

LOCAL FEATURE

COUNTRY-STYLE AUCTION TO BENEFIT SEASIDE HALL

7/23/10

Home to Stony Creek Fife and Drum Corps for over 100 years

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

On a recent humid July evening in Branford's picturesque Stony Creek, Hannah and Joel Baldwin, proprietors of the nearby Linden Point House, wandered into Seaside Hall, the maple hardwoods squeaking under their feet.

That was when they learned that there would be no music at the home of the venerable Stony Creek Fife and Drum Corps on Aug. 7.

At 5 p.m. on the second Saturday of August, auctioneer Mike Nuzzo's rapid-fire, quick-cadence delivery will replace the trademark up-tempo pace of the Corps. Instead of the shrill of the fife — audible enough, says longtime Corps member Mark Dudley, to swell above the noise of battle — there will be the whoosh of paddles and the sound of bids rising higher and higher. Assuming the role of the thunderous bass drum, the thwack of the gavel will signal each time an antique clock or a drive in a 1931 convertible or a Stony Creek granite bench has been sold.

The purpose of the "down-home-style country auction," as Nuzzo, who was trained in auctioneering in North Carolina, described it, is to raise funds for the final phase of the seven-year-long process of restoring Seaside Hall: the painting of the outside of the 1885 structure. That task is not as simple as it sounds, says Dudley. Pursuant to state mandate, earlier coverings, including lead paint, have to be removed before painting begins. As John Kirby, historian of Stony Creek's Church of Christ, put it, "Who knows what has been applied to the exterior during the last 125 years?"

Not that the members of the Corps are daunted by the estimated \$20,000 cost. After all, they only have to listen to the stirring music they play to rouse themselves to action. Besides, they're accustomed to steep challenges, regularly braving stultifying heat and driving rain in the countless parades they march in each year.

Above all, they're deeply invested in preserving both Seaside Hall and the Corps itself as an integral part of Stony Creek's rich history. So much so that in 2003, they maintained their independent spirit by turning down a \$250,000 state grant, opting to raise their own funds from various civic organizations while recycling the state grant to the town for other projects.

The reason was simple. Sure, the Corps has performed far and wide: at President Eisenhower's Inaugural Parade in 1957 and the World's Fair in New York in 1964. Yes,

they took First Prize at the International Band Competition in Limerick, Ireland in 1980, played at the ceremony celebrating the reopening of the Statue of Liberty in 1985, and appeared at New York's Lincoln Center in 2002.

But no matter how far they've ventured, "Everything about us is here in Stony Creek and in here," said Dudley, gesturing around the large open space. "This place exudes history. This is where five generations have passed down the art of martial music. We wanted to do it our way and we wanted to do it with craftspeople from the area."

While plans had been proposed for years, it was only when a 2002 structural and engineering study indicated that major repairs were necessary to save the historic structure that the urgency of restoring the building became clear. Seaside Hall had been constructed on a marshy site; it was inherently unsound. To provide stabilization against storm and tidal destruction, it was necessary to raise the building two feet by installing cement piers covered with Stony Creek granite. The Corps also upgraded the first floor and made improvements to the second floor meeting space. They brought the building up to code and added new handicap access. All along, said Dudley, local foundations, companies, charities, and individual donors have come through.

It's been no different with the Saturday, Aug. 7 auction to fund the final phase of painting the exterior. Already there have been donations of garden pieces from Taken For Granite in Stony Creek; free rides in a vintage convertible from Branford's Planet Hot Rod; high-end European-style briefcases for women from Stony Creek's Fabrique, Ltd.; and gift certificates from expert seamstress Lucy Camarda of Lucy's Tailors on Main Street in Branford.

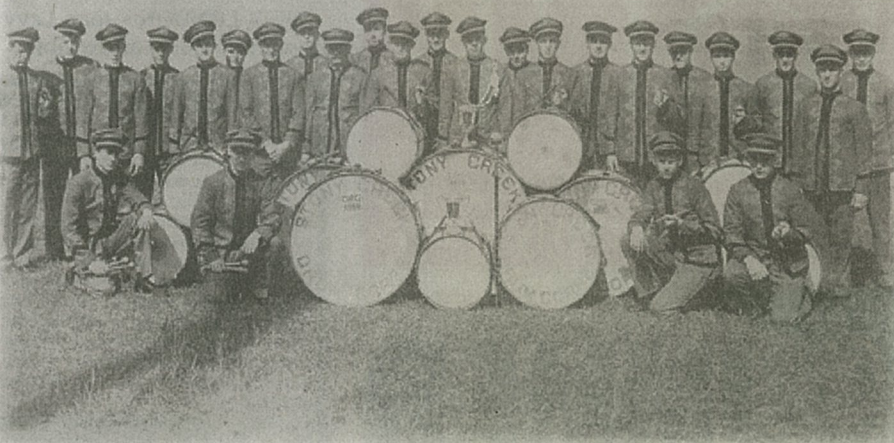
The craftsman Bill Brody has contributed a rainbow trout exquisitely hand carved from the branch of an elm tree. There's also \$100 worth of doggy day care or boarding offered by Allison Becker of Madison. Stony Creek Package Store will be providing drinks and hors d'oeuvres. And the renowned auctioneer George Barba, whose father played fife in the Corps from 1910 to 1924 and who himself called square dances in Seaside Hall from 1947 through 1949, will be making a special guest appearance.

But perhaps there's no better testament to the symbiosis between the village of Stony Creek and the Fife and Drum Corps than the spontaneous offer by Hannah and Joel Baldwin of Linden Point House the warm evening they passed through Seaside Hall: two nights at their bed and breakfast overlooking the Thimble Islands.

That was after they learned the Corps would precede the



Above, Auctioneer George Burba, vice president of Stony Creek Fife & Drum Corps Mark Dudley, and auctioneer and fife player Mike Nuzzo. Photos Brad Horrigan.



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auction with a performance at adjacent Madera Park.

"We just love hearing the Fife and Drum Corps," said Hannah Baldwin. "The way the patriotic tunes drift through the streets and across the water whenever they're practicing, it's just uplifting." With that, she looked around at the historic uniforms and the ancient drums. "To us, this is a big part of what makes Stony Creek what it is."

Editor's note: Stony Creek Fife and Drum Corps Auction and Concert takes place Aug. 7. Concert 4 p.m. at Madera Park. Auction 5 p.m. at Seaside Hall, 215 Thimble Island Rd. Admission \$5. Monetary gifts for the preservation of Seaside Hall can be sent to Corps' Building Fund, P.O. Box 1886, Stony Creek, CT 06405. For contributions of goods and services, contact Mark Dudley at 203-453-6760 or Joe Monroe at 203-481-9878.

