This will be a reflective talk on why people tell stories and what they mean to an individual. Jane will share examples of how these stories are used.

This talk, a collaboration between the Library and the GHS, is free, open to the public, and accessible for those with disabilities.



Groton Historical Society
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