

# HARWINTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

## MARCH 2018

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### **The Bushwackers 1957**

Pictured left to right: Richard Bartku, Vincent Zolla, Kendal Crossfield, Arthur Munson, Warner Sankman. Photo was taken at the Campville Community Center

### **Looking Back in Harwinton History**

## **The Bushwackers –Part of the “Luckiest Generation”**

**By Bonnie Andrews**

In 1954 LIFE magazine referred to those growing up in the 1950s as “the luckiest generation.” In Harwinton, teen-age members of the “Bushwackers” band were certainly an active part of that lifestyle. Joined together by a love of hillbilly (now country-western) music

they had some good luck, some bad luck and a lot of fun in between.

Members of the band are now in their 70s. Several of them are enjoying retirement in places with more warmth and sunshine than

**Continued on page 3**

Sunday, March 18 from 2 to 4 p.m. Harwinton Library,  
Historian Hamish Lutris will present the following:

**"Newspapers in the Civil War"**

The Civil War was the first war covered comprehensively by newspapers on both sides. It was also the first war during the age of the telegraph, which made newspaper coverage of the war something out of the wild west - cut-throat, light on ethics, always exciting, but at times wildly inaccurate.

This talk will center on newspaper coverage of the war, the reporters who covered it, and the rough-and-tumble of political reporting during the Civil War. The program offers both an often-humorous view of emerging media of the time, and sheds light on the media and its role today.

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**Scholarship Applications Available**

The Historical Society is offering a \$1,000 scholarship this year. The applicant must be a student who is a resident of Harwinton and/or active in the Harwinton Historical Society. The scholarship is to be used to pursue post-secondary education by a graduating senior or a student currently pursuing education beyond the high school level.

Applicants must show an interest in history/social science through coursework and/or experiences. Applications are available at [www.harwintonhistory.com](http://www.harwintonhistory.com), from area high school guidance counselors, at the Harwinton Library or by contacting the Historical Society via email at [harwhistsoc@gmail.com](mailto:harwhistsoc@gmail.com).

**Entries must be postmarked by April 15, 2018**

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***"WITHOUT OUR HISTORY ONLINE, PEOPLE IN THE  
FUTURE CAN MAKE UP WHAT THEY WISH TO BE TRUE  
ABOUT THE PAST."***

Dr. Kristen Gwinn-Becker

Historian, Digital Strategist, Founder of History IT

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**A Bit of TRIVIA**

**Question: Who was Noah Webster?**

**Answer on page 6**

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## They Were Part of the “Luckiest Generation”

Continued from page 1

Harwinton can provide. They all still have one thing in common: fond memories of growing up in a small, rural town and making music together.

Generally considered the band’s founder and leader, Warner “Butch” Sankman’s family lived on Litchfield Road (Route 118) in a home later occupied by Art and Nancy Hine. Warner’s first and second grade education took place in one-room schools - first at the fourth district Clear View School and then the first district Center School. In third grade he made the short hike from his home east to the new Harwinton Consolidated School.

Speaking recently from his home in Las Vegas, Nevada, Sankman, now 77, noted that his connection to music started with violin lessons in sixth grade. “By the eighth grade I discovered that the guitar was more fun, and the violin went into the closet where it remains today,” he said.

### Coming Up With A Name

In the 1950s “Butch” and his childhood friend Vincent “Vinnie” Zolla from Campville sang together for fun. They both liked hillbilly music and recorded middle-of-the-night broadcasts from Tennessee and Wheeling, West Virginia so that they could try to duplicate what they heard on the radio. Sankman said, “When we decided to start a band, we needed a name. Vinnie suggested “Butch’s Bushwackers” and it stuck.” That was about 1955.

Zolla, who turned 79 in mid-February, is a now resident of Truxton, New York. He describes himself as a self-taught musician who can play a variety of instruments including the guitar, banjo and harmonica. He was “the harmonizer”

for the Bushwackers. As an adult he continued to make music as a hobby but never pursued it professionally. According to his daughter, Zolla has received some acclaim for his skill as a gunsmith.



**Warner “Butch” Sankman**

Several other teen-agers played with the band when it was first organized. They included Jerry Plaskett on the steel guitar, Andrew Kasznay on piano and washtub bass. Kasznay said the band’s theme song was “Wildwood Flower.” “I was the least talented of the bunch,” Kasznay, 79, remarked recently from his home near Lancaster, PA. When he graduated from high school in 1956 his role with the band ended. “I never crossed paths with them thereafter,” he said.

**See Bushwackers, page 4**

### Bushwackers, continued from page 3

Sankman said he took an interest in learning to play the steel guitar after watching Jerry Plaskett play. Plaskett's steel guitar was the only one he has ever seen with a built-in amp and speaker. After Plaskett left the band Frank McCormack filled in for a short period of time. Plaskett eventually moved to Florida where he died in 1993 at age 52.

#### Core Group Forms

Several other friends joined in and by the mid-1950s a core group had been formed including Sankman, Zolla, Richard "Dick" Bartku of Scoville Hill Road and Arthur "Art" Munson of Morris. Kendal "Kenny" Crossfield, a 12-year-old drummer who also lived on Litchfield Road, was recruited to help "keep the beat." Several others played with the band at various times but did not stick with it.

"Harwinton was a wonderful place to grow up," Bartku, now 77, said recently from his home near Charleston, S.C. His memories of playing with the Bushwackers are good ones, but he is no longer involved in the music scene. He said he carried his accordion around "for about 60 years" but has finally packed it away. Today he is more apt to be seen with a fishing rod in hand.



**Richard "Dick" Bartku has traded his accordion for a fishing rod**

While many teens in the Fifties were listening to rock and roll, the Bushwackers found a niche in the Harwinton-Torrington area playing country-western music at local dance halls like the Burrville Firehouse, Harwinton Community Hall, and the Campville Community Center. They mostly played round and square dances, but Crossfield, now 73, said, "we would occasionally throw in a waltz or polka."

Sankman and Zolla wanted to enter the band in the local 4H talent shows but they were the only two who were 4H members. So, they came up with the idea of registering the band as a 4H club



**"Vinnie" Zolla** with their mothers as leaders. It worked and the "club/band" went on to win the Litchfield County 4H talent show and place second and third in the state competition.

Art Munson's family lived in Morris. He described it as a musical household where he started playing the guitar at age five. His father and Butch's father were business associates and friends. That connected the two boys and led 16-year-old Art to a successful "audition" to become a Bushwacker.

At night and on weekends the band played at talent shows, dances and benefits. Crossfield, who is now a resident of Torrington, said the band may have occasionally been paid, but only about \$5 for four hours of work. Other band members remember being paid "sometimes," but not much.

**See Bushwackers, page 5**

**Bushwackers, continued from page 4**



**Arthur "Art"  
Munson**

At least two of the band members have continued to keep music in their lives with some degree of success.

Munson is the one Bushwacker who has, according to Bartku, "made it big time" in the music industry. Munson, 76, lives in California and has had a positive career as a professional musician. According to Sankman, Munson "played lead guitar for several groups in the 50's including Dick Dale and Del Tones (surf music), and The Righteous Brothers. Munson continued as a studio guitar player in Hollywood and is currently writing production music for television and producing songs and jingles, often in collaboration with his wife.

Munson said Connecticut "was pretty much an idyllic place to grow up ... of course, being young and restless, I couldn't wait to get out of there." That led him to the Marine Corps, then southern California, and eventually into the music business.

Sankman, too, continued to be involved with music, though not full-time. He lived and worked in California for 40 years. About five years ago he retired from his day job and moved to Las Vegas. In his free time, he keeps busy making music with "Stuck in Reverse," a bluegrass band, and a duo known as "Denim and Lace"

In time, the Bushwackers were playing every Friday night at the Burrville Firehouse in Torrington. They sometimes traveled to Storrs to perform at the University of Connecticut School of Agriculture.

When Bartku's family moved to the Boston area about 1957, he was replaced by Frank Vitalo on accordion. Joe Matarese also joined the band for a brief time. Sankman said he has kept in touch with nearly all the former band members.

**Accident Sidelines Two Band Members**

All was good with the band until 1957. Then the bad luck came.

In July of that year a serious car accident injured Sankman and Munson and ushered in the beginning of the end of the Bushwackers. The two boys were driving back from a performance in Storrs when Sankman, who was driving Munson's car, fell asleep at the wheel. The car hit an oak tree near the Harwinton Congregational Church and both boys were hospitalized. The accident left Sankman in a body cast for nearly a year. By the following spring, however, Sankman was back to playing music but in 1959 his family moved to El Paso, Texas.



**Bushwackers, continued on page 6**

**Bushwackers, continued from page 5**

Looking back, Bushwacker band members recall years filled with plenty of activities in addition to music. They went swimming in Red Hole, fished in Leadmine Brook, skated on Sam James' pond, rode their bikes and visited the Harwinton Fair. For the most part, they all have maintained fond memories of growing up in a small New England town.

In many ways, the former members of the Bushwackers band who were contacted recently all seem to agree that they were, in fact, part of the “luckiest generation.”

A 2014 article by Ben Cosgrove refers to photos of teens taken in the mid-1950s this way:

“They look secure. They look confident. They look, in some elemental way, independent. They're learning, day by day, what it means to make one's way in the world. In that sense, maybe they were the luckiest generation, after all.”



**Kendal “Kenny” Crossfield**



**Andrew “Andy” Kasznay**

**Answer to Trivia Question on page 1**

Born in 1758 in what is now West Hartford, Noah Webster created the first American dictionary in 1806, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, defining American spelling and usage. He published a revised edition in 1828, *An American Dictionary of the English Language of American Usage*. Webster went on to formulate the first American copyright law also. After his death in 1843 in New Haven, Charles and George Mirriam acquired the rights to the dictionary, famously know today as the Mirriam-Webster Dictionary. A graduate of Yale College, Webster was a teacher and early textbook creator, a spelling "reformer", writer, editor and, of course, lexicographer. You can visit the Noah Webster House and West Hartford Historical Society, 277 South Main St., seven days a week between 1 and 4 p.m.

**JUNE 9<sup>TH</sup>: CONNECTICUT OPEN HOUSE DAY. PLAN TO VISIT OUR BARN MUSEUM AND SCHOOLHOUSE FROM 1 TO 3 P.M.**

**The Barn Corner**

**THE IMPORTANCE OF FIRE AND FOOT WARMERS**

**Contributed by David Ryan**

The importance of fire in early Harwinton cannot be overestimated. At its best it provided the obvious means for cooking, heating, and lighting. At its worst, it destroyed buildings and sometimes entire towns. In 1949 fire destroyed the Harwinton Congregational Church.

Located in the barn museum is an artifact that looks like a small box. It has a wooden frame with a metal bail handle attached to a box made of tin with a door on one side. The tin is heavily pierced in an appealing design. It is called either a foot warmer or a foot stove, and has an interesting story to tell. The story begins with the Congregational Church.

In early Connecticut history, the Congregational Church was initially supported by the state. In fact, when members of the town couldn't agree where to build a church, the location was determined by a state siting council. This was true of the Harwinton Congregational Church. The church building itself was often referred to as the "meetinghouse" because, in addition to church services, all meetings concerning town business were held there, both in summer and winter. Most churches had no heat, as a barn." Sermons were and a good prayer lasted about break on Sunday, families building that was heated by a rest, eat, and warm up before finish the service.



and thus were said to be "cold often two or three hours long, an hour. During a "nooning" could go to a nearby small fireplace where they could returning to the church to

Although there is more church service, this story is foot warmer was mostly used was filled with hot coals from placed on the floor of the seat. The person sitting there robe to put over them, thus the journey to church. The

that could be said about the about the foot warmer. The by women and children. It the home fireplace, then wagon or sleigh under the would bring a blanket or lap holding in some of the heat on warmer could then be brought

by the bail handle into the service, hopefully to provide at least some heat until nooning time. It was then possible to refill the foot warmer from the church building's fireplace during the break. Many of the older surviving churches have doors at the end of each pew to minimize the draft on one's legs and help retain the heat. Despite the foot warmer, a winter's day in church must have really tested one's faith.

By the mid-1800's the question of putting a wood stove in the church for heat arose. There were "heated" debates on both sides of the issue. In one church, in a close vote, the wood stove won. When Sunday arrived, the stove was at the back of the church all hooked up. Some people arrived, and rubbed their hands, thankful for the heat, but one elderly matron, after approaching the stove, became so flushed that she had to have a deacon help her to her seat. At the end of the service, the deacon escorted the woman over to the door, and on the way rested his hand on the stove, explaining "By the way, ma'am, although the stove is connected, we won't light a fire until next week."

*Sources consulted: Raymond Bentley, Alice Morse Earle, the internet  
The April newsletter will look at the importance of the fireplace to the home.*

**HARWINTON  
OUTSTANDING CITIZEN  
2018 Honoree  
ELEANOR WOIKE**



Join your neighbors in honoring *Eleanor Woike* by attending the  
Harwinton Outstanding Citizen Award Banquet

*Friday, April 20*  
*Fairview Farm Golf Course*  
*6:00 p.m. – Appetizers*  
*7:00 p.m. – Dinner*

Banquet reservations are \$40 per adult, \$10 for children ages 10 and under.  
For reservations, dinner choice, or questions, please call (860) 485-1275.