

Dublin Historical Society

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GENE GOWING – MAN OF MANY TALENTS



Corporal Almerin Gowing in Vincennes, France, 1919. Courtesy of the Jaffrey Historical Society.

Many old-time Dublin residents remember Gene Gowing as a caller and teacher at the square dances held in the Dublin Town Hall, as well as in Bell's Barn in Peterborough. Along with Dick Richardson and Ralph Page, he was one of the leading callers in this part of New England. In addition, he founded and directed the Folkways Foundation, and taught folk and square dancing at schools, summer camps and community centers in many other parts of the country. He produced at least two books and record albums on square dancing. But square dance calling was only the culmination of an exceptionally varied career, which included service as a Signal Corps photographer in World War I, 15 years in Hollywood, New York, San Francisco and London as an art director, producer, writer and director, and service with the Office of Price Administration in World War II.

Gene Gowing was born in Dublin in 1896, the only child of Clesson Elbridge and Mary Kate McIntosh Gowing. He was christened Almerin McIntosh Gowing: Almerin after his grandfather, George Almerin Gowing, and McIntosh after his mother's family, which came from Peterborough. (George Almerin Gowing, through his daughter's marriage to Milton D. Mason, was the great-grandfather of Elliott, Hildreth and Christine Allison,

SAVE THE DATE...

... of August 14th for the Society's **Summer Meeting**. Trustee Rusty Bastedo will speak on the history of the Dublin Lake Club. The Lake Club will celebrate its hundredth birthday in 2001, and Rusty is working on a centennial history. Members will receive a reminder as the date gets closer, along with an announcement of the time and place.





The Clesson Gowing house. Photo by Lucy Shonk.

who were thus Gene Gowing's first cousins once removed. Gene Gowing was also related, but rather distantly to Henry and Alice Gowing). Just when he began to be called Gene is unrecorded, but he used that name professionally for most of his life, and adopted it legally in 1948, by petition to the Cheshire County Probate Court.

Gene Gowing grew up in the house on Main Street that now belongs to Thomas LaFortune (the second house downhill from Worcester's Garage), which his parents had built at the time of their marriage in 1890. He graduated from Peterborough High School in 1914 and studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, N.Y. before enlisting in the Army.

He made an effort to enlist in the newly-formed Camouflage Branch of the Army Engineers, in which were serving a number of Abbott Thayer's students, including Barry Faulkner. Gowing, himself something of an artist, probably knew Thayer and may well have been familiar with his work on protective coloration.

He was, however, unsuccessful, and wound up in the photographic division of the Signal Corps. He trained at the Signal Corps' photography school at Columbia University and then, in May, 1918, went to France as a photographic laboratory technician, first in Paris and later in the suburb of Vincennes. In a September 12, 1918 letter to the Peterborough Transcript, Gowing describes the work of the photographic division as of "triple value: As news value, propaganda, and spy work, and after the war we expect to make a great photographic history of this war . . ."

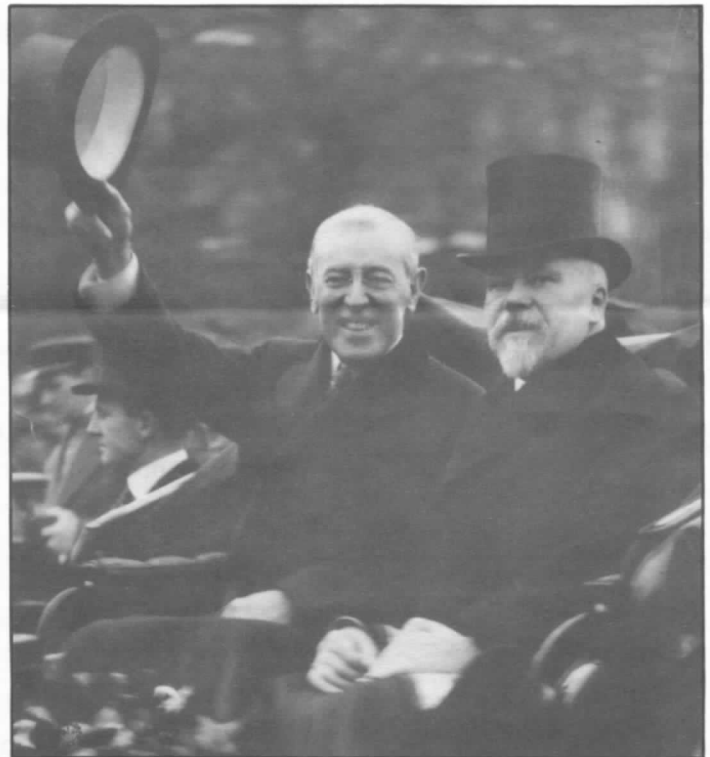
Although his principal duty was to develop other men's pictures, he took many on his own account,

including a memorable shot of Presidents Wilson and Poincaré, taken on the occasion of Wilson's triumphal tour in December, 1918. He was justly proud of this picture, and presented a large framed copy of it to the Dublin Public Library, where it can be seen today.

Gowing was promoted to Corporal in January, 1919. The following month he got permission to visit Rheims, where he spent a day photographing the devastation inflicted on the cathedral and city. He described this expedition in an eloquent letter to his parents, which was published in the Peterborough Transcript of March 13, 1919. Writing of the cathedral, he says:

There is so little left that it is hard to describe. The flying buttresses at the back and sides together with their foundations are entirely razed. The spire and roof with the many decorations at the back are all gone. . . . The front is almost devoid of its once beautiful Gothic ornaments and decorations. The east tower . . . is badly shot away and great shell holes yawn in the east side.

Adding interest to his day in Rheims was his meeting with Samuel Gompers, founder of the American



Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Raymond Poincaré, Paris, December, 1918. Courtesy of the Jaffrey Historical Society

Federation of Labor, who at over 80 was doing relief work in France. Gowing's letter describes Gompers: "Of course Mr. Gompers is a tremendously interesting and great man and next to Wilson is probably the greatest American war worker." Later in February more pictures resulted from a short spell of leave in Cannes.

The following month, Gowing was transferred to duty as a photographer with a Y.M.C.A. entertainment unit, first in Paris and later in Tours. That assignment produced a crop of photographs of men dressed as women — the typical army entertainment of those days. On June 6, 1919 he received orders to return to the U.S., carrying photographic negatives to Signal Corps headquarters in Washington, after which he was discharged from the Army.

In the 1920's Gowing was in Hollywood, where, judging from photographs of him, he achieved a certain level of affluence. His theatrical career as set designer, director, producer and writer lasted, according to his 1942 resumé, for fifteen years. Thereafter, he seems to have developed an interest in folk dancing, and became an instructor in that art at various colleges and schools, including Madeira, Foxcroft and St. Timothy's, as well as the Dublin School.

By 1950, he was well established as a choreographer and caller. In that year he bought the Hafeli/Ernst house, now owned by Dublin School (the first house on the left after the fire station on the New Harrisville Rd). During this period he spent summers running



Gene Gowing in Hollywood. The inscription reads: "Breakfast is ready / Dad & Mother / 10/26/27 / Almerin". Courtesy of the Jaffrey Historical Society

classes in square dance calling and folk dancing at the Folkways Foundation at Bell's Barn in Peterborough. He wintered in Florida, calling for square dances in resort hotels.

After selling his Dublin house in 1956, he spent his remaining years in Jaffrey. He died in 1968, having never married. Many of his World War I photographs found their way to the Jaffrey Historical Society, to which we are indebted for permission to reproduce some of them here.

— Nancy E. Campbell

Clesson Gowing (1865-1942), Gene Gowing's father, operated a livery stable and garage in the barn behind what is now Nancy Lehmann's house. He served the Town as Tax Collector, School Board representative and as a member of the executive committee for the Town Improvement Society.

Unfortunately, Mr. Gowing's town service ended unhappily. In November, 1932, the State Tax Commission audited his accounts as Tax Collector and found discrepancies. According to the 1933 Town Annual Report, Mr. Gowing had collected and kept an extra two dollars on certain tax bills. In other

instances, amounts collected were not adequately accounted for. The Tax Commission's accountant recommended that Mr. Gowing be required to refund amounts paid over and above those set out in the tax warrant.

According to a March, 1933 *Keene Sentinel* report, he was charged in Cheshire County Superior Court with thirty-five counts of obtaining money under false pretenses. In what appears to have been a plea bargain, he pleaded *nolo contendere* to one count and was given a suspended sentence of one to three years in state prison.

SOCIETY NEWS

The Society's Annual Pot Luck Supper...

...in February was enjoyed by fifty members and guests. Bill Bauhan gave an entertaining and informative slide presentation on historic Dublin houses. Bill has given the Society the slides used in his talk. Nancy Handy has transcribed the talk from tape, so it is available to interested persons in either oral or written form.



Bill Bauhan speaking to the Society, February 21, 1997.
Photo by Henry A. Campbell.

From The Schoolhouse Museum

Curator Marney Bean announces that the schoolhouse museum will once again be open to the public on Sundays in August. It could be open more often, if we could find more docents. Any volunteers?

The museum has purchased another piece of **souvenir china**. This is a decorative plate and is unusual in having not just one, but five different Dublin scenes. The plate was made in Germany around the turn of the century for George W. Gleason, who operated a general store between the Town Hall and the present site of Worcester's Garage.

The museum has also acquired the **lectern from the Trinitarian Church**, now the Post Office. It is marked as having been made in Keene in 1877, the year the church was built. The lectern comes as a gift from the Trustees of the Dublin Community Church, who were given it by the Dublin Women's Community Club.

From The Archives

Nancy M. Aldrich has continued her generosity to the Society. Among her most recent gifts are *The Seven Parsons and the Small Iguanodon*, a charming children's book by Gerald Handerson Thayer; *The City Without Walls*, an anthology compiled by Margaret Cushing Pearmain Osgood; and clippings, photographs, letters and other memorabilia relating to the Pearmain family.

Alfred and Fay Sawyer, of Jaffrey, have donated papers, letters and phonograph albums relating to Gene Gowing. Some of this material forms the basis for the foregoing article.

John and Lucia Sirois have given the Society papers relating to Nathan Gould Methley, including poems written by Mr. Methley. Nathan Methley lived in what is now the Sirois' house on Goldmine Road and was known as "The Hermit of Monadnock".

Jim Sovik has given the Society a copy of the regimental history of the 14th New Hampshire Volunteers, in which several Dublin men served during the Civil War.

Among new books acquired are Richard Meryman's biography of Andrew Wyeth and *Footprints of the Past*, a history of the Cornish art colony.

Other gifts have come from **William L. Bauhan, Robert Gowing, Mary McKee, Elizabeth S. Pool, Jeanette Walker, Edward F. Whitney**. To all of them our thanks.



C R E D I T S

This issue of the Dublin Historical Society Newsletter was edited by Nancy E. Campbell.

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