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Milbridge Theatre groundbreaking signals bright future for town, arts

by Ruth Leubecker

Years of fundraising and creative community events resulted in Monday's milestone groundbreaking of the upcoming Milbridge Theatre and Community Arts Center.

As a critical next step in the process, the event attracted dozens of Gateway Milbridgers and area supporters. Envisioned as a community gathering space that will eventually host musical performances, educational programs, community theater and movies, the versatile 5,000-square-foot space will seat 200. As an efficient, year-round facility, it is viewed as a venue that can be expanded in the future to accommodate further programs.

"We are very excited that the theatre and community arts center

will help serve as a commercial anchor in the center of our downtown," said Cathy Chipman, Gateway Milbridge vice chair, in her opening remarks to those assembled for the Monday morning groundbreaking.

Charmingly tucked into the shoreline at the mouth of the Narraguagus, Milbridge is a delightful little town of 1,300-plus souls. Incorporated in 1848, aside from its quaintly attractive layout, it is perhaps best known for the obvious pride of its people.

The Milbridge Theatre project is a shining example of this. Over the past six years Gateway Milbridge has consistently hosted a creative string of fundraisers with impressive results. With the exception of the past pandemic

(Theatre cont. pg. 5)

Restoration moves ahead on Machiasport's Liberty Hall

by Sarah Craighead Dedmon

Port Road drivers have enjoyed the renewed beauty of historic Liberty Hall since 2009, when a \$1.1 million exterior restoration project was completed on the former Machiasport town hall. Now another project is underway, this time out of drivers' sight.

Scaffolding stretches across the building's back side, where workers are stabilizing the final untouched facade of Liberty Hall, replacing and restoring clapboards, windows, and decaying decorative trim. Ultimately this project phase, the third out of four, will prepare the building for a ramp. But first, one unusual appendage had to be removed — a two-story, two-seater

outhouse.

"We had a long discussion [with the state historic preservation office] about whether or not that had to be preserved," said Anna Grimshaw, Friends of Liberty Hall secretary and original member of the Campaign to Save Liberty Hall. "In the end the state agreed, no."

Not original to the 1873 structure, the outhouse was affixed to the building where one day the committee plans to build an elevator. That project is still beyond the horizon, but the construction of an access ramp is closer at hand, likely next year. The ramp will descend from the building's second floor to a hilly embankment in the

(Liberty Hall cont. pg. 13)



Where to find the gold

Locals don't need a rainbow to remind them that the Downeast coastline is a treasure, but it sure is nice to lift the spirits on a grey day. Susan Ronga of Cutler captured this rainbow on April 6, after the clouds broke and the sun peeked through onto Cutler Bay. Photo courtesy Susan Rogna



Lady Raiders conference volleyball champs!

Congratulations to the Washington Academy Lady Raiders volleyball team, coach Schwinn and coach Simmons for winning the Penobscot Valley Conference Large School Volleyball Championship! After an undefeated season the Lady Raiders clinched the title on April 11 over the Brewer Witches. Back Row (L-R): Coach Amy Simmons, Chloe Lyford, Sarah Moulton, Isabel Cates, Kate Taylor, Jinny Davis, Kara Lyford, Kylie Atkinson, Emma Griffin, Mackenzie Cates, Marissa Cates, Coach Corey Schwinn. Front Row (L-R): Rachel Vose, Emma Soctomah, Morgan Schwinn, Lauren Hall, Chloe Dinsmore, Sarah Otto. Photo by Jason Overby

Joint tech school up and running in Columbia

by Nancy Beal

Career technical education (CTE) has existed in coastal Washington County for years. Many law enforcement personnel in the Sunrise County and beyond began their training in the criminal justice program at

Narraguagus High School. In the late 1990s, the building trades teacher at Machias Memorial High School took his class to Florida to help clean up and rebuild after a hurricane. Next week, the culinary arts students at MMHS will offer home-cooked

(bagged) lunches to benefit a summer camp for teens (see details below).

Last fall, COVID-19 notwithstanding, a joint venture mounted by MMHS, NHS and Jonesport-Beals High School

(Tech school cont. pg. 15)

Machias Wild Blueberry Festival canceled

by Sarah Craighead Dedmon

The Machias Wild Blueberry Festival will not happen for the second year in a row due to the COVID-19 pandemic, festival organizers announced Friday, April 9.

"It was a hard decision. We

really just did not see how we could safely put on a festival," said festival committee chair Ellen Farnsworth, pointing to festival events that take place in close quarters, like the blueberry musical. "That couldn't have happened. Even the vendors,

how could we guarantee that we were keeping our vendors safe? There were just too many things."

Organizers of the Maine Lobster Festival, a large event held in Rockland in July, also

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year, its outdoor stage has brought a wealth of talent to the town over the summer months, with refreshments sold as well during these performances. There have been guided snowshoe hikes, cash calendar raffles, and local artists -- in another popular event -- taking to the streets to exhibit their talents for eventual auction.

"We are currently in phase 6, which is the construction of the exterior of the building, with phase 7 being the completion of the interior of the building," explains Richard Bondurant, Gateway Milbridge chair. "Our goal is to have the exterior structure and HVAC systems done by late fall. Then move to work on the interior

through the winter and into mid-2022."

The ambitious goal of the project has been exacerbated by the climbing price of building materials. "Building materials -- especially lumber -- have increased over 300 percent during the last 18 months," says Bondurant. "Naturally, that's been a bump for us from the original cost estimates. So, we'll continue our fundraising efforts to help build up sufficient funds to complete the interior."

A big step forward financially has been the \$10,000 matching challenge grant from Wymans of Maine. "Wyman's will match every dollar donated to Gateway Milbridge and the Milbridge Theatre project,"

says Bondurant, "between now and June 30, up to a total of \$10,000. This is very exciting for us, and helps us keep moving forward with our fundraising for the interior of the building."

Project supporters are well aware that events beyond their control have impacted their goals. "It would be great if we could be in the building by mid-2022, but events around us -- like the last 14 months of COVID -- as well as fundraising, will steer us toward that goal," says Bondurant. "We're excited that the theatre and arts center will serve as a commercial anchor in the center of our downtown. These are the main goals for the future of the building's purpose."



Years of fundraising and extraordinary community spirit last week resulted in this groundbreaking for the new Milbridge Theatre and Community Arts Center. From left to right are Bill Davis, Kevin Barbee, Elaine Mathiason, Lewis Pinkham and Jan Rossi. Photo courtesy Richard Bondurant

Festival Continued from page 1

canceled their event for a second year, citing pandemic concerns. Other large summer events, such as the Maine Boat and Home Show in Rockland and the North Atlantic Blues Festival, are tentatively scheduled to proceed. The Common Ground Fair, held in September in Unity, is also scheduled to proceed.

A letter to church members sent by Farnsworth and Centre Street Pastor Susie Maxwell said state COVID-19 guidelines needed for so many festival events made it "impossible" to ensure safety.

"We know this is a deep disappointment on so many levels and we too feel sad for and along with our guests, our vendors, and our local businesses," wrote Farnsworth and Maxwell.

Normally, funds raised by hosting the festival contributes 25 percent of the church's annual operating budget, money which

goes to operate the Machias Food Pantry and a home heating oil program, among others.

New state guidelines released March 5 maintain capacity limits currently set at 50 people indoors and 100 people outdoors in spaces such as tents, provided 6-foot distances can be maintained within the space.

Facilities such as restaurants, which have set capacity limits, may utilize 75 percent of their space until May 23, then 100 percent after May 24. Because six-foot setbacks still exist, 100 percent may not mean that restaurants can return to their full seating capacity.

Founded by Centre Street Congregational Church in 1976, last year would have been the 45th Machias Wild Blueberry Festival, which traditionally takes place on the third weekend in August. Farnsworth said the planning committee will now

explore smaller recurring events which could also attract people into Machias, such as Sunday afternoon concerts on the church green.

"We could encourage concert-goers to go to local restaurants to pick up their lunch, then come to the green," said Farnsworth.

Climbing COVID-19 case counts in Maine and nationwide factored into the committee's decision. In March, state case counts had decreased to between 100 and 200 per day. In the past two weeks, however, those numbers have more than doubled again, with Thursday's new positive case count at 438.

"It was a really hard decision," said Farnsworth. "For awhile we thought things were looking better and we could maybe pull this off. Then things stopped looking better, we waited just as long as we possibly could."

Normally the church begins



Fans of the Machias Wild Blueberry Festival will have to forgo their August celebration for a second year in a row. Organizers announced cancelation of the 2021 event on Friday, April 9. Photo by Sarah Craighead Dedmon

planning the next year's festival shortly after the current year's festival is completed.

Farnsworth says the festival website will continue to showcase ads from its sponsors, at no charge, for the second year.

"We did not charge them a sponsorship fee in 2020 and we will not in 2021 but we will

continue to run their ads for them so that anybody who visits our website will see the businesses that support us," she said.

"We certainly recognize how difficult this is for the entire community, particularly the business community in Machias."

Milbridge-based ham radio club honoring USS Squalus Crew

The submarine USS Squalus sank in the Gulf of Maine on May 23, 1939. Twenty-six of its crew were lost, but miraculously, 33 others were saved.

The Maine Ham Radio Society, based out of Milbridge, will be honoring the Squalus and its crew with a special "Remember The Squalus" event on the amateur radio airwaves on the 82nd anniversary of the tragic accident. Using the special FCC-issued callsign W1S, club members will take to the airwaves and make contacts nationally and around the globe, making other hams aware of the Squalus. Special certificates will be awarded to hams who successfully make contact with W1S that day, upon request.

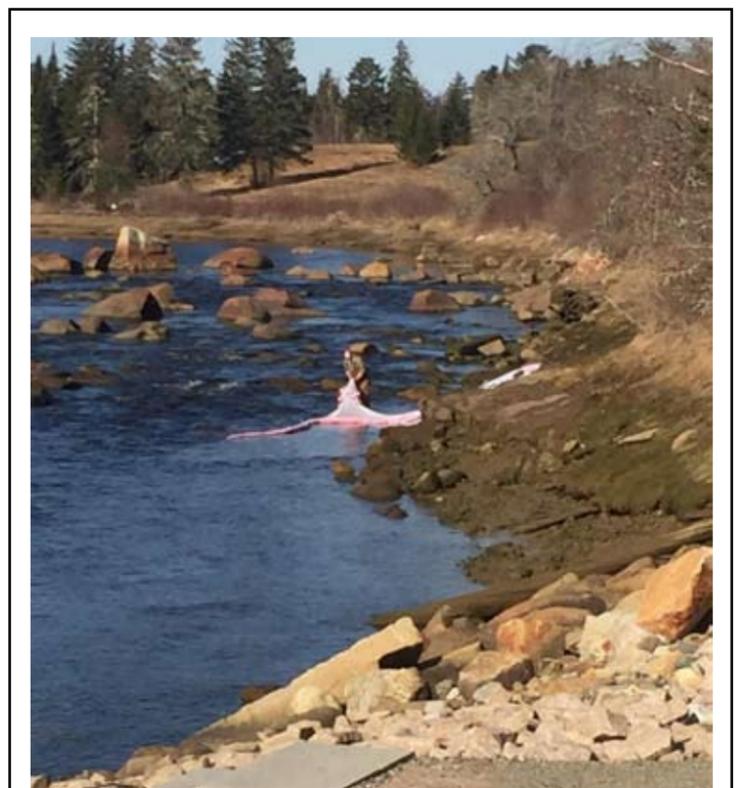
For more information on the USS Squalus special event and other Maine ham radio activities, visit <https://mainehamradiosociety.com>



Brenda Duggan, ham radio call sign N1ZPV, operates her radio from her home in Milbridge. Submitted photo



On the morning of May 23, 1939, the submarine USS Squalus sank to the ocean floor nine miles off the New Hampshire coast, trapping 59 men on board. Thirty-three survived due to the daring efforts of diving rescuers. Photo in public domain



Elver season underway

An elver fisherman adjusts his net in the Chandler River in Jonesboro. When the season opened, the baby eels fetched \$1,000 per pound but not many were being caught. Those in the industry expect both the catch and the price to improve before the season ends in June or the 98,000-pound state quota is filled. Photo by Nancy Beal