

**A WORLD OF IDEAS, COMPLIMENTS OF BURBEEN FREE LECTURE SERIES
By Marie Coady**

There's nothing that stands out more in an era of greed than the generosity of someone who has no other motive for giving than making life better for people who are less fortunate. And that was Leonard Thompson's goal in 1892 when he donated \$6,000 to establish the Burbeen Free Lecture Fund in Woburn.

In fact, five years later, in May of 1897, he and his wife celebrated their golden wedding anniversary at their home on 60 Warren Avenue by adding another \$5,000 to the fund to ensure its longevity. And here it is 111 years later and the Burbeen Free Lecture Series is still going strong.

By founding and supporting the Burbeen Free Lecture Fund, Leonard Thompson's intention was to provide a continuous source of education to those who had been, for economic reasons, denied the education and travel necessary to expose them to the world of ideas. So it was that the first speaker took the stage at Lyceum Hall in Woburn Center on January 6, 1893 to speak to a packed house on the topic of "How American Came to be Discovered by Columbus".

With that in mind it seems appropriate to announce that this Wednesday, September 24, 2003, Burbeen Free Lecture Series begins its 111th season with a presentation designed to inform and educate community residents just as Leonard Thompson had intended. This Wednesday's presentation will be hosted by State Representative Jay Kaufman, and the topic will be "Our Hospitals: On the Critical List". But instead of packing Lyceum Hall, this forum will take place at 7:30 pm in the O'Donnell Auditorium at Woburn High School, and as promised by Leonard Thompson, the event will be free of charge.

It also seems appropriate that we travel back in time and review some of the high profile speakers the Burbeen Free Lecture Series attracted over the last 110 years. As mentioned earlier, the first speaker was John Fisk, a well known historian and philosopher of his day and a most familiar figure on the lecture circuit.

Although Fisk graduated from Harvard Law School and was admitted to the bar in 1864, he never actually practiced law. Instead he found his calling as an author of scholarly articles that appeared regularly in the *National Quarterly Review*. That venue led him to a regular spot on the lecture circuit in both the US and Great Britain as well as a teaching position at Harvard.

As a result of his accomplishments Fisk became not only Burbeen's first lecturer, but a favorite making six appearances, four of which were during the 1894-95 season alone. For this he was paid the princely sum of \$50 for each appearance and with topics like "The Witchcraft in Salem Village" and "The Boston Tea Party" he managed to pack them in at every lecture as well as fulfilling Thompson's hope to educate the people of Woburn and surrounding communities.

Another speaker of note who appeared before a Lyceum audience as the first Burbeen speaker for the 1893-94 season was May French Sheldon who came to tell of her journey alone to unexplored parts of Africa in 1891. Not only had Sheldon been attacked in the London Spectator as "the Lady Errant" filled with an "uneasy jealousy that is forever driving her" to prove she is man's equal, she was also approached by someone as she was about to board the train at London's Charing Cross Station who pleaded with her to be reasonable and "abandon this mad useless scheme".

She didn't, of course, and in spite of the fact the Burbeen program billed her as Mary instead of May, she made a stunning appearance before the audience as a liberated woman and the first to explore the waters of Lake Chala, "a volcanic crater on the side of Mount Kilimanjaro". The topic of her lecture also told of how she infiltrated the harem of a Sultan and presented herself to a chief of the Massai tribe in a sparkling ball gown, covered with jewels, a ceremonial sword hanging across her hips and wearing a blonde wig. Her audience was enthralled and one will never know how many young women were influenced by her "shocking", liberated ways.

The first speaker of the 1906-07 Burbeen season was a woman as well, but she was not as well received as Mrs. Sheldon, but it had nothing to do with her being liberated. The main complaint about this particular woman was that she was indeed a captive of her own controversial version of history.

The speaker was none other than Mrs. LaSalle Corbell Pickett, wife of Confederate General George Edward Pickett who led the disastrous Pickett's Charge at the Battle of Gettysburg. It was during that fateful charge that every member of his entire division was killed, wounded or captured. Of course, the topic of Mrs. Pickett's lecture was "Gettysburg" and rightly so as it was Sallie Pickett, third wife of General Pickett and 16 years his junior who lived through that awful ordeal and its aftermath with her husband.

Her one-sided lecture elicited a response from the editor of Stars and Stripes magazine in the form of a letter to the Woburn Daily Times on November 21, 1906. In his letter he described Mrs. Pickett as a "beautiful and charming woman of the southland", but claimed to be too much of a patriot to have sat through the entire hour listening to her glorify the South with no reference to the brave soldiers of the North who may have been sitting in the audience. Every word he claimed "minimized the Blue and magnified the Gray".

It also ruffled him that at the end of the hour she was greeted with polite applause when it had been his experience traveling through the South that no northerner could have given a similar speech without some visible signs of dissatisfaction from the crowd. He concluded by saying that, "Evidently Mrs. Pickett's soul is still sore; and even though lecturing to an audience in the suburbs of the Hub, refers to the South not as 'Our Country' but 'That fair country of history'."

Other famous speakers spoke before huge audiences at the Burbeen Free Lecture Series over the last 111 years, like Booker T. Washington, Dr. Angelo Patri, Charles Wellington Furlong, Sarah S. Cummings of Woburn, and Edward E. Whiting of The Boston Herald among many, many others, and I hope to be able introduce you to them in future columns.

The 2003-2004 season's offerings are no less illustrious. Like Sandy Mortimer who will take you on an "unforgettable journey into a world long forgotten" with her lecture and film entitled, "The Legacy of the Maya" on October 2, 2003, and Fran Reidleberger who will show you the "wild and woolly side of Scotland" in his film and commentary that will take you through the "rolling hills and green valleys of the Border Region" and the "mountains and waterfalls of the Highlands" on November 11, 2003, and much, much more throughout 2004.

So it seems that once again I have run out of space in which to tell of the past, present and future of the Burbeen Free Lecture Series and more importantly the story of the man behind the Burbeen Free Lecture Fund, Leonard Thompson. Thompson is the person who, through his generosity, infused his community with the sophistication it needed to become a vital, vibrant city well into the 21st century and his story needs a more complete telling.

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