

REMEMBERING KELSEY

On the 25th anniversary of his passing, we pay tribute to a “Clinton institution,” Kelsey P. Wirehouse (1909 – 1989)

When Kelsey died 25 years ago, he left behind an exceptional legacy of community service and enduring memories in the Town of Clinton. A large part of that legacy is still remarkably alive today in the hearts and minds of those who fondly remember him a quarter-century later. Their personal stories, as well as some publicly recorded stories, comprise the essence of this two-part *Historian* tribute to Kelsey Wirehouse.

Because his home was his office during his twenty years as town clerk, it's safe to say that the man dubbed a “Clinton institution” by the *Taconic Press* had more people visit his home than anyone else in town between 1965 and 1985. More often than not, visits with Kelsey were lively and memorable, rarely brief, and usually included a story or two ... or three.

“In the course of a conversation with Wirehouse,” one reporter wrote, “he can take the listener from histories of family and friends to the best places to eat if one is ever in Pennsylvania’s Lancaster County.”

“Kelsey was always delighted to have people drop in,” recalled Caroline Huggins, who took over as town clerk after his retirement in 1985. “He was town clerk 24 hours a day.”

A storyteller

“Kelsey was such a storyteller,” said longtime friend and colleague Bill McDermott. “That was what was appealing about him. If you went for a hunting or fishing license, you might

not leave for two hours. The business would literally take three or four minutes. The rest of the time was spent listening to stories about farming or some matters in the town that needed attention.”

Handling all the paperwork for town licenses—whether for a marriage, a dog, a fisherman, or a hunter—Kelsey would inevitably enliven the routine business with a healthy dose of his own personal style. After arriving at his door and being welcomed into his home, each visitor was invited to step into what was originally the dining room but had quickly become the centerpiece of Kelsey’s office as town clerk.

Donna Seelbach, penning a memorable newspaper feature shortly before Kelsey retired in 1985, described the scene at the center of his world. “The dining room table—buried underneath a half-finished crossword puzzle, books Wirehouse plans on reading once his clerking days are over, calendars, hunting regulations, adding machines and other implements of the clerk’s trade—still has its four matching chairs surrounding it.”

The official transactions usually happened around this table, transactions that sometimes took quite awhile to complete—a point well illustrated by a few personal stories of those who arrived to get a marriage license.

In pursuit of a wedding license

Several weeks before their September 1976 wedding, Leigh Nauta and Barry Knickerbocker arrived at Kelsey’s house for their Saturday morning appointment. “When we walked into his home,” Leigh recalled, “I was a bit awestruck and overwhelmed. It seemed like every piece of furniture was piled with stuff. Kelsey dug a space around the table for us to sit and conduct our business.”

“In a couple of minutes,” Leigh said, “our marriage license was filled in and signed—and then we engaged in a half-hour of chat, getting caught up on the neighborhood, family news, and various other topics Kelsey had on his mind to share with us.”

“As we got ready to leave,” Leigh added, “Kelsey paused and said, ‘Wait a minute, I’ve got something somewhere for newlyweds. And, sure enough, after rummaging through some piles on the table, he presented us with a travel kit containing toothpaste, toiletry items, and other helpful travel items.’”

For Kelsey handling a marriage license was to be



Kelsey P. Wirehouse

Daily Freeman photo

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viewed as far more than a routine matter. In fact, on at least one occasion getting a marriage license from him required more than a single visit.

"When I was was engaged in 1972" recalled Nancy Estes Chadwell, "I paid a visit to Kelsey to take care of getting our marriage license." But for Kelsey, the marriage license was more than a mere piece of paper, especially since Nancy was a close neighbor.

"Just a minute now," Kelsey insisted. "I need to meet your future husband first." So Nancy returned a few days later with her fiancé Wayne Chadwell. After a pleasant three-way conversation, their marriage license was duly completed—with more than an official seal of approval in the two-day transaction.

For one newcomer from "across the pond" finding herself at Kelsey's door, the initial impression was not so favorable.

"The first time I ever visited his home," said Philippa Ewing, "was to get our marriage license.

It was in the winter of 1982, and I went over there by myself. Once inside the house, I spotted a huge stuffed owl on the wall who seemed ready to pounce on me!" "At that moment,"

Philippa admitted, "I wondered 'What am I doing here? What on earth have I gotten myself into in this town?'"

Soon learning that Philippa was the fiancée of Arthur Weiland, Kelsey proceeded to sing the praises of Arthur and his family. As a longtime friend of Arthur's father, Kelsey knew the Weiland family well and was delighted to prepare the marriage license for Philippa and Arthur.



Wirehouse's home and office Dutchess County Parcel Access photo

"By the end of that first visit with Kelsey," recalled the now longtime Clinton resident Philippa Ewing, "I was totally charmed by him." Not only did she receive the full wedding package usually provided by the legendary town clerk that day, but Philippa was offered what she described as "sound, straightforward wedding and marriage advice" from the 72-year-old lifelong bachelor. Fondly recalling their subsequent encounters during the remaining seven years of his life, Philippa summed up Kelsey as "a very sweet and charming man who had opinions on everything!"

Colorful commentary

In his role as town clerk, Kelsey enjoyed the steady stream of visitors to his home throughout his twenty years on the job. And he would have been perfectly content if it had been possible to conduct all his official town duties without leaving the house. But occasionally those duties required Kelsey to travel beyond the confines of his Pumpkin Lane home—primarily to Town Hall.

And that's where longtime Clinton Corners friend and colleague Jeff Burns experienced some of his most amusing and cherished moments with Kelsey.

"Kelsey had a great sense of humor," said Jeff, "and of course [as town clerk] he sat next to me at the town meetings when I was supervisor. He often offered personal comments to me about agenda items as well as about the public comments of those in attendance."

"But what Kelsey didn't realize," Jeff explained, "is that the audience could often hear what he was saying. One night, during a rather heated discussion, one person was really laying into me, and Kelsey turned to me and said, 'I choose to be unmarried, but that person couldn't buy a marriage partner!'"

"The audience clearly heard Kelsey's private commentary," said Jeff, "and broke into very audible laughter. Kelsey didn't know what they were laughing about, and turned to me to ask what I had said that was so funny."

"I responded to him," Jeff recalled, "that I had made a face at a person—and never did tell him what they were really laughing about. I wanted him to keep making comments because I enjoyed them so much, and so did the audience, most of the time."

Fond memories

Growing up as his neighbors on Pumpkin Lane, the children of Lee and Ruth Estes—Tom, Nancy and Don—had many fond memories of Kelsey, the Wirehouse family, and the farm. Nancy described Kelsey as a "very comfortable and caring neighbor." And the care was mutual. When Kelsey broke his pelvis during a fall in his uncle's silo, the Estes family chipped in to help. Lee took care of milking the cows "and," Nancy explained, "my brothers and I ran around gathering up the cows and chasing the chickens!"

Even 25 years after his passing, the childhood memories are vivid for Nancy. She remembers that while Kelsey's mother Jennie was alive, visits to their house would sometimes include a Bible story being read to her by Jennie. For Nancy it was a pleasant part of the landscape of visiting the Wirehouse farm, usually followed by the young neighbor bounding outdoors for another day of adventures on the farm. "Looking back at our childhood," she said, "having Kelsey as a neighbor was a wonderful gift, a warm and steady presence. And we lived in his fields during the summer!" -🐣



The Lasting Legacy of a Few Brushstrokes



One summer evening in the mid-1970s, a group of boys in Clinton Corners gazed gleefully at an old wooden sign they had lifted from its post on Pumpkin Lane. For years the sign had been hanging from a tree in the driveway of Kelsey Wirehouse with the hand-painted words “Town Clerk.” Having secretly carried their plunder down to a workshop near Upton Lake, the boys were excited about diving into the next phase of their operation.

In search of summertime fun, these “Upton Lake boys” had enjoyed pulling off a prank or two in the neighborhood over the years. One of their favorite games was called “pursing.” They would tie a string to a purse, drop the purse in the middle of the road, and then hide in the nearby bushes, waiting for a passerby to notice and rescue the purse. Whenever a passerby would try to grab the purse, the boys would yank the string, pulling it away from the stunned visitor. This was usually accompanied by a not-so-muffled round of laughter from the bushes as the boys revealed the prank to their surprised “victim.”

Of course the pursing game couldn’t fully satisfy these thrill-seeking boys of summer. In their quest for more summertime adventures, the boys came up with a new idea, setting their sights on Kelsey’s sign. For the Upton Lake boys, the unassuming red and white sign would become the centerpiece of a brand-new game.

This time the game didn’t involve a purse and some string, but an old paint brush and some outdoor paint. Fueled by their boyhood camaraderie and humor, the boys realized that changing the word “Clerk” to “Jerk” would not only provide some amusement, but it would be “really cool” . . . not to mention fun and fairly easy to do. So with sheer delight—and a bit of trepidation—they set about their scheme.

As they prepared the paint for their clandestine project, what the boys didn’t realize was that they weren’t the first ones to add an extra layer of paint to the old wooden sign now in their possession. In fact, this sign had a history of its own to tell—and Kelsey wasn’t the first person to own it. The sign had been made and painted twenty years earlier, a full decade before Kelsey became town clerk. And when it was first touched up with a new coat of paint, it wasn’t for the purpose of changing “Clerk” to “Jerk,” but simply for sprucing it up as it was about to change hands.

Originally, the sign lived three miles away on Hollow Road, outside the home of Charles Talleur. As his son Tim recalls, “My father had a number of wooden signs on the family farm, all

painted red and white, including one that said “Red Fox Hill Farm.” For ten years the smaller “Town Clerk” sign served to guide town residents to the home of the man who served in that post from the mid-1950s until 1965. Although he was widely known in town for this role, Charlie Talleur was perhaps even more widely recognized as “the telephone man” and for his memorable annual role as Santa Claus. When he was elected town supervisor in 1965, Charlie offered the sign to his friend and successor, Kelsey. And the ten-year-old sign made its way from Hollow Road to Pumpkin Lane.

A decade later, as the Upton Lake boys carried their freshly painted sign from the lake back up to its post at Kelsey’s house, they had no idea about the long and winding road the sign itself had already traveled. They were now adding a new chapter to the multilayered history of this old wooden sign. In the dark of night, they returned the sign to its post—and could hardly wait for daylight to usher in the “grand unveiling” of their artistry.

Sunrise came soon enough. The transformed sign sat quietly in the morning daylight, resting in its familiar perch, proclaiming Kelsey Wirehouse as “Town Jerk.” From time to time, a few of the Upton Lake boys would casually wander along Pumpkin Lane to take a peek at the doctored sign, wondering how many people might have noticed their handiwork. For a couple of weeks, the sign sat there undisturbed. But one afternoon the boys noticed it was gone. Wondering if Kelsey himself had spotted the change, they were curious and a bit nervous about what he might do next. After a few days, the sign was back at its post, with the word “Clerk” repainted.

Was this the end of the story? No, not for the Upton Lake boys. In their continuing pursuit of adventure, they decided that the sign’s “undoing” was no reason to simply end the game. After waiting a few days, they found

an opportune moment to re-take the sign and bring it back to their workshop. Reopening the paint cans, they again carefully painted over the top part of the “C” in red, connected the lower part to the “l” in white, and successfully restored their “Jerk” imprint to the sign. After waiting for the latest coat to dry, they returned the sign to its post once again. And once again they waited and wondered.

What would Kelsey do this time? As it turned out, nothing. How did he respond to this second round of being proclaimed “Town Jerk”? Simply silence. Day after day, week after week, the sign remained in place.

By simply leaving the sign alone, Kelsey had effectively ended the game. It was a TKO in Round 2 of what the Upton Lake boys might have wished had been a 15-round contest. And being a man of good humor and many stories, it seems that Kelsey decided the best way to stop the game was to simply leave the sign alone, accepting it as a gift-with-a-story from some anonymous donors. For more than a decade, the “Town Jerk” sign remained on its perch in Kelsey’s driveway, even after he retired as town clerk in 1985.

In fact, the prank truly did end up being quite a gift—adding to Kelsey Wirehouse’s reputation as a good-humored “Clinton institution,” undismayed by neighborhood pranks. For the remaining years of his life, the transformed sign provided both a conversation piece for amused (and sometimes bemused) new visitors to his home, and ready grist for his own story mill—as well as for those who would affectionately add this “Town Jerk” story to their repertoire of Clinton folklore.

P.S. You may be wondering: where is that storied sign today? No one seems to know. We asked the Upton Lake boys and even they don’t know. Honest!

TOWN CLERK

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