

# GREENVILLE LOCAL HISTORY GROUP NEWSLETTER

May 1994

Share Session

Nice weather made us do it!  
About fifteen showed for the June 9 share session.

Actually, a lot of small pieces filled the night. Harriet "Taylor" Rasmussen recounted more of the Taylor diaries. Reading from the 1880 segment, Harriet detailed Richard Taylor's trip to NYC, as well as describing visits of distant relatives to the farm. Other mention was given to pieces of the 1960's and 1970's diaries that recalled events fifty years earlier.

Dave Dively's attendance brought an anticipation about the fourth grade project, and he didn't disappoint. He brought several essays and read two of them, based on the assignment, "Life Before TV". Of course, my humorous comment of "Was there any?" brought a flood of stories about the richness of life without the "tube". Dave promised to drop off essays to the volunteers who will read them. This year, instead of recognizing the top two or three, the fourth grade plans to recognize a core of 10-15. In a change from past years, most of the writing is being done in class.

Joe Mangold brought a variety of pictures of his house, the Cherry Hill Homestead. Pictures included photos of his relatives, other guests, and different stages of house alterations.

Ray and Marge Bennett brought in two documents. The first was a 1957 Life magazine, the one that detailed the saga of Siam, the lost elephant that roamed the Windham and Durham area for a couple weeks. Mentioned in the article was Virgil Phinney of the Freehold Airport who helped search and, upon sighting the pachyderm

(vocabulary lesson! I knew I'd use that word some decade), would throw out a roll of toilet paper to help the searcher on the ground. The second part was a clipping of the death of Virgil Phinney in a plane accident in 1963. Ray told of Virgil's aerial exploits.

Don had several items to show. First, two postcards from June Clark (now of NYC) were read and connected to the recent news of the Botsford House being placed on the National Historic Register. Quite a feat, and many of us are aware of the time and effort taken by June to compile the information to complete the application. Don brought back a package of goodies brought last month by Arlene Brown; these items included GCS musical booklets, Greene County table placemats, GCS graduation exercises' leaflets, a copy of an Academy song, and a couple other good pieces. This is a good place to remind all that these kinds of details are easy to collect; before throwing them away, consider placing them in the Historian's files. Phyllis Beechert contributed several newsletters from church that drew attention to whereabouts and goings on of the young adults in the church - college, work, service. Then, Don read four or five paragraphs about the 1887 cyclone, as written up in that issue of the Greenville Local (a copy of which was contributed by Cris Ketcham), that devastated parts of Schoharie and Albany Counties. And, to finish things off, Don brought some aerial shots Debra recently took of Baumann's Brookside, Van Auken's Express and the newly renovated GCS track.

Adjournment was announced, which meant a half hour of serious chatting ensued.

**Reminders:**

- The June 13th meeting will be a "Computers and Genealogy For Beginners" program, demonstrated by yours truly. No computer expertise is needed; in fact, I will assume that computers are a mystery and hope that most of you attending will walk away understanding half of what I say!
- The June 13th meeting also marks the five year anniversary of our first meeting. Maybe we can take a half hour to look back where we've been and celebrate with refreshments. If no one volunteers or helps out, you may be stuck with what I consider to be refreshments!
- Warning! Label your pictures! If someone were to go through your photo albums, would they

know who is in them or what is going on. If not, it's not too late. If you're writing on the back of the picture, use pencil or some other instrument whose marking agent will not ruin or bleed through years from now. Do not use tape or paper clips; both leave marks in time.

- Pearl Capone at a GLHG meeting is a sure sign it really is spring. Welcome back, Pearl.
- Attached is a copy of an article from the Altamont Press about the SRV retreat just across the town line.

Sincerely,

*Don*

# Blue-jean swami brings Hindu to America...

By Terez M. Limer

**WESTERLO — Swami?** This tall, blue-eyed American in plaid shirt and jeans? It seems unlikely. As unlikely as a pink stone temple set in the fields and orchards of southern Albany County.

Yet both Swami Bruce Hilliger and the sunset-hued Temple of the Universal Spirit are integral components of the SRV Retreat Center on Jennings Road in Westerlo.

Set on 100 acres, the Retreat Center stands on a hill facing one of the area's most beautiful Catskill mountain views. Its early 1800s Victorian farmhouse and unique stone temple are clearly visible from busy Route 32, yet to most passersby its history and function are a mystery.

Named in honor of three Hindu saints, Sarada, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the SRV is an educational and religious center owned and operated by the SRV Association of America. All three saints were teachers of Vedanta, the ancient Eastern religious philosophy that is the lodestone for the organization.

Hilliger, the center's resident director, sees SRV also as a contraction of service, the organization's mission in the community. In the five and a half years he has directed the center, he has worked to make it a place where groups and individuals of all religious and philosophical backgrounds can find space and solitude for educational and spiritual retreats.

According to Hilliger, Vedanta recognizes the validity of all the world's religions and strives to promote unity through understanding of the similarities in each of them. Above the temple's front en-

trance, the symbols of the world's five major religions are carved: the Christian cross, the Jewish star, the moon and star of Islam, the Buddhist Wheel of Dharma, and the Hindu Om. Inside the temple, there are no religious symbols.

"Each group that comes in sets up their own shrine," Hilliger explains. He has hosted Kripalu yoga retreats, Buddhist, as well as Vedantic, meditation groups and occasional interfaith dialogues.

Overnight guests stay at a farmhouse, formerly a resort called the House on the Hill. The center's extensive religious library is housed here and is available to anyone interested in comparative, especially Eastern tradition, religious study.

One room of the building, a former parlor, is set aside exclusively as a Vedantic shrine. Here, Hilliger holds daily meditation sessions, also open to the public, and renews his own philosophic well-springs. He spent ten years studying with the Ramakrishnan Order of Monks at a Michigan Vedantic Center to earn the Hindu title Swami, (the equivalent of a Ph.D. in Vedanta, he explains, but totally integrated into all parts of his life.)

Throughout the rest of the center the theme is, as Hilliger puts it, "ecumenical." Christian, Moslem, Hindu and Buddhist religious pictures and symbols decorate the walls.

The rooms themselves, with their original moldings and woodwork intact, retain the relaxed country elegance that has made people comfortable for over 150 years. Meeting tables are set up in the dining room, and retreat participants

can either prepare their own meals in the large commercial kitchen or have Hilliger provide for them.

Service-oriented community groups are also welcome at the center. Both Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous hold weekly meetings there.

Hilliger is constantly seeking to expand the range of cultural and spiritual activities available at the temple. This building's wide expanse of smooth oak floor provides practice space for classes in Karate, Tai Chi, acting and dance as well as religious functions.

Each group leaves the temple as they found it, an empty slate waiting for whatever spiritual significance the next group wants to impart. All make a donation to the center for its upkeep and some help Hilliger with the routine tasks of maintenance.

The entire structure was built around the massive framework of the farm's original barn by the Vedantist group that bought the property in 1978

and later sold it to the SRV Association.

Tall peaked windows, beautifully framed in natural wood moldings point upward to a vaulted wood-pannelled ceiling. At the north end, a large round window frames the sky. The southern windows frame a stunning Catskill Mountain panorama.

Boxed-in beams with graceful support arches span the former hayloft, while on the lower floor of the building, originally used to house the farm's cows, the huge rough-hewn timbers and split tree trunks of the original barn are exposed to view.

Restrooms and a non-profit food buying cooperative now occupy that space.

"The love and devotion they put into it makes it special," Hilliger says. "It was their worship."

The transformation took six years, according to Wayne Levitt, a member of the original group.

**From Barn to Temple**  
"Three of us worked full-time to complete it," Levitt said. "We did 95 percent of everything ourselves. The only things we didn't create are the main blocks for the building and the arched beams."

One of a dozen core members of the Vivakananda Vedanta Vihar (spiritual home), Levitt lived in the main building and spent six years of his life, beginning in 1980, painstakingly adapting the circa 1867 barn into a form reflective of temples in India.

The pink stone is a cement aggregate dyed to match the color of native Indian sandstone, he explained, and the domes are steel and fiberglass replicas of Indian temple domes.

To put the peaked windows around the sides, the group removed the barn's tie beams and strengthened the walls. Two of the structure's four main support beams were moved farther apart to allow a wider activity space on the main floor and carved arches were inserted to help carry the weight across the increased span.

"It was a wonderful experience to put every fiber of your being into a project like that," Levitt remembers. "We worked seven days a week and all kinds of crazy hours."

None of the group had any formal building experience, but Levitt said two friends, a builder and an architect, advised them as the work progressed.

"When we ran into a problem, we worked our way through it," Levitt said.

The entire project was funded by donations from the group living there and from a wider group of supporters who used the center for retreats. When they eventually disbanded following organizational difficulties, they looked for another organization to carry on the dream that had inspired them.

According to Hilliger, this was the opportunity a group of American Vedantists, based predominantly in California, had been looking for.

Led by Alexander Hixson, a religious philosopher and writer from New York City, they incorporated as the SRV Association and purchased the property. There are 13 Vedanta Centers in the United States, Hilliger explained, but this is the only one run by Americans. The others have strong ties to Vedantic Centers in India and are run exclusively by Indian Swamis.

"We want to live our religion through our own culture," Hilliger, who joined the SRV as (Continued on next page)



## And vice versa

(Continued from previous page)

director in 1988, said. Many spiritual traditions practised in the Ramakrishnan centers have meaning in India but not in the United States, he explained. For this reason, he wears jeans instead of a robe and seldom stresses his Hindu title.

"Swami is a cultural thing," he says. "As soon as someone calls me that here, there's a separation between us."

community," Hilliger explained. "It is in our bylaws and corporation papers."

Also included in the incorporation papers is a clause dedicating the property irrevocably to religious purposes. According to Hilliger, no individual can make a profit from the operation or sale of the center and it can only be sold to a non-profit organization. A ten-member board of directors, two

**'Swami is a cultural thing. As soon as someone calls me that, there's a separation between us.'**

Through the center's open door policy, Hilliger works to build bridges to the surrounding communities. "I think it scared people seeing this barn slowly turning into a temple and not knowing who was doing it or why," he says. "The former group was more reclusive. When our group took over, we felt a need to interact with the community."

Although donations from those using the center pay for its upkeep, Hilliger works several part-time jobs, as school bus driver, tutor and musician, to support himself. This also, he believes, helps local people see him as a person rather than a representative of a foreign religion.

While he personally has found meaning and value in the faith he practices, Hilliger says he does not push his ideas, preferring instead to make discussion and instruction available privately to anyone interested. Unlike the first center he directed in Atlanta, Georgia, the Westerlo center does not have a ready-made community of Vedantic supporters.

But Vedantic tradition stresses the universality of all religion, Hilliger says, and he believes the center serves its purpose by providing a place where all are welcome to grow in their own way.

"Our philosophy and devotional practice is service to the

of whom are local, meets annually to review his activities.

Levitt, who returns to the center occasionally, said he is pleased with the direction it has taken. "It's nice to see it being used by community groups," he said. "Swami Bruce is the one who's really made the link with the community."

With the combined responsibility of coordinating activities, maintaining the buildings and the property, and providing opportunities for Vedantic study, Hilliger has a big job cut out for him.

But Levitt says, "He's a big man. Both in body and spirit. I think he's done a wonderful job."

Fortunately, this Chicago-born emissary of a religious tradition transplanted from halfway around the globe has a sense of humor.

"I'm the only Hindu monk in my family," he says. "My parents have been disappointed in me ever since I didn't become a dentist."

Speaking in a more serious vein, he adds, "Everything I do here, I do as my worship. This wonderful philosophy and psychology transformed me. I manifest this through the center."

*Further information about activities taking place at the center or information about retreat opportunities is available from Hilliger at 966-5140.*



The Enterprise — Terez M. Limer

*The Temple of the Universal Spirit - part of the SRV Retreat Center in Westerlo. According to Swami Bruce Hilliger, the center's resident director, it is a neutral place of worship where all religious traditions are honored.*