

May 2006

History In A Time Capsule: The Bicentennial Of Salem, Ohio

by George W. S. Hays

More than 200 items were placed in a time capsule and buried in the front lawn of the Salem Public Library on July 25, 1956, concluding the Sesquicentennial celebration of Salem, Ohio, the City of Peace, founded in April 1806.

On a very cold and damp April 25, 2006, the capsule was dug up as the kick-off event for the three month long Bicentennial celebration. Despite the chilly rain and wind, several hundred people gathered on the front lawn to watch the excavation. The festivities opened with welcoming remarks by George W. S. Hays, Director/Clerk-Treasurer of the Salem Public Library and B.J. Abrams of Kolby's of Salem, co-chairs of the Bicentennial. Pastor Larry Paxson of Faith Chapel Fellowship and President of the Salem Ministerial Association offered an invocation. The audience was lead in the Pledge of Allegiance by Salem High School Senior and Boy Scout Troop #2 Eagle Scout Ed Wrask.

Time Capsule Committee chair Judi Allio introduced and welcomed special guests. City, county and state elected officials were in the audience, as were the Sesquicentennial Queen and three of her court. Frank Chuck, now 85 years old, attended. He dug the hole for the Sesquicentennial time capsule by hand.

Mayor Larry DeJane addressed the crowd, recalling his youth growing up in Salem. He remembered when the time capsule was buried in 1956, never imagining that he would participate in its excavation as mayor fifty years later. The city was responsible for the Sesquicentennial events and time capsule. The Bicentennial was organized under the auspices of the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce. Mayor DeJane announced that Salem City Council transferred custody and control of the time capsule's contents to the Salem Historical Society, which was entrusted to preserve and provide access to the contents for future generations.

Mary Mercer Krogness of Cleveland returned to Salem to speak. As a senior in 1956, Ms. Mercer had participated in a Sesquicentennial essay-writing contest. Her essay on "Salem in Our Time" won first place and a \$50 bond for Ms. Mercer. She shared remembrances about growing up in Salem. Her contacts in Salem remained strong even after marrying and moving to Cleveland, as her parents remained in Salem until their deaths in the past few years.

With great excitement and anticipation, the time capsule was lifted from the ground. It is actually three separate containers. The inner container measures 18" X 24" X 36" and weighs 750 pounds. Once sealed, air was extracted and replaced with argon gas to better preserve the contents. It fits tightly into a second container made of steel that was welded shut. Air between the containers was replaced with argon gas. Both containers were made by the E. W. Bliss Company, and set into concrete provided by the H. M. Butcher Company. Logue Monument donated an engraved stone to mark the location.

Among the items known to be in the time capsule was an autographed copy of "Sincerely" by Salem native and graduate Alan Freed. It was Freed who coined the term "rock 'n roll." He left Salem after graduation and became a disc jockey in Akron, Cleveland, Youngstown and New York. He was entangled by a payola scandal that effectively ended his musical career, although he later went on to work in the film industry. Freed was among the first ten inductees of the Rock 'N Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland.

To celebrate Salem's famous native son, an ensemble of Salem Middle School and Salem High School girls sang "Sincerely" under the direction of choir director Attila Samu. The girls were all dressed in poodle skirts reminiscent of the 1950s.

Henry Spack performed the excavation and Tom Wright and his crew from Grandview Cemetery brought the capsule to the surface, all under the direction of Russell C. Loudon of Stark Memorial Funeral Home. Sinsley Towing transferred it to temporary storage in the Trinity Block, three storefronts on E. State St. built in the 1860s by Daniel Howell Hise, a successful entrepreneur, an ardent abolitionist, and one of Salem's most highly respected citizens. The capsule was later moved to the Salem Historical Society for opening.

No one knew what to expect when Fred Baker, Jr. of Salem Welding and Supply Co., assisted by his father Fred, Sr. lit the torches to break the weld that had sealed the capsule for fifty years. Fred, Sr. had been one of the workers who made the capsule so it was particularly fitting that his son was involved in its opening.

The hiss of escaping argon gas was audible as the inner container was opened to expose more than 200 pristine artifacts that had been carefully packed fifty years ago by members of the Sesquicentennial committee. The initial examination showed that the artifacts had survived the last half-century underground in remarkably good condition. Society volunteers inventoried and prepared to catalog the contents of the capsule as they were taken out. Each item was photographed as it was removed from the capsule.

The first item to be revealed was a Bible with the following inscription:

THIS BIBLE IS AN EVIDENCE OF "THE FAITH OF OUR FATHERS LIVING STILL"

It is also in recognition of the 35th anniversary of the First Friends Ruth Circle, missionary group, which was organized December 1921. Miss Nellie Lewis, an honorary member, spent two terms in India as a medical missionary.

The Bible was carefully placed on a 48-star United States flag. Underneath were various artifacts and paper documents from social and service clubs, schools and businesses, all carefully selected to represent the Salem of 1956.

Numerous picture post cards of beautiful images of Salem sites were included. One of the practices common in many communities that have become lost over the last fifty years is the production of post cards from local photographs. Of course, one of the most exciting items found in the capsule was the autographed sheet music of Alan Freed's "Sincerely," which was originally sung by the McGuire Sisters.

Among other items included were a pack of double bubble gum, a Revlon lipstick, and several packets of seeds. According to David Stratton, director of the Salem Historical Society, the gum was still soft. Some of the seeds were planted to see if they would germinate after being sealed in the capsule for so many years, which they did.

The Salem Historical Society worked to conserve the materials and to prepare them as quickly as possible for public display throughout the Bicentennial celebration. Items were on view at the Salem Public Library and the Salem Historical Society. The society took all necessary preservation efforts to ensure the artifacts do not fall prey to deterioration as they are viewed by the general public and used by researchers.

Throughout the summer, Ms. Allio and her committee developed guidelines for what could be included in the Bicentennial time capsule and solicited donations from the community. All items selected for inclusion had to be representative of Salem, capturing the spirit of the community for future generations. Items that could not be included were anything toxic, likely to release gas or deteriorate, no vegetation, no fasteners, batteries or ammunition, and no canned goods, foodstuffs or liquids. Print materials were requested flat, not folded. They could then be rolled if necessary.

The committee spent countless hours over the summer months carefully planning each and every detail. Each item offered was carefully evaluated, and those selected for inclusion were then carefully and fully documented, archivally packaged and labeled. More than 500 treasures were chosen for the time capsule. Detailed documentation of all items was placed on file at the Salem Public Library and the Salem Historical Society.

Following the tradition begun with the Sesquicentennial time capsule, an American flag was placed on top of the items and the Bible was placed as the last item in the time capsule. The Bible was inscribed "We pray that God will continue to bless our city as we trust His Guidance to the year 2056. With the 'Faith of our Fathers,' we trust Salem continues to be known as the 'City of Peace.'"

The committee decided for historical purposes to reuse the Sesquicentennial time capsule. Because of the overwhelming interest in submitting items for the Bicentennial time capsule, a second smaller capsule had to be fabricated. The two inner capsules are made of aluminum and the outer capsule is made of hot-rolled steel, all fabricated by Butech-Bliss of Salem.

The inner capsules were welded shut and filled with pressurized air to check for leaks. Once satisfied that there were none, the air was pumped out and replaced with argon gas. The valves were plugged and welded shut ensuring a permanent seal. The whole procedure took about ten hours. The same procedure was followed for the middle capsules and then again for the outer capsules, just as the Sesquicentennial time capsule had been fifty years earlier. The outer capsules were placed in a new vault provided Stark Memorial Funeral Home.

The Bicentennial time capsule weighs 956 pounds. Fourteen-year-old Tommy Baker was instructed how to open the time capsule in 2056, ensuring that the Baker family direct involvement in the Sesquicentennial the Bicentennial, continues as well in the 2056 Semiquincentennial.

The Bicentennial time capsule was buried on Heritage Day in Salem, September 23, 2006. After acknowledging the hard work of the entire Bicentennial committee and the time capsule committee members, the Salem High School Choir, under the direction of Jacci Samu, sang a very moving rendition of "Look to the Future." The words of the first verse are:

Gather, my friends and neighbors; let's make a plan.
The future of our world is here in our hands.
We can fight all the evil; we can fight all the hate.
If we do it together, it won't be too late.

The capsule was then lowered into the ground and as Mayor DeJane, Chamber President Gary Abrams, and Frank Chuck threw in the first ceremonial shovels of dirt, the Rev. Ross B. Jackson, Salem Community Hospital Chaplain offered a benediction, which was followed by the choir singing "God Bless America."

Grass was planted and Logue Monument provided a new granite marker. This time, the global positioning coordinates were recorded as well: N 40 degrees 54.062 minutes, W 80 degrees 50.964 minutes.

About the author - George W. S. Hays retired as the Director/Clerk-Treasurer of the Salem Public Library in 2006 and now is a consultant. He served as Vice Chair of the Ohio Preservation Council 2003-2004 and Chair 2004-2005. He can be contacted at 330-938-6126 or haysgws@oplin.org