



Windsor  
Historical  
Society

News



*A bi-monthly publication of The Windsor Historical Society, 96 Palisado Avenue, Windsor, CT 06095*

October 1999

Special Edition

# Robert "Bob" Silliman Retires

**After 25 years as a member and 17 years as the Director of the Windsor Historical Society, Bob has retired.**

Bob's service to the Society and the ancient town of Windsor is a matter of record and has been detailed in several newsprint articles. As many of our membership live beyond this small and pivotal community, you should be not only notified but share with us the accumulative effect Bob has had on the history of the Society.

A thousand members nationwide have joined Connecticut's first town's historical society since he came on board. He has journeyed afar and personally met many of you and has kept in touch through private letters and this newsletter. His reports to the Board



Bob receives Rotary Club Award  
June 29, 1996

would make a journal of the past two decades of growth and progress.

Some adjectives might help to describe his long service

and character: personable, affable, usually unflappable, accessible, durable, active, effective, inquisitive, distinctive, and surely, constructive, motivated. Dedicated and always captivated by the history of his native town. These are some of the words through which we might capture Robert Silliman and his tenure.

He has earned a break. We will sorely miss him as our Director, but we are hopeful he will continue to stay on as an active participant in the Historical Society he has so lovingly helped to build.



But is it authentic? Bob examining a tall-case clock shipped to the Society with Bev Garvan, 1994.

1954 was a year of significant occurrences: the first U. S. nuclear submarine, THE NAUTILUS, was launched at Groton, CT. *Brown vs. The Board Of Education* became a landmark ruling by the U. S. Supreme Court which helped to lay the foundation of the Civil Rights movement. Senator Joseph McCarthy was condemned by his colleagues effectively marking an end of his "Red Scare" campaign against domestic communism. Ernest Hemingway was the recipient of that year's Pulitzer Prize for his novel, The Old Man And The Sea.

Yes, many important events occurred in 1954; but to the Windsor Historical Society, no event was more critical than Bob Silliman being bitten by a bug - the history bug, that is.

In 1954 a family genealogy research project led him to the Historical Society; and Bob Silliman, a life-long resident of Windsor, was officially bitten by that history bug. Bob joined the Society as a member, was later

elected to its Board of Directors, and then served as the Board's president for eight years before becoming its Director in 1983.

Under Bob's direction, the Society simply blossomed. The Society's physical size expanded as Bob led a one-million dollar expansion project in the late 1980's. However, this was no simple construction endeavor. Bob conducted extensive research into museum design to make sure the building safely and comfortably housed the Society's precious collections, visitors and staff members. The results of his efforts and vision are obvious in the completed Mills Building. The Mills Building is not simply a museum, but a showcase for Windsor's history in its museum galleries and renowned genealogy library which attracts researchers from across the country.

The Society's physical growth continued under Bob in 1992 when he arranged for the Society to lease the nearby Dr. Hezekiah Chaffee house from the Town providing the Society with the opportunity to interpret the lifestyles of Windsor's prominent 18<sup>th</sup> century families.

However, growth of the Society under Bob's direction was not simply limited to its physical size. Bob's passion and ability to breathe life into stories and facts from the past were infectious - which would explain why more than a thousand people from all



Bob (left) with Jarvis Strong at the 1993 MARY AND JOHN Worldwide Conference.

over the country joined the Society under his leadership. An impressive feat, indeed! He greeted these visitors personally, conducted tours through our old houses and new exhibits, and even walked them across the street through our ancient burying ground. He listened carefully to each visitor's story and made some amazing connections for them

either through our books or anecdotes he remembered from his nearly 80 years in Windsor. He served the Society at all hours of the day and night, often leaving a warm bed at 3 a.m. on a snowy night to return to work and answer a false alarm in the security system. It was a job description like no other. When the ashes of one of Connecticut's earliest aviators, Percival Spencer, arrived in the mail from California, Bob oversaw their burial. When the state was looking for a town to relocate their Major John Mason statue, he attended a hearing at the Department Of Environmental Protection and secured a home for this Windsor founder. His love for the past goes beyond our local museum in that he oversaw the care of the Poquonock cemetery for over 40 years. He was a volunteer fireman for many years, and served in the official capacity of Town Historian fielding questions of all varieties. As a WWII veteran, he serves as historian for his Air Force 57<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing unit. He loves his town, his home and his family's past.

Finally, the Society under Bob's direction grew not just in terms of its physical size or membership base, but also in terms of its respect. The knowledge, integrity and passion for Windsor's history that Bob possessed as Director was recognized by the



Bob and "Famous Offshoots Of Windsor Roots" exhibit, 1998. Bob can trace his family back to Windsor's 1633 beginnings.

town, the members and visitors of the Society and other professionals in the museum community. His expertise was well utilized at other historical organizations as well. Bob was a past trustee of the Connecticut Historical Society and the Antiquarian And Landmarks Society. He served as president of the Connecticut League Of Historical

Societies, and he currently serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Descendants Of The Founders Of Ancient Windsor (DFAW).

Bob was, and still is, recognized by his peers as a consummate professional who operated a best-in-class organization. He was more than a manager, he was a leader. We at the Society love him, miss him and will eternally be grateful to him.

Thank you, Bob.



Receiving the Bear Bible, 1990. Left to right: Bob, Lyman Potter and Bill Robinson.

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Miss Beverly Garvan  
14 Giddings Avenue  
Windsor, CT 06095

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*Come to the party . . .*

Help us celebrate Bob's long and loving  
tenure at the Society on

*Sunday, October 24, 1999  
2 - 5 p.m.*

*Society's meeting room*

Refreshments will be served.

If you can't be with us, send your good  
wishes to Bob via a greeting card, e-mail,  
FAX or photographs to the Society's  
address.



**Windsor Historical Society**

96 Palisado Avenue  
Windsor, CT 06095

860/688-3813

Windsor@ntplx.net

FAX 860/687-1633

*Two charming old New England homes  
await your visit in Connecticut's oldest  
English settlement.*

Hours

April 1 - October 31, Tuesday - Saturday  
10 - 4 p.m.

Contributions to this special edition  
were written by  
Warren Giffin, Cherie Sweeney and  
Connie Thomas.