

HAMBURG HISTORY

A special section contributed by Mr. Daniel Barr on behalf of the Hamburg Historical Society

The Gingerbread Castle

Hamburg School has generously allowed the Hamburg Historical Society to use the two trophy cases in the lobby of the middle school to display items from our history. I decided that the first two displays should be the “Gingerbread Castle” and a man named Reeve Harden. This month, I want to tell you about the Castle, and next month’s column will be on Mr. Harden.

The Gingerbread Castle was the brainchild of F.H. Bennett. Mr. Bennett owned and operated the Wheatsworth Mills. He had started his business in NYC. But due to high labor costs, he moved his business to rural Hamburg, NJ. Mr. Bennett was the inventor of the Wheatsworth Cracker and Milk Bone dog biscuits. Bennett and his wife did not have any children of their own, but they had a great love for children. One night they went to NYC to see a play on Broadway. That play was Hansel & Gretel. Bennett had a vision of building a castle -like fairy land after the Grimm Brothers tales. The set designer of that play was a man named Joseph Urban. Urban was a world renowned architect from Austria. Bennett hired him to design his vision. On the site of an old blast furnace, Urban set out to design the Gingerbread Castle. Construction started in 1928 and it took 2 years to build. It had a grand opening in 1930 and cost \$250,000 to complete. The construction took place at the time of the great depression and along with the construction of the High Point Monument was a boom to the local workforce.

Bennett, being a baker by trade, built the castle to resemble cookies, crackers and icing dripping off the roof. It was said that the castle was made of these edible delights, but when touched by human hands, they turned to stone. This was told to the children by tour guides who were local children dressed like Hansel & Gretel. As you toured the castle you were taken up stairways lined with elephants, passed a juggling seal, black cats, and two owls that guarded the entrance. Inside children were told of the various Grimm’s fairy tales such as Little Miss Muffet, Jack and the Beanstalk, Snow White and others. My personal memory consists of nightmares of the giant spider and the bones of children that had been cooked in the witch’s cauldron. You could also see the Old Lady in the Shoe, Humpty Dumpty, Gingerbread men, and other attractions that were outside the castle. There was also a giant open storybook with Hansel & Gretel on one side and you could pose on the other side for pictures. Every year my sisters and I would get our picture taken in the storybook.. Even though we lived in Hamburg, we always looked forward to going to the castle every summer and riding the “Gingerbread Castle Limited” train, or even fishing in the Walkill next to the castle.

In 1931, Bennett sold the mill and castle to Nabisco. Over the years the property changed hands many times, but the new owner would always keep the castle open. In 1943 Plastoid Corporation purchased the property and operated the castle until it closed in 1977. After that, the castle fell on hard times until the late ‘80’s when it was bought and re-opened for a brief time until a fire forced the castle to close for good in the early ‘90’s. Now, we have new owners, and they have pledged to see it re-opened in some form. In the meantime, please stop by and see my collection of castle memorabilia and artifacts, and hopefully we will be able to tour the castle again!

