

PENTANGLE ARTS

Celebrating 46 Years!

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A Conversation with Pentangle Founders

I recently had the pleasure of meeting with two Pentangle Art's founders, longtime volunteer leaders and dear friends, Gennie Carouso and Patsy Niles. They both attended the March 19, 1974 meeting of artists and arts educators convened at the home of Polly Billings with the intention to form an arts organization. Polly was rightly concerned that neighboring towns had arts organizations and that it was high time Woodstock create one as well.

Though Patsy was the "little engine" that for years developed programming with the able assistance of volunteer artists and educators, she recalled being dragged to that first meeting.

In May 1974, Pentangle Council on the Arts, elected its first officers, most of whom remain in the area: Bob Belisle, President, Patsy Niles, Vice Chair, Peggy Merrill, Secretary, and Bo Gibbs, Treasurer. Over the years Gennie handled the marketing and promotion for all the programming the organization provided to the community right up until 1984 when David McWilliams was hired as the first Executive Director.

Gennie and Patsy recalled their first large scale event, a performance by jazz greats, Noble Sissle and Eubie Black, (known for the score of the first overwhelmingly successful African American musical on Broadway, *Shuffle Along*) at the Woodstock Union High school auditorium August 17, 1974. The concert was part of Pentangle's first three-day Summer Festival held in various locales in Woodstock.

The ladies were nervous right up to the day of the performance since they had no written confirmation from the artists or agents. They phoned Polly Billings who assured them all was well, and they need not worry. They were both relieved and surprised at the amazing turnout. During their stay in Woodstock, Governor Thomas P. Salmon gave Sissle and Black citations recognizing their contributions to the musical history of America.

Pentangle continued the Summer Festival, which entailed a wide variety of programming in the schools, churches, and outdoor locations such as Falkner Park and of course the Village Green throughout the year. Eventually the Fire Department put the kibosh on the Summer Festival on the Green due to its increase in popularity and the fear

that fire trucks would not make it through the village in an emergency.

The mighty cadre of Pentangle volunteers continued to bring a wide range of artists into area schools in addition to partnering with art instructors for exhibits of students work. Patsy balanced parenting two school age kids whilst keeping Pentangle an invaluable cultural and community resource for all ages to enjoy.

Gennie's role with the organization shifted in the late 70's when she was tapped to represent Pentangle in Town discussions around the future of the Town Hall Building including the Town Hall Theatre.

In 1978 \$10,000 was voted at Town Meeting to study all the town's properties, including the Town Hall building.

A 1987 article in *Woodstock Common*, that profiled Gennie, noted that "the study concluded that the theatre should be turned into office space." Gennie, who was/is a commercial and contract interior designer by trade, had the informed foresight to steer the committee away from the idea of turning the theatre into offices and toward a renovation for use as a performing arts venue. She jumped into action drawing up a usage study report for the building, which became the starting point for another Town Hall Committee report outlining proposals for the future use of the building. That report like so many before was filed away until 1984 when oddly enough a discussion regarding a Town/Village merger brought the future of the Town Hall building to the fore.

The Selectboard tasked Pentangle and its first Executive Director, David McWilliams, to oversee and raise funds for the theatre portion of the renovation.

Here we are again looking at the future of the building, this time we aim to be forward thinking as possible, while keeping in mind the building's rich history. Hopefully, the next renovation will well serve the community for 50 plus years to come. Band Aid approaches rarely serve the long-term interest of the community or the taxpayers.

Watch this space for more reflections on the history of this gem in the center of the village. Next week the history of movie screenings in the building that began with "Talkies in the Opera House" in 1930.