

## **HORN POND, DEADLY POND**

**by Marie Coady**

**The twentieth century heralded the birth of quantum physics and the automobile, yet many people held fast to myths and superstitions. One of the superstitions of that time was attached to the swirling, dark waters of Horn Pond. Many Woburnites at the turn of the century were convinced that demons in the depths of Horn Pond somehow exacted tribute from its residents. They believed that the pond took a life each year, and if it skipped a year, it took two the next. And who could blame them. Between 1870 and 1890, Horn Pond had swallowed the life force of twenty-three victims.**

**Although records of drownings in Horn Pond prior to 1870 are sparse, there were nine documented. The first was that of Mrs. James Converse in 1803, yet little is noted other than the date and cause of death.**

**In August of 1861, Timothy Holland, who was in the employ of Pierce & Hall ice dealers, also found the waters of Horn Pond waiting greedily for him when he stood up in his boat, fell in and was immediately sucked to the bottom. What makes his accident stand out among others was that it claimed the life of Mrs. Ellen Mosher also, in spite of the fact she was safely on shore. It seems, Mrs. Mosher, recently immigrated from Ireland, was so overcome by the tragedy, she “was thrown into convulsive fits which resulted in her death a few hours later”.**

**Young William Menard is also one of Horn Pond’s victims. Menard was just a lad of fourteen when he decided to take two of his Lexington Street neighbors fishing on a stifling hot day in July, 1869. Since his friends were much younger than he, he probably promised their mothers to keep a good eye on them. That is most likely why, when one of his charges lost the float off his line, William volunteered to wade in to get it.**

**Unfortunately, he was surprised by the sudden drop off into sixteen feet of deep water and sank below the surface, leaving his younger charges on shore yelling for help. But help arrived too late, and days later William’s classmates filed into church benches in an orderly fashion for his funeral, led by their teacher, Mr. Perkins.**

**Like many of the pond’s victims, Louis Bournique and Michael McNamara were doing nothing more harmful than seeking relief on a sultry August day, Louis in 1864 and Michael in 1869. Although five years separated their drownings, each had a similar experience. Bournique and McNamara merely waded in to cool off and found themselves in very deep water. It seems the shoreline had been prepared by the ice companies for the landing of ice in winter. To accomplish this, they dredged the bottom of the pond a few feet from shore, causing a sudden drop off and putting bathers at risk. Bournique and McNamara slipped into one of these deep holes and breathed no more.**

**As tragic as the fourteen reported deaths that occurred in the years preceding 1877 were, none stands out as horrendously as the event that occurred on July 4, 1877, in site of hundreds of picnickers, boaters and bathers, celebrating the Fourth of July at Horn Pond. It was on that occasion that five people, including a six year-old boy, drowned in full view of helpless onlookers. Even more tragic was the fact that four of the victims belonged to the same family.**

**Dennis O'Leary had arrived at the pond to celebrate the Fourth with eight members of his family. He and a friend, Thomas Kenney, decided to rent a boat at Cormack's boathouse in Town Cove. After securing the boat, he and Kenney went to pick up the remaining family members, piling nine more people into the sixteen foot rowboat. Among them were his wife Anna Rossiter O'Leary, their two small children, his brother-in-law Lawrence Rossiter, wife Bridget, their three youngsters, and a young woman friend, Anne Curran, thus overloading the boat with eleven people.**

**Eyewitnesses described seeing one of the men stand as if to switch places to take his turn at rowing. Just then, he tripped and fell, tipping the boat completely over and dumping all eleven occupants into twenty feet of water. Alexander Cormack, Fred Bryant and Daniel Barnum went immediately to the rescue and pulled Lawrence Rossiter and two of his children to safety along with Anne Curran and the two O'Leary children. But the deaths of Dennis and Anna O'Leary and Bridget Rossiter left two children motherless and two others orphaned.**

**What is most remarkable about this story is that it continues today. Recently, Norma Nisco of Fountain Valley, California, contacted the Woburn Public Library seeking documentation of a story told by her grandfather of that Fourth of July family tragedy. It turns out her grandfather, Michael Joseph O'Leary, was one of the surviving O'Leary children who had been plucked from the grip of Horn Pond that day. In the flurry of mail, both electronic and snail, more details from family members put a human face on an event that occurred over 120 years ago.**

**According to Norma Nisco, the only reason her grandfather and his older brother survived was because they were wearing dresses, as was the custom for very young children of the day. These dresses filled with air and held the two young boys, ages 1 and 3, aloft, keeping them bobbing like little corks until rescuers could get to them. Left an orphan, Michael Joseph O'Leary was taken in by James and Elizabeth Canniff of Winchester, a couple in their fifties with six children of their own. By 1880, the Canniff's had adopted Michael. It is believed the other O'Leary son went to live with the Rossiters in Milford, New Hampshire.**

**Michael O'Leary Canniff went on to marry Sarah Hickey of Woburn. It is believed there was a special bond between Sarah and Michael right from the**

beginning as Sarah had lost her brother, Thomas Hickey, to the depths of the pond on July 4, 1878, exactly one year after Horn Pond had made Michael an orphan.

Thomas Hickey was drowned at age 11, attempting to save his little friend, Patrick Murphy, age 8. The medical examiner carried young Hickey's limp, lifeless body to his Fowle Street home etching a lasting image on, the then four year-old, Sarah's memory. Patrick Murphy survived.

Lawrence Rossiter, who lost his wife and one of his three children in that July Fourth tragedy, married Anne Curran, the young woman who had been plucked from the jaws of death with him, in August of 1877.

Norma Nisco made sure to offer her thanks to the ancestors of Alexander Cormack, Fred Bryant and Daniel Barnum, the men who rescued her grandfather. By all accounts, Michael Joseph O'Leary Canniff was a wonderful, loving, caring man who took in many family members when in need, returning the favor done him by the Canniffs many times over.

Drownings at Horn Pond were not always accidental. Many desperate souls chose the murky depths of the pond as their last resting place. One family, living on Buck street in the 1880s, suffered more than any from the melancholy depression that sent so many to seek permanent relief in the pond's cooling waters.

On August 2, 1882, Bartholomew Lombard's brother Patrick reported him missing. Lombard and his wife Catherine shared their home with Bartholomew and became concerned when he failed to come home the evening before. But it was five whole days before Engineer Wade of the Woburn Water Works spotted a body 100 yards from the shore of the Pumping Station.

When the body was retrieved, it was identified as Bartholomew Lombard. The body had some minor scratches and bruises on it, but the medical examiner deemed his death a suicide, and the family didn't object.

Some two years later, on August 14, 1884, Catherine Lombard left home at 5 AM and two hours later was found drowned at the foot of Richardson Street. Her death was also judged a suicide and attributed to her poor health of recent years.

As if this were not enough tragedy for the Lombard family to absorb, on July 22, 1886, Patrick Lombard decided to end his life in the same way. But as fate would have it, Mr. W. J. Nelson of Winchester just happened by in time to save him. Lombard must have been terribly distraught as he was immediately taken into protective custody by the police.

No sooner was Patrick released from custody than he once again threw himself into the pond and once again was saved. But Patrick was determined and decided to take a different course of action. On May 19, 1887, he climbed to the top of Mount Misery and slashed his throat, hoping at last for some release from his private torment, but once again he was discovered and saved. He was taken to the Almshouse on top of Rag Rock where his wounds were dressed, and he was released.

No record of Patrick's final demise is recorded in obituary accounts, so it is not known if he finally succeeded in escaping his tormented life by his own hand.

Between 1890 and 1945, eighteen more citizens were claimed by the pond. From fourteen year-old Patrick Ryan who came to celebrate the Fourth of July in 1906 and disappeared in the old "swimmin' hole"; to twenty year old Arthur Gage, honor student and Class Prophet, Class of 1906, who along with friends dove off their boat to swim to Horn Pond Island and immediately sank out of sight; to the unidentified man whose body was found in September of 1942, floating twenty feet from the pumping station, the pond continued to claim victims and to some minds---sacrifices.

One particularly tragic drowning occurred on July 26, 1943 when three young girls disappeared "without utterance or outcry" into the deep water fifty yards from Horn Pond brook bridge. Only one girl in a group of four was saved by the valiant efforts of Lifeguard Joseph Giffune when he pulled thirteen year-old Lillian Zercon to safety. Giffune had arrived on duty a little earlier than usual and was getting the boat from the Pumping Station to patrol the pond. He heard shouts from shore and saw struggling in the water a short distance away. He went in the water, clothes and all, and pulled Zercon to safety. He and Lifeguard Alvin Breyton continued their rescue attempt but were only able to recover the lifeless body of thirteen year-old Evelyn Hooper from the determined waters of the pond. Later in the day, the bodies of Loretta Zebrauski, age 10 and Mildred Cooper, age 11 were retrieved.

Distraught parents and family members clung to each other in their sorrow at joint funeral services at the Methodist Church in Woburn where Mildred Ruth Cooper and Evelyn Jean Hooper were wished a fond farewell. Loretta Zebrauski, who had come to visit with her cousin, Lillian Zercon, was buried in her hometown of Lawrence.

In 1964, Foley Beach was moved to the Parkway side of the pond and continued to offer residents a safe swimming environment with lifeguards on duty. But when a survey was done in 1984, it was discovered that only 18% of the bathers were Woburn residents. Due to those findings and budget cuts, it was decided the beach would be closed and no swimming would be allowed at the pond.

We can never be sure if our turn of the century ancestors were right in

concluding that demons in the depths of Horn Pond demanded human sacrifices, or whether we just got a lot smarter about water safety. But it is certain, that in modern times, the pond has claimed fewer and fewer victims each succeeding year. That could also be because each year fewer and fewer are foolish enough tempt the spirit of Horn Pond.

## **VICTIMS OF HORN POND DROWNINGS**

**1803 Mrs. James Converse**  
**1846 Martha Hood**  
**1859 Catherine Ryan**  
**1860 Thomas Cutler**  
**1861 Nancy Edgerly**  
**1861 Timothy Holland**  
**1867 Michael McNamara**  
**1864 Louis Bournique**  
**1869 William Menard**  
**1870 Charles Luke Riley**  
**1870 George Doherty**  
**1871 Maggie McIntire**  
**1876 Redmond Owens**  
**1876 Frank Maxwell**  
**1877 Dennis O'Leary**  
**1877 Anna Rossiter O'Leary**  
**1877 Thomas Kenney**  
**1877 Robert Rossiter**  
**1877 Bridget Rossiter**  
**1877 James Daley**  
**1878 Thomas Hickey**  
**1881 Thomas Kelley**  
**1882 Bartholomew Lombard**  
**1884 Catherine Lombard**  
**1884 Abbie Davis Fay**  
**1885 Michael McDermot Jr.**  
**1889 Webster Potter**  
**1890 Jessie Croucher**  
**1890 Etta Parr**  
**1890 Edward O'Rourke**  
**1890 Mary Darmody**  
**1905 Michael Ryan**  
**1906 Arthur Gage**  
**1909 Dr. Wilford D. McDonald**  
**1914 Joseph McGarrity**  
**1919 George McNeil Jr.**  
**1924 Jeremiah Shea**  
**1932 Francis J. McMurray**

**1932 Patrick O'Donnell  
1932 Frank McKinnon  
1938 Coleman Connolly  
1940 Henry McDonald  
1942 unidentified man  
1943 Loretta Zebrauski  
1943 Mildred R. Cooper  
1943 Evelyn Hooper  
1945 Maxine Catania**

**This list was compiled from Woburn Deaths 1642-1900 and newspaper accounts.**

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