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Max Delsignore: Northern New York Community Podcast. Stories from the heart of our community.

Hi there and welcome to the Northern New York Community Podcast, I'm your host Max Delsignore. The North Country has been built on acts of generosity for centuries. Communities have been created and realized because of the leadership and philanthropy of many visionaries. Residents of Northern New York understand why this region is so special, where you live becomes a part of your personal fabric, it is who you are. It may shape your everyday purpose in life but in the North Country your community gives you a sense of place. For Jeannie Brennan and Connie and Larry Barone that sense of place is Sackets Harbor, New York.

The village neighboring Lake Ontario is steeped in a rich history dating back to the early 1800s. Jeannie, Connie and Larry have devoted their lives not only to the preservation of the village's history but other cultural elements that have made their community progressive. They are one of many families who have made giving back to Sackets Harbor and the North Country a lifelong priority. It is a pleasure to have Jeannie, Connie and Larry join us on the podcast.

Constance Barone: Well, thanks for inviting us.

Max Delsignore: Now before we dive in let's set the record straight first and foremost on the spelling of Sackets Harbor. It's been well documented, it's been in debate for many years whether it's one T, two Ts, is there an apostrophe, S, potentially in the name for the municipality. Jeannie, can you share or provide us the official story behind the accurate spelling of Sackets Harbor?

Jeannie Brennan: My husband researched that for quite a while, and on the tombstone for Augustus Sacket in the lakeside cemetery it's spelled with one T, and then we have a plate with all the autographs of the original founders of the village, and again there it's still spelled with just one T.

Max Delsignore: Why do you think there was so much confusion over the years, of saying well, there's an extra T in his name, even though the tombstone states otherwise?

Jeannie Brennan: Well, the reason for the two Ts I think, and the fact that they spell harbor O-U-R instead of R was because it probably sounded a little more elegant than just Sacket, S-A-C-K-E-T. So they, you know, different people would decide that that was the way it had to be spelled. But as I've said, Bob researched it and there was an article in the paper, two Ts are not two T, or something like that, and – but it is supposed to be just one T.

Max Delsignore: Now Jeanie, you were a first grade teacher at Sackets Harbor Central School for 30 years. Can you share with us what education was like in the North Country when you were a teacher?

Jeannie Brennan: We didn't have all the technology that we have now. It was blackboards and chalk and the children I think, if you treated them with respect they were very eager to learn and they wanted to do their best for you as a teacher, and for their parents both. And so over the years I could see that as a whole group they – when they first came to school they didn't know each other. But by the end of the year they really were – shared with each other all the things that they had done that year, and they were always willing to help any new student that came in during the year to show him how you did things and where you did things.

And I evidently earned a reputation of being fair, I expected them to behave because one little boy went home and said – told his mother, 'You can't get away with anything with Missus Brennan. I think she's got eyes at the back of her head.' And another little boy went home one day and went right upstairs to his room instead of going out to play. So his mother thought he was, you know, she went up to find out what was wrong. She said he was very busily putting his – straightening up his room and putting things where they should be, so she asked him, 'Why are you doing that?' 'Well, Missus Brennan said you should keep things neat.' So I don't know if it lasted his whole life but at least first grade it did.

Max Delsignore: So the message kind of sank in with some of your students?

Jeannie Brennan: It did indeed, right, yeah. When I retired one of the second grade teachers informed me that she was very glad I had retired because she said, 'Now I won't have to hear all year long everything Missus Brennan did, everything Missus Brennan said.' So – and I met a lady a month or so ago and she informed me that she had been one of my students 55 years ago, and she said, 'You're the only grade teacher that I remember out of all my years of being in school.' So that made me feel kind of good, yeah.

Max Delsignore: Well, and the impact for you has certainly gone beyond education. In referencing your husband, Bob, the two of you really devoting your entire lives to local history is something that has been -

Jeannie Brennan: Oh, right.

Max Delsignore: - indelible in the village of Sackets Harbor and really the town of Huntsfield.

Jeannie Brennan: Right.

Max Delsignore: Where did that passion, that interest in local history for the two of you, where did that come from?

Jeannie Brennan: Well, Bob was very proud of the fact that he was born in Sackets, they lived in the same property until he was 92 years old and he liked military history, and of course we had Madison Barracks was adjacent to the village, and he did a lot of – for years he researched the history of the village Madison Barracks and what is now Fort Drum, and he would go through the microfilms at the Flower Library, microfilms was the Watertown Daily Times and researching each one of those from 1818 up to 1973. Any article that he found that had to do anything with Sackets, Madison Barracks or Fort Drum, he would make copies of that. And so we have – I think there's 33 ring binders.

They probably weight about five pounds apiece or more, and he would make copies of those articles and we made an index of each book, and then over the years if people came to the village at the municipal building they would send them over to our house and Bob would give them the information about maybe their ancestors that had been stationed at Madison Barracks, or if they wanted the history of the village he was willing to share with him all that. And over the years we purchased many postal cards about Sackets and photos and things, and so eventually in 2000 Arcadia Publishing asked us if we would do a book on the village, which we did.

And one also on Fort Drum, and those have been purchased by, well, I think Sackets book is up to almost 4000 copies now that have been sold. The royalties from those two books were shared with the village Pickering Beach Museum and the Hay Memorial Library in the village. So we were always able to give back in that way to the village.

Max Delsignore: Connie, you grew up in Sackets Harbor, graduated from Sackets Harbor Central School. You've been a world traveler, you've been

a Director of the Historical Society at Elmira in New York. You share it seems to be the same passion as your parents for local history. Approximately 15 years ago you and Larry moved back to the area, after being away for some time. What was the reason for coming back to the community and what are some of those feelings that you had about your hometown?

Constance Barone: Well, growing up in Sackets Harbor was of course very special because of the history, and I think also the serenity of the community, people knew each other, everyone knows – they knew everybody else in the village. The harbor was undeveloped, it was open and very natural. So it was a very beautiful setting and when I was in college I worked at the village’s Pickering Beach Museum a couple of summers, and found a real interest in the thought that I could work in a museum for my career, which is what I did. And then after all of those years, to come back to Sackets, certainly coming back to be near my parents, and a pleasant, peaceful place to retire.

But then I got a full time job, so actually really didn’t retire and working in a business now where we can continue to effectively I hope promote the preservation of the community’s history, and begin to continue to disseminate that information. And with technology today that information can really go world-wide.

Max Delsignore: Tell us a little bit about your current role and what you’re doing as director of the battlefield site in the village, correct?

Constance Barone: Right, yeah. So New York State parks has about 30 or so historic sites across the state, and Sackets Harbor is one of the very few that really totally focuses on the War of 1812. I think one of the interesting aspects is that the National Park Service a number of years ago did a big study and designated Sackets Harbor as one of the top War of 1812 sites in the country. So that’s quite a distinction. And then during the War of 1812 bicentennial we did a number of programs in the community, particularly at the historic site, and some of them were as we say, may be transitory, such as living history, reenacting. But things that are much more permanent, we did the establishing of several monuments.

And so you know, as you visit Sackets Harbor and you come to the memorial tree grove, which was established in 1913, the 100th anniversary of the Second Battle of Sackets Harbor, there’s that beautiful granite monument that the daughters of the War of 1812 funded and had installed. So now we have two additional granite monuments on the property. New York State purchased more land

in recent years to extend the battle grounds, and now on those battle grounds there's a granite monument to the American troops who fought during the War of 1812, and then also a monument to the Crown Forces, the opposing forces, who of course had casualties as well, and the British documented those casualties in great detail.

So we knew the names of the 40 or so men who were left behind, who died at the battle, left behind buried somewhere in the field. And then that granite monument recognizes their contributions.

Max Delsignore: Larry, Sackets Harbor has become kind of like your adopted home in a lot of ways. You're from Batavia, New York, many years as an art educator, what is it about Sackets Harbor and the North Country that really impresses you the most?

Larry Barone: Well, you know, my first contact with the village was through my relationship with Connie, and I think my first visit probably was either in the late 60s or early 1970. And you know, soon as I walked through the door at the Brennan home I could see the love of Sackets Harbor and the North Country environment through the collection and the conversations we would have around the dinner table. So yeah, it didn't take long for me to become very comfortable with that, and then over the years as Connie and I pursued our careers in other areas of either Massachusetts or the Southern tier of New York, we would come to many of the summer programs, you know, reenact the battlefield Fourth of July fireworks – firemen's field days, and the Brennan home was right there in the heart of the village.

So it was pretty easy just to walk out and see the community and how the community would come together for these events year in and year out. And when Connie and I were ready to retire, at least we began thinking about retirement, Sackets was certainly at the top of that list of places that we would like to retire to, primarily to be closer to Bob and Jean. But as it worked out we both were able to pursue our own careers, Connie going to work almost immediately as a site manager at the state historic site, and I over the first few years establishing an art gallery in downtown Sackets that started small and it's still pretty small but it's grown, and my presence and our commitment to the core of the business district has grown with our purchase of the building.

And not only providing a gallery of studio space for myself but we also have two rental units that, you know, have made it kind of interesting. We've always rented to for the most part young

military officers from Madison – excuse me, from Fort Drum. Through that I think made a bigger connection with the day to day life of our military in the North Country, and a more casual off-base environment.

Max Delsignore: Sure. Your talent's very much in the arts and beyond the gallery you have had many works, have shared them globally, and not just locally. What are some of the opportunities, the activities, things that you have seen within the village in terms of the growth of the arts in Sackets Harbor in the last 15 years that you've been here?

Larry Barone: Well, you know, when we first arrived I got interested in the Sackets Harbor Historical Society. They really played an important role in the development of several important historic buildings in downtown Sackets. One of them being the bank building, and there was a wing that the Historical Society was basically using as a home base, but we partnered with the Artists' Association of Northern New York, which was a spinoff of a bigger organization that was centered more around the Watertown area. And they – that group came to Sackets, occupied the wing of the bank building as their temporary gallery as that particular group in the society looked for funding to open up the Historic Cooker House, which is where the – any organization is currently situated.

That building is owned by the Historical Society and we were pivotal in the development and funding of the exterior renovation, structural renovation of the building. And the arts group took on the responsibility of opening the gallery portion, the interior. So it's been that kind of partnership that's been going on for about ten years. That kind of sums up the visual art component that we see here in the village, but you know, there's also community choirs and musical groups and through the church and sometimes just through local interest that have come to flourish in Sackets. And that's all part of the big picture in terms of the arts on the village.

Max Delsignore: Your family and many others inside Sackets Harbor have shown a willingness to make the community where you live more vibrant. Why is being philanthropic, whether it's time, talent, financial capabilities, or otherwise, why is that so vital in making a community thrive here in the North country?

Constance Barone: Well, I think you have to have not only the funds but you also have to have the people to make things happen. So there's two important components, and then you have to have the environment as well. And Sackets seems to have those components. We've been doing it actually since before the War of 1812, I suppose. So for a couple

of hundred years people have been pulling together to make things happen. I think the interesting part about Sackets as well is not only its strategic importance in the past for military aspects, but it's strategically important today for tourism.

And that is very important. Having Madison Barracks in the village, I know really shaped a lot of the culture and the sense of place, but also the interaction between the military and the civilians. And cultural diversity, because the military brought diversity with it, and in some cases historically it didn't work and in other cases it did work, and I think the long term benefits are people from Madison Barracks who chose to live in Sackets, make it their home, raise their families and continue on. I can think of several families that contributed greatly over the years who came through the military through Madison Barracks. And today we still have that tremendous connection but it's with Fort Drum.

And so we have many military associated families and individual people who live in the village but work at Fort Drum. So we continue to have that military civilian kind connection.

Max Delsignore: Diversity's a great point, thinking about how communities evolve over time, and how that diversity's really integrated within those residents that maybe have been there for generations. In thinking about the evolution of the village from a historical, cultural perspective, what are some of the important examples of philanthropy that you've seen? Other projects, programs that have taken place, that have maybe embraced that diversity, but have also allowed the community to really take off, because of that.

Constance Barone: What about Marietta Pickering Hay, and all that she did for the village?

Jeannie Brennan: The Pickering family came to the village just before the War of 1812 and they built a home in 1817 where it is now opposite the battlefield site. And Marietta was very, well, community minded, and she had the nine bells erected in the tower of the Presbyterian Church in honor of her family, and on each of the bells it's the name of the husband and the wife and then in 1899, when they had a huge fire and those bells fell to the ground, of course, she had them sent, the remains, sent down to Troy, New York, and had them recast, so that they are still in the village now and are played periodically. And then she – down through the family eventually the Ewers who were a part of the family, when they passed away in Bermuda they left the building – they left the house and its furnishings to the village to be used as a museum, and which it has

done over many years, and for about – well, over 27 years I was in charge of that.

So we ran it between volunteers to have the museum open each year for visitors to go through and usually would have bus tours come through and local people from other villages around. So it just continued the showing people how the house was furnished and how the family lived until finally the last Pickerings, people of the family, were gone in 1936.

Constance Barone: And then also she established the library.

Jeannie Brennan: Oh yes, right, yeah. In the tower of the Presbyterian Church they had the White Library, I believe they call it the White Library, and she and her husband had a huge collection of all sorts of volumes of books and things, and those – that's where the – before the library was built on the front of the Presbyterian Church, that was what they called the White Library and people would go there to borrow books and use the references that they had.

Constance Barone: And Pickering Beach of course has survived on volunteers, as many of the organizations in Sackets.

Jeannie Brennan: Right. Well, first it was taken over by a group of ladies called the Civic Improvement League, and they took care of it for many years. Eventually their members were older, they either moved away or passed away, and so the museum sat empty for about ten years and that was in quite a bad state of disrepair and I was asked if I would like to take care of it, so I had retired then, in 87, I said oh, sure. And that's how I got involved with that, working with that for finally a couple of years ago I had to retire from doing that work. It's always been staffed by volunteers, has been very successful. Has many interesting articles in it for people to see and most tours would come through and they – doesn't look like a large building from the outside but it's quite a few rooms and lots of things to look at to tell about Augustus Pickering and his career and how he committed suicide and how the rest of the family survived.

Max Delsignore: How important are those volunteer groups to the success of a smaller community? It's not – for efforts like that, you may not have some of these museums or other smaller non-profits that can survive in a small community. How important are those groups?

Jeannie Brennan: Very, very important. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to have it open, you know? I believe now they do – of course we all did that,

we weren't paid for anything, and I never was paid for anything, but I believe now they are hiring someone to have it open, but I'm not sure about that. What's important that you – and we were always looking – they would always have a good group of people who were – the library – after I researched the family and everything else I wrote up a little brochure I guess it's called, FYI, For Your Information, and said, you know, if you're going to take people through the museum you should know something about the family, and something about the furnishings that were in there. And so that kind of helped people out because they didn't just walk through and say well, this is this and this is that.

Constance Barone: Yeah. So I think also at the battlefield site volunteers are extremely important, and one of the things that has been very key to the educational programming is developing a core of volunteers, and today we have almost 50 volunteers that we can draw upon. They're not only Sackets Harbor residents but Watertown, Black River. People are willing to come because they enjoy it so much. Either we're dealing with school students or we have groups of adults who come to the community, and we wouldn't be able to do all of the school tour programs, which are very activity based, without a core of volunteers who lead those activities for the students.

Max Delsignore: You see a lot of these school groups, as you mentioned, come through the site. In thinking about the next generation and their involvement, whether it's to volunteer or be engaged in the community, how can we inspire youth to give back just as your generation and your mother's generation have before?

Constance Barone: Well, I think you have to have some kind of a connection. You need to experience in a positive way, for example, visiting Sackets Harbor, if you're a fourth grader or second grader. And those positive experiences, to know that something important happened there, I think that's how you can take those dreams that the students have and maybe their career choices and they may diverge and go somewhere else for a long time, but maybe they come back as well, because they have that remembrance, that sense of place, and they then begin to carry that on for new generations. I remember as a child, I don't know how old I was, but I remember being at the battlegrounds walking on the stone wall, you know, very young, maybe seven, eight years old.

And then also the centennial monument that – walking around the base of that in your bare feet as a child, and you felt that cold, the granite and how nice that felt in the summertime on a hot summer

day, and when we sit there now in the summer and we watch on Sunday afternoon, the concert's in progress and inevitably there are little kids who want to walk around the base of that monument. So that's been going on probably for 100 years, or more now, because the monument was set up in 1913. So you know, parents, adults, bring the kids, they let them touch the monument, walk on the base and so there are those connections that are being made.

Max Delsignore: How important is philanthropy as a whole to the North Country's future?

Jeannie Brennan: Well, I think if people, you know, we want to continue the atmosphere of the North Country. It's the greatest place to live, I would say. You know it's quiet, we – you are able to do whatever you want to do, and by everybody giving forth, well, like Bob and I, we felt we were very fortunate that we were able to donate money to the foundation. So it has a broader base instead of just keeping it in the village, and we have – you can do more with a broader base and you can touch more communities that way, and it's just part of being a member of the – of this area.

Constance Barone: Yeah, I think everybody has to work together to maintain an area, a region. We see ways in Sackets Harbor where people have joined forces to make positive things happen within the village and within the town that surrounds the village, and then as you keep spreading out from there and you're looking at the bigger picture, the whole North Country, then it takes a lot of people working together to make positive things happen.

Max Delsignore: We're truly fortunate and grateful to have you share your community story with us and being able to articulate what it means to be a part of the North Country, and thank you so much, Jeannie, Connie, Larry, for being with us and sharing your story on our podcast.

Jeannie Brennan: Our pleasure.

Constance Barone: Thank you.

Max Delsignore: And thanks to all of you for listening to this great community story and about these important acts of philanthropy taking place in the North Country. Thanks for tuning in and we hope you'll join us again.
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