

The Chronicle Quarterly

Weston Historical Society

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ARVID JOHNSON WESTON'S OWN WAR HERO PART II

In the summer 2001 issue of the Chronicle, we shared with you the story of Arvid Johnson written by Jean Howes of upper Weston. Arvid was born in 1895 in the house in which Jean and Charlie Howes now reside. While working in the attic in 1977, Charlie uncovered a packet of letters written to Arvid. Jean pieced together Arvid's life from these letters telling of his life in Georgetown, riding the train to high school in Norwalk, going to Storrs to study agriculture, and his ultimate enlistment in the army to serve in World War I. The letters ended there, but not his story.

We now give you Part II of the story of Arvid Johnson, Weston's Own War Hero as told by Jean Howes. "Here the letters ended, leaving us in great suspense. How did the story end? Did Arvid go to France to fight in the great war? Did he every marry Elsa?"

"One person who might have the answers was our former neighbor who had lived across the street for many years. So I wrote to Esther Wahlquist in her retirement home.

"Killed in France: Her reply was a sad one. Arvid was killed in France shortly before the Armistice. No, he and Elsa were never married. He was buried in the Branchville Cemetery. His mother was never the same afterwards.

"The Argonne Forest. Wasn't that an historic battle? How quickly memories fade. How brief is glory! After checking several histories of World War 1, I could review Arvid Johnson's last battle. It is the story of the "Lost Battalion."



Tombstone of Carl Arvid Johnson, located in the Branchville Cemetary

"On Memorial Day we [Jean and Charlie] found his grave at the far end of the cemetery marked with two monuments-one the small white government issued stone, the other a large granite block with his parents names on the back. The inscription reads "Our Loving Son/Carl Arvid Johnson/Lieut Ce K 305 Inf/American Expeditionary Force/ 77 Division/ Argonne Forest, October 8."

On October 1, 1918 General Pershing, head of the American Expeditionary Forces, eager to finish the war, ordered the 77th Division to push into the rugged Argonne Forest 'without regard of losses and without regard to the exposed conditions of the flanks.' "Major Charles Whittlesey and Captain George McMurtry, despite their protests to General Alexander, were forced to send men exhausted from combat, out early the next morning into the tangled thickets. By mid-morning they had broken through the German lines, but were then pinned down by heavy enemy fire. Supporting troops had not come through, and the unprotected men were shelled by German artillery through the night.

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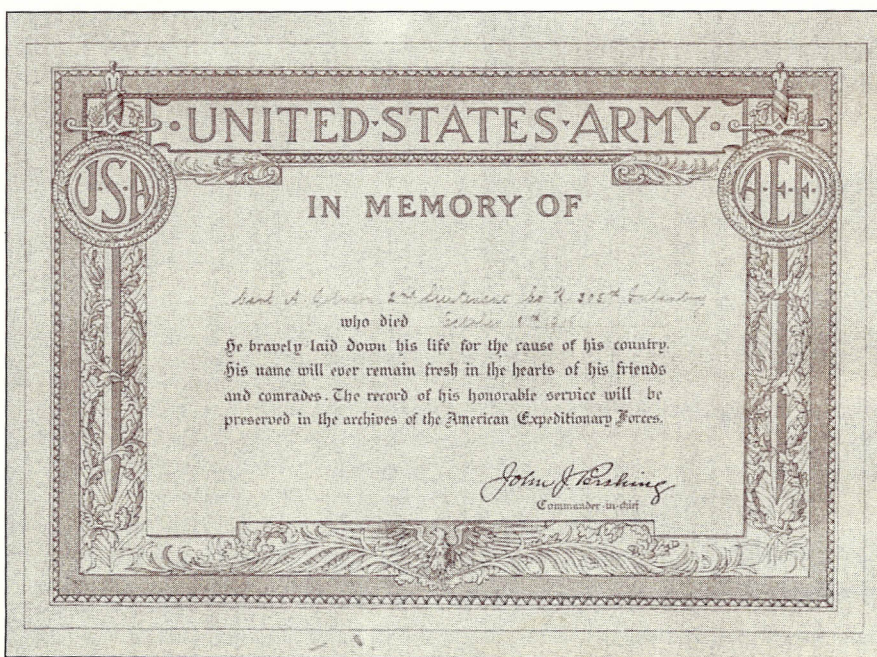
WESTON'S OWN WAR HERO *Continued*

"Somehow one group, Company K, Arvid's company led by bold Captain Nelson Holderman, had managed to slip through in the dark to bring support. When Holderman and his men tried to lead them up Hill 198, they found the Germans had re-taken it and fortified it with nests of machine guns. Now they were surrounded on all sides. On October 3, the officers agreed 'to hold their positions at all costs. No falling back' and this message was sent by carrier pigeon along with an urgent request for reinforcements to General Alexander. Meanwhile Arvid and fellow soldiers, after sharing the last box of crackers, turned back a German infantry attack which left one third killed or wounded.

"On October 4, the First Army drive through fog and forest came within 50 yards of the German trenches. There they met a solid wall of machine gun and artillery fire, and a bloody massacre ensued. It was a hellish scene, but our men never faltered. Row on row they came, climbing over the fallen bodies, fighting on until the last machine gun was rooted out. But Whittlesey's men and Company K remained surrounded. Another carrier pigeon was sent describing their critical condition and asking for immediate support.

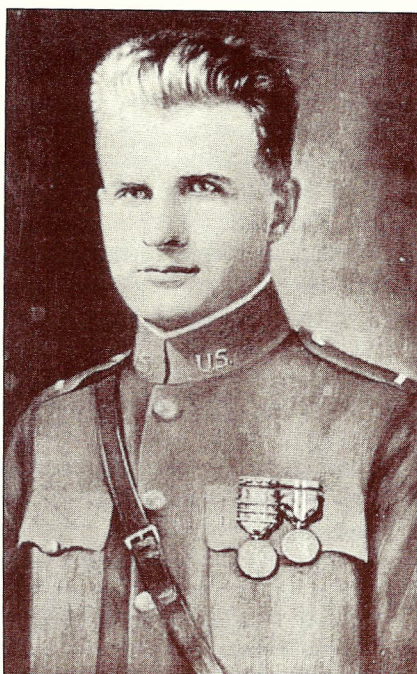
"General Alexander's charge had failed, and he now ordered artillery to attack the Germans surrounding the pocket. Instead, by mistake, our own artillery began shelling our own trapped men, killing or wounding eighty of them. Cher Ami, the company's last pigeon flew off with the message reporting the tragic error and 'For heaven's sake, stop it.'

"The barrage was lifted, but the Germans made another assault which the men repulsed. Then volunteers slipped down an exposed ravine to get water from a little stream, and others dug up roots to eat. The wounded kept dying. At 9 p.m., the Germans lit up the area with flares and pounded them with grenades, until a German voice cried out for them to surrender. 'Try and make us, you



bastards,' was the answer as the men stubbornly kept firing their rifles.

"On October 5 allied planes flew over, dropping desperately needed supplies, but they landed just out of reach, near the Germans. The first Division was still moving ahead. From a high observation post an observer with a telescope watched the furious shelling advance towards the trenches where the Germans crouched. He reported: 'Some gigantic hand seemed to be tearing up the earth in huge handfuls, opening ugly yellow holes from which sprang a whirling mass of dirt, sticks and dust. And nearer and nearer to the line of trenches this devastating annihilation was coming. To know that human beings were lying there without means of escape-waiting there while the pitiless hailstorm of shrapnel drew slowly closer to their hiding places seemed such a



Arvid Johnson



diabolical method of torture that I wondered why men in the trenches did not go utterly mad with terror.'

The 'lost battalion' was still in the pocket. Pershing embarrassed by the failure of the rescue attempts, now sent a company of riflemen up the ravine to get them out. This also failed. Now the Germans attacked the pocket with flame throwers, but the men of Company K, let by a wounded Holderman, counter attacked and stopped the 'liquid fire.'

"Desperately hungry, nine of the men crawled out to try to get the air-dropped packages—five were killed, the others captured. One was sent back with a message for them to surrender. Again the refusal, and the Germans came back with another assault which the embolden company broke up.

"With the First Division now forcing the Germans to withdraw, a rifle patrol was able to reach the surrounded battalion that night. The next morning when Major Whittlesey walked up the ravine only 194 men walked out with him: 107 had died and 63 were missing. Arvid Johnson was among the 109 badly wounded who were carried out. He died that day October 8, 1918. Whittlesey was promoted to Lt. Colonel, and he, McMurtry and Holderman received the Medal of Honor. Even Cher Ami was hailed as a hero. What medals could comfort the grieving?

"The terrible news reached Arvid's family just before Armistice Day. After the guns were silenced, and while joyous bells rang out, and cheering people went wild in the streets with dancing, parades and flag-waving, this house where I live was draped in black and inside, the family and Elsa wept and mourned in their grief and heartbreak.

"The American Legion in Georgetown keeps his name and that of another fallen soldier - the Johnson-Frederickson Post. As Armistice Day (now Veterans Day) comes around again, Charles and I remember Arvid Johnson along with our prayers that mankind someday may learn to abolish the scourge of war and a permanent worldwide armistice prevail."

Ed. note: Jean, your words written many years ago most certainly are held in all our hearts during this terrible time in the United States. We thank Jean Howes for sharing the story of Arvid Johnson with us, and we are proud of Arvid for his bravery and proud of you and Charlie for honoring him each Veteran's Day. Thank you.

Standing proudly on the lovely flat piece of property on Lyons Plain Rd. stands the home of George and Linda Guidera. This home is not only historic in years, but it boasts that it has been the home of three First Selectmen of Weston. The home has a rich history which George and Linda have been kind enough to share with us.

"The house was built by Samuel Merwin Banks, the son of Thomas Banks II and Abigail Merwin. Thomas was born at the Thomas Banks house/tavern at 266 Lyons Plain Rd., now owned by Jose and Susan Feliciano. His paternal great, great, great grandmother was Elizabeth Lyon, a member of the family for whom Lyons Plain Road is named, and the original owners of the upper part of Lyons Plain and Kellogg Hill.

"In 1835, at the age of 28, Sam Banks purchased from his father a one-half interest in a 71-acre undeveloped tract of land that included acreage on both sides of Lyons Plain (including all of Smith Farm Road) and both sides of the Saugatuck River, extending from Lyons Plain to Tannery Lane South and Steephill Road. In 1838 he purchased the other half interest for \$2,000, a very large sum for the 1830's. This price, however, reflected the prime agricultural value of the land along Lyons Plain Road. Sam was a farmer, and a successful one, all of his life.

"Samuel Banks married Clara Ann Bradley (born 1812) of Greenfield Hill. They had two children, Harriet Bradley Banks (born 1831) and Sarah Maria Frances Banks (born 1838), who died in 1842 at the age of four.

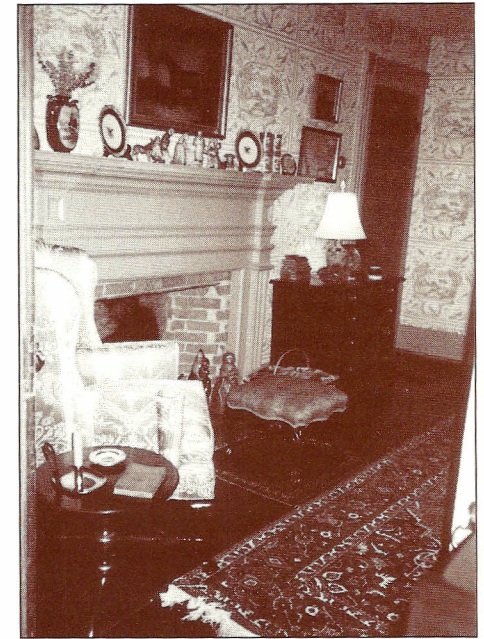
"In 1838 Mr. Banks started building his house. This date is definitely confirmed by the 1917 obituary of Harriett Bradley Banks (Samuel's daughter), which

stated that "when seven years of age, her father built the house which has been her residence." The date is also confirmed by the architectural style of the house. That style was a combination of Georgian Colonial and Greek Revival. The front facade of the house exhibits the typical 5 over 4 Georgian colonial window arrangement, but with a somewhat elaborate Greek Revival entrance door. The house has a central chimney as in the colonial Georgian style, but, the gable ends exhibit the triangular pediment of Greek or Roman temples then being uncovered by archeologists on the European continent. Nevertheless, the gable end does not face the road as was the custom in the construction of Greek Revival houses in the 1840's.

"Surrounding the house were a myriad of typical farm outbuildings, most of which survived until the 1950's. There was a large barn which burned to the ground about 1890 and was rebuilt on the original foundation by a local carpenter, Wildman Adams. The barn is still standing. There were also a chicken coop, corn crib, outhouse, well house and numerous storage sheds.

"As well as being a successful farmer Samuel M. Banks served as a Selectman in Weston in the 1840's and 1850's. Although the office of First Selectman was not created in Connecticut until the 1870's, it appears that Mr. Banks was the leading Selectman in Weston or Chairman of the Board of Selectmen. He was also a founding member of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in 1845.

"In the 1850's a young black girl by the name of Hettie Freeman came to live with the Banks family. The history of the Banks Family implies that Sam Banks was an Abolitionist and that Hettie was an escaped slave from the South. True or not, Hettie became an important member of the Banks family and lived with them until the end of her life. To show how important she was to the family and their affection for her, she is buried in the Banks family



Two views of the front parlor at the
The stool in front of the fireplace has been

plot at the Emmanuel Church Cemetery.

"Harriet Banks (Samuel's daughter) married Frederick Coley on April 25, 1848. Frederick was the son of Levi David Coley and Mary Hide Coley. He was born at the house at 28 Goodhill Road, opposite River Road. Frederick and Harriet had two daughters, Harriet Frances Coley born in 1850 (nicknamed Fannie), and Clara Ella Coley, born in 1853 (called Ella). In 1855 Frederick Coley was tragically killed on the sharp bend on River Road when his wagon turned over and crushed him. He is buried at the Coley Cemetery on Weston Road. After this accident, Harriet and her two daughters returned to live with Sam and Clara Banks.

"When Samuel Banks died on April 21, 1873, he left his wife Clara Ann Banks, Harriett Banks Coley, Hettie Freeman, Fannie Coley and Ella Coley all living in the house on Lyons Plain Rd. Without husbands or fathers to run the farm, the women did quite well engaging the services of workmen to plant and harvest the fields, and to cut and saw standing trees for lumber. Diaries left by the women of the house showed that although they were struggling to keep things going, they also had many, many social engagements, including social visits to and from friends and relatives as well as a visit to the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. The girls also attended private finishing schools. Clara Banks lived until 1892.



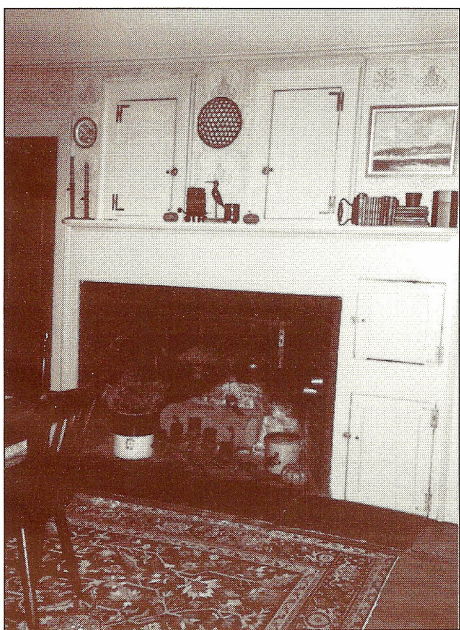
Samuel Merwin Banks House, 227 Lyons Plain Road

IN BANKS HOUSE

Plain Road



Home of George and Linda Guidera.
in the house since Sam Banks, circa 1840.



The original kitchen now dining room of the Guidera home.
George calls it the room of 9 doors.

"Fannie Coley married David Provoost of New Jersey. He was a successful architect, and they lived all their lives in New Jersey. There were no children from this marriage. Fannie's sister Ella married James A. Smith of Garrison, New York in 1882. She met James when he came to work as a hired hand on the Banks farm. They had one child named Clarence Chester Smith, born September 14, 1890.

"James Smith became the second gentleman of the house to become a First Selectman. He served from 1893 until

1902. He was also elected as Weston's State Representative in the Connecticut General Assembly where he served for the first ten years of the 20th century. James and Ella remained at the homestead until their deaths, she in 1929, he in 1931. "He is described in a 1901 biography on Connecticut's leading citizens as a farmer and lumberman who harvested trees on the property to be made into poles for electric and telephone service. The remnants of his sawmill can still be seen between Lyons Plain and the Saugatuck River."

"The homestead then passed to Clarence Smith ("Smitty" to his friends). He lived there all his life though he never married and had no children. He had been born in the house in 1890, and died there in 1950. Clarence also kept a daily diary from 1900 to 1950.

"George Guidera, Sr. who was born in New York City in 1907 first came to Lyons Plain in 1914. He was a summer visitor with his parents, Saverio Guidera (a native of Italy) and Ann Cimino Guidera. Shortly after, Saverio purchased land at 275 Lyons Plain Rd. and built the house that stands there now. This event meant that many Guidera family members came to Weston for regular summer visits. George Guidera, Sr. became a very close friend of Clarence Smith.

"In 1933 George, Sr., married Janet Krothe of Oneonta, New York and they went to live in the Bronx. Clarence Smith invited George and Janet to come and live with him in 1934. They accepted the invitation and George worked in Weston and surrounding towns as a stone mason. George, Sr., was tragically killed in an automobile accident in Westport in 1956,

but not before they adopted their son, George Clarence Guidera. Janet lived many years until her death in 1981.

"George C. Guidera attended and graduated from Weston schools, Staples High School, Colgate University and Georgetown University Law School. In 1965 he married Linda

Ann Gmelch of Delmar, New York. George and Linda have four children, Karen (Mrs. James E. Magee), George Jr., Barbara (Mrs. Leo B. Schwertley) and Suzanne (a partner in George's law firm). "In 1969 they undertook a renovation to the house and grounds. In 1973 and 1988 they added new rooms onto the house being careful not to alter or obscure the original front facade. The original trim, floorboards, mantles and room layout were preserved. All work on the interior and exterior has been done with the goal of preserving the original character of the house. The grounds have been maintained to reflect the farmstead character of the land, including open meadows and stone walls (many built by George himself)." George and Linda want the landscape to preserve the feel of "Old Weston."

"George C. Guidera is the third gentleman to serve as Weston's First Selectman - 12 years, longer than anyone before him. He also served Weston and surrounding towns as State Representative and State Senator in the Connecticut General Assembly."

"Chestnut Farm" (named in honor of the tree that was used for the lumber for the beams, posts and studs of the house), as it is now called by George and Linda has never actually been sold. It has been passed from generation to generation by inheritance since 1838. Because of this, many items such as photographs, diaries, quilts, and china still remain in the house. George and Linda display many of these items and care for them lovingly. We thank you both for sharing the history of your beautiful home with its amazing history.

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George and Linda Guidera added on to the right of the original Samuel Banks home.



SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

A DAY WE WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER

The mission of the Weston Historical Society is to preserve the past for future generations. We also preserve the present. We have an archivist on our Board who works tirelessly cataloging and preserving hundreds of documents, some from the past and some from the present that are pertinent to Weston and the history of the world around us during a particular time.

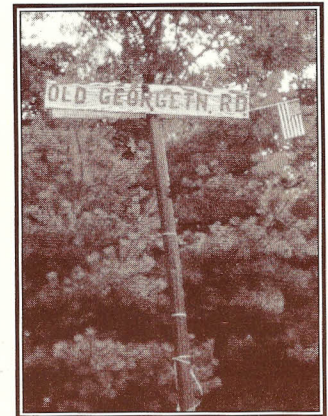
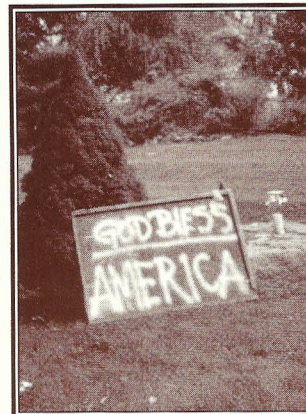
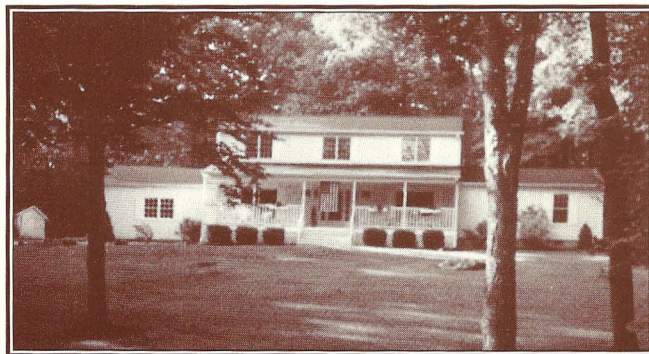
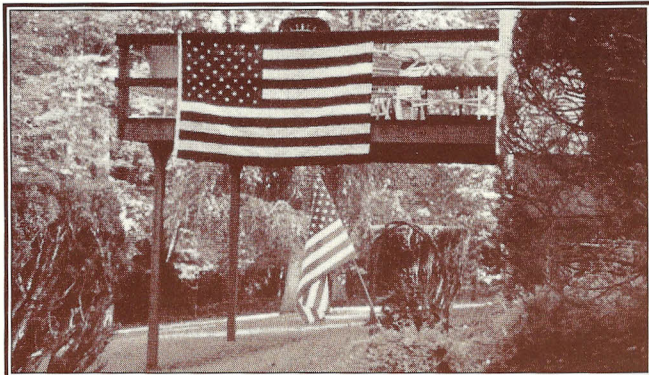
The Society, along with the rest of the world watched the horrible events of September 11. So many of us felt helpless, angry, afraid, sad and overwhelmed. We would like to offer each of you, your family, and especially your children, the

opportunity to put your thoughts of that day down on paper. This might take the form of an essay, poem, drawing, or just a few paragraphs. These pages will be put in acid free covers and placed in a book which will be kept at the Historical Society for people to see and read, now and in the future.

You may wish to sign and date the document, or you may choose to remain anonymous. That is certainly your choice. We ask that you either type or write in ink (as pencil does not always hold up over the years), and you may drop it off at the Weston Library, or mail it to the Weston Historical Society, Box 1092, Weston, Ct. 06883. Thank you.

FROM THE EDITOR:

As I walk and drive the streets of Weston, I am so proud to see so many flags, ribbons, stars, and other signs of the Red, White and Blue, hanging from flag poles, houses, trees, mailboxes and flower containers. From the biggest to the smallest, Weston is showing its pride as Americans. May you and those you love remain safe.





BETTY HILL

In August of this year, the town and the Historical Society lost its oldest member, Betty Hill. Betty and her husband Scott were very involved over the years at the Society, Scott serving as President for several years. Scott implemented the Society Bus Tour and wrote up the history of the homes and points of interest along the way. Betty, helped to gather pictures used in the book "Weston, the Forging of a Connecticut Town." In 1995 our membership chairman received a check from Betty and Scott saying that they were

sending a lifetime membership as they were sure they had used up the first one.

After Betty's passing we learned that she had donated a sum of money in her will to the Historical Society. The Board of Trustees voted to name the herb garden in honor of Betty and the Weston Garden Club has agreed to take over the planting and care of the garden. We are most grateful to Betty not only for this last remembrance, but for all the support she gave us over the years. She was a great lady who will be missed.



Christmas At the Coley House

Our annual Christmas Open House

will be held

Friday, December 7

for our members only preview party

*We will be having
the usual array of delicious treats,
and
great conversations with
old and new friends*

*The Weston Garden Club
will again be doing the decorations.
Please come and enjoy the evening.*

*The Coley House will also be open to the public
Saturday, December 8 & Sunday, December 9
This is our fourteenth Open House and
it just gets better and better.
Please join us.*

*The Weston Historical Society
Chronicle Quarterly*

Karin Giannitti, Editor

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