

Highlands Historical Society

Spring 2009

To preserve and promote the rich heritage of Highlands

Highlands, N. C.

KELSEY AND HUTCHINSON AND THE FOUNDING OF HIGHLANDS PART I

In January of 1875, Samuel Truman Kelsey and Clinton Carter Hutchinson left Reno, Kansas, on a venture to establish a community in the southern Appalachians. While the two men were quite different in some respects, they were much alike in others. Both were men of vision: both were born and spent their childhoods in the East; both went west to Illinois as young men; both later moved to Kansas where they met; both shared a vision of establishing a community in the Appalachian Mountains; and both had the initiative to convert their dreams into reality.

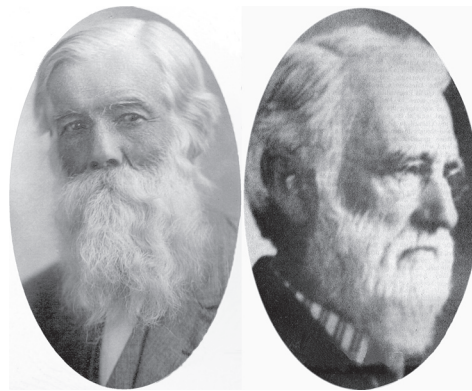
Mr. Kelsey was born November 14, 1832, in Florida, New York, about fifty miles northwest of New York City. At the age of four he moved with his family to a farm surrounded by virgin forests sixty miles south of Buffalo. As the years passed, he witnessed the destruction of this forest by lumbermen and then farmers who completed clearing of the land to make fields. This experience kindled an interest in forestry that remained with him for the rest of his life. Also at this farm his father grew apples which the boy felt were so good that they should be enjoyed by all people. At the age of twelve he determined that he would become a great orchardist who would grow and sell beautiful fruit. And another youthful experience also influenced his career. While still a boy, he served as a guide to the Rock City attraction near Chattanooga. In that capacity he became familiar with the southern part of our country and began to learn of the beauties and potential benefits of the mountains.

At the age of twenty-one Mr. Kelsey took the advice of Horace Greely and went west to grow up with the

country. He went first to Bloomington, Illinois, where he was employed by a nursery company and where he married Katherine Ricksecker, his wife of many years. While employed in Bloomington, he gathered seedlings from eastern and northern forests and transplanted them to the Midwest plains. Attending a meeting of the American Pomological Society at Rochester, New York, he saw a display of fruits by Westbrook and Mendenhall of Greensboro, North Carolina. This fruit, particularly the apples, appeared superior to the fruits from any northern part of the country. Mr. Kelsey reasoned that fruit could be grown very successfully in the higher elevations of North Carolina where the climate was milder and the growing season longer than

in the North. He sought information regarding the climate and resources of the Southern mountains, and he concluded that this information supported his belief. The thought of growing luscious fruits in the Appalachians would stay with him for many years and eventually contribute to his interest in developing a community in the mountains of North Carolina.

In 1865 Mr. Kelsey was invited by Ottawa University in Kansas to come there and plant 15,000 acres of prairie with a variety of trees. There he met Clinton Hutchinson, his future partner, who had established the university. Remaining in Kansas, Mr. Kelsey established a nursery business and was active in "hedging, forest planting, and land improvement." With the help of a financial backer, he acquired 12,000 acres which he planted with 100 miles of Osage Orange hedgerows to be used as fencing. He



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President’s Letter

What an exciting time to be involved with the Highlands Historical Society! HHS was founded only 10 years ago, almost immediately went into debt in order to purchase the Prince House for \$275,000, and, through the efforts and generosity of its supporters, is now within \$20,000 of paying off the mortgage! All this while restoring and furnishing the Prince House, moving and renovating the former Hudson Library building, and equipping a state-of-the-art Archives! And now it’s time to make a wonderful announcement: two supporters of the Historical Society who previously donated \$5,000 have now issued a challenge to the rest of us:

Ned and Linda New will donate up to \$10,000 to match every dollar given to HHS for retirement of the mortgage!

Surely with this incentive we can all join together to match the \$10,000 offered by the News, and wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could celebrate that payment on August 1, 2009, the tenth anniversary of the assumption of the mortgage! Please get out your checkbook now and make a generous donation to the Highlands Historical Society for mortgage retirement..

Of course, maintaining the oldest residence in town and providing a place to store the town’s artifacts are simply the means toward the end of educating residents and tourists alike about the unique history of Highlands. Nurturing pride of community in the hearts of the young people growing up here is one of our primary goals. Watch for news about a children’s summer program we hope to offer.

Those who organized the Historical Society had the wisdom to plan fund-raisers that also teach the Town’s history. This year we plan to continue with “Walk in the Park,” a Tour of Historic Homes, and a Christmas Showhouse. Log onto www.highlandshistory.com for more information. And see the article in this newsletter about this year’s “Walk in the Park.” Hope to see you there!

Elaine Whitehurst

2009 CALENDAR OF EVENTS	
Memorial Day – Oct. 31	Museum and Archives (Fridays and Saturdays)
June 26-28	Walk in the Park
August 8	Tour of Historic Homes
December 5-6	Christmas Show House

OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS

- Elaine W. Whitehurst, President
- Eric NeSmith, Vice President
- Carolyn Patton, Secretary
- Leila Chapman, Treasurer
- Martha Betz, Jeannie S. Chambers, Jim Green, Susie deVille Schiffl, Wiley Sloan, Allen L. “Buck” Trott, Ronnie Waller, Walter Wingfield

CHRISTMAS SHOW HOUSE

Everyone who took the opportunity to visit the Historical Society’s 2008 Christmas Showhouse agreed: this house was ideal to be decorated for Christmas! The two-story log structure was built by legendary Joe Webb and stands on 8 acres of land on Satulah Road. Six local decorators outdid each other with decorations.

Starting with the logs burning in the fireplace of the living room, the whole house looked and smelled like Christmas. Susan Jones of The Dry Sink had the kitchen smelling as if the cook were still preparing gingerbread men and hot cider; Nancy Ostema, owner of Cospes Flowers, decorated the living room; and Barbara Smith, the dining room. Sarah Sloan of Antiques and More provided decorations for the lower-floor bedroom and study, while Connie Thompson of Basketworks in Cashiers set up a gorgeous Christmas tree in one room upstairs. Quilter extraordinaire Liz View actually quilted a special quilt with pillow covers for the upstairs bedroom and sold them to benefit the Historical Society. Our thanks to all the folks who worked to make the 2008 Christmas Showhouse so special!

WALK IN THE PARK 2009

In observance of the 10th anniversary of the Highlands Historical Society and of “Walk in the Park,” seven of the most significant people who ever lived in Highlands will be featured: Samuel Kelsey, co-founder of the town; Baxter White, one of the first settlers and the first postmaster; Mary Chapin Smith, a leader in helping Highlands found the second public library in the State; Professor Thomas Harbison, founder of Highlands Academy, botanist, and writer; Margaretta Ravenel, business-woman and philanthropist; Henry Bascom, Highlands merchant and mayor five times; and Dr. Mary Lapham, operator of the TB Sanatorium in Highlands. Portrayals of these historic characters will be provided respectively by Dean Zuch, Nick Bazan, Wendi Diamond,

Thomas Craig, Jeannie Chambers, Colin Long, and Becky Schilling.

Two performances of “Walk in the Park” will take place at Highlands Memorial Park (the Town cemetery) from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. on June 26 and 27, 2009. A third performance will be provided at the Performing Arts Center on Chestnut Street beginning at 4:00 p.m. on Sunday, June 28. We are pleased that Boy Scouts from Troop 207 will serve as docents for the performance on June 26. Tickets to “Walk in the Park” will be available online or at Cyrano’s Bookshop beginning June 1. Adults: \$15.00; students: free. As always, shuttles will run from the Community Building on Friday and Saturday, the last ones leaving at 7:30.



Mary Chapin Smith

ORAL HISTORY

Historical societies are often associated only with the preservation of historic buildings and memorabilia of past generations. It is the culture, however, of societies of the past—the stories and the way they are told—that are really at the very heart of preservation.

This year, the Highlands Historical Society will be pushing to document the historical happenings of Highlands from residents who best remember the town’s past by beginning the Highlands Oral History Project. This project will target native Highlanders and will document their memories of the town while also recording the dialects in which the stories are told. How else can you preserve the history of a region as

unique as Highlands if you do not capture the local voices of those who remember it best?

HHS is partnering with *The Highlander* and the local television station, channel 14, to document several individuals from the community in both print and visual media. Throughout the year, we will continue to record as much of our past as possible in hopes that future generations will better understand and appreciate their legacy. All recorded interviews will be stored in the Historical Society’s archives and will be available to the public upon request.



Interview with Norman Webb

If you know of an individual whose story needs to be recorded, please contact us at (828) 787-1050 or email highlandshistory@nctv.com.

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“laid out” and landscaped the town of Pomona, named after “pomology,” the branch of knowledge that deals with the cultivation of fruits, and he later planted a line of “experimental stations” across the state of Kansas for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad. Most of his business ventures in Kansas were successful for many years. However, by 1875, a depression in that area had severely impacted his financial condition. He had lost whatever fortune he had accumulated, and he was ready for a new opportunity.

Clinton Hutchinson was a native of Bernard, Vermont, and the son of a map maker. Born December 11, 1833, he also went west as a young man. Going first to Chicago at the age of twenty, he sold real estate there for two years before moving farther westward, this time to Topeka, Kansas, where he again entered the real estate business. He married Martha Young in Kansas, but this marriage ended in 1859 when his wife died shortly after the birth of their first child. For the next two years Mr. Hutchinson served as the first pastor of the Topeka Baptist Church and then continued his real estate activities while engaging in several other business ventures. He was granted \$50,000 by the New York state legislature for the purpose of establishing a university and, with the assistance of a local minister, used these funds to organize Roger Williams University. The two men then collaborated again to establish Ottawa University on 20,000 acres of Indian Reservation in Kansas.

Mr. Hutchinson was also appointed agent for five Indian tribes including the Ottawa, and in 1865 he founded the town of Ottawa, Kansas. In 1871 he entered into an agreement with the Santa Fe Railroad company to establish a community at the point where the railroad crossed the Arkansas River. He bought one square mile of land and laid out the streets and lots to create the town that he named Hutchinson after himself. True to his Baptist heritage, he took steps to discourage the sale of whiskey in the town. When land was sold, he stipulated in the deeds that title to the land would revert to him if alcohol were sold on the property. He was also active in politics, being elected to the Kansas state legislature in 1872.

Mr. Hutchinson’s business ventures in Kansas were

successful, but his stay there was not fully satisfactory. He developed health problems which he attributed to the local climate. Seeking a more favorable environment, he began gathering information about other areas of the country and became interested in the Blue Ridge Mountains through the writings of Silas McDowell. Mr. McDowell was a nationally known botanist and writer, who also farmed and lived by the Cullasaja River between Highlands and Franklin near the foot of the Highlands Plateau. After Mr. McDowell’s apple orchard was destroyed by a severe freeze in 1858, he observed a strange phenomenon. Early frosts did not affect growth on the mountainsides 350 feet above his farm. It was as though “a vast green ribbon” of warm dry air lay above a perfectly horizontal frost line through the entire length of the mountains. Mr. McDowell began to write and promote the Highlands Plateau, which he called the Sugartown Highlands, as being well suited for farming and also as a health and summer resort. His articles in the 1856 *Smithsonian Reports* and other publications were the first to describe the Thermal Belt of the Southern Appalachians.

Attracted by Mr. McDowell’s writings, Mr. Hutchinson traveled to the Cumberland Mountains of East Tennessee and the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina to further investigate the conditions in these locations. He apparently was pleased with what he found and determined that he should establish a new home for himself and his family in this area.

Returning to Kansas, Mr. Hutchinson shared his thoughts and information with Mr. Kelsey, who was also concerned about his health and was ready for a fresh business opportunity. Mr. Kelsey’s old dream of establishing a community and raising fruit on the slopes of the Blue Ridge was rekindled. The two men agreed to unite their experiences, energies, and capital in a new enterprise. They set out from Kansas in January of 1875 seeking a site for a new community to be established in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.

SEE PART II IN NEXT ISSUE

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