

Remembering Past Anniversaries: Celebrations in 1908, 1958 and 1983

By Jean Luddy

The Town of Vernon has celebrated significant anniversaries several times since its founding in 1808. During these milestone years, town-wide celebrations occurred and anniversary publications were printed.

A brief comparison of these events and publications provides an overview of how our citizens saw their past and future, as well as offers a quick snapshot of the town during these times. All the anniversary books used for this article can be found in the collection at the Society's Museum

For the 1908 celebration, a book was prepared that summarized the town's history and recorded all of the centennial celebrations. Within Part I, the book presented a series of essays on the early history of Vernon and Rockville, background on individual mill companies, biographical sketches of mill owners and summaries of military service in major wars. Other articles traced the development of local businesses, town services and civic groups including the Post Office, the railroad, banks, newspapers, local schools, churches, clubs, the Fire Department and the Police Department. This section was illustrated with photographs of early mill owners, local scenes and significant buildings.

Part II of the centennial book outlined plans for the town-wide celebrations. Since the book was published after the centennial year, all official proclamations, and speeches given at events were printed. Charles W. Burpee, a former Rockville native wrote an article about his youth in town during the 1860's and 1870's. A commemorative poem was written for the occasion by Rev. Thomas Goodell, a graduate of Yale University and a member of the first graduating class of Rockville High School. Photographs in this section included local civic and business leaders, and members of the Centennial Committee. The book concluded with the financial reports for the Centennial Committee and press comments on the event from other state and local newspapers.

1908 Celebration activities took place in Rockville and Vernon from June 28th to July 4th. The official program for "Old Home Week" listed the daily events. Some of the activities included church services, a Colonial Ball, a Firemen's Ball, band concerts, a high school alumni gathering, fireworks, baseball games, parades, and a balloon ascension. There were industrial displays by local mills. The Automobile Hill Climb contest in which cars raced all the way up Vernon Avenue was well attended. Buildings along Main Street in Rockville were festooned with electric lights and patriotic bunting decorated streetlights and homes throughout town.



Spectators lining Vernon Avenue watch one of the cars from the Hill Climb contest.

The 1908 centennial book served as a local history book. It also provided a complete compilation of all celebratory activities, but its publication in 1911 limited the book's timeliness. Future anniversaries were commemorated with two publications. A souvenir book prepared first was followed by a celebration summary published after the events. Both the 1958 and 1983 anniversary books were larger with more photographs than the 1908 book. Both books included advertising by local merchants and business.

The 150th anniversary book was printed by the Rockville Journal. Short essays covered many topics such as: the Rockville General Hospital, the Rockville and Vernon Police Departments, the Rockville Public Library, the Rockville and Vernon Fire Departments, schools, local industries and businesses, public utilities, and recreational facilities. The names of local soldiers who died in World Wars I and II and in Korea were listed. Town history was discussed in a lengthy article. Brief histories of Ellington and Tolland were included. As in the 1908 book, official proclamations, lists of committee members and financial statements were printed. In the 1958 book, Vernon has a greater role as a focus for celebratory activities. This anniversary book has less text and more photographs with many of new or planned retail buildings. Aerial photography is a new feature.

The 150th anniversary celebrations were scheduled for a week in September 1958. Introductory ceremonies were held at the Vernon Elementary School on September 14th, and the final parade with closing ceremonies took place in Rockville on September 20th. During the week, a variety of events occurred throughout Vernon and Rockville. The Memorial Tower on Fox Hill was rededicated. A torchlight parade wound through the streets of Rockville. Entertainment included a barber shop quartet, a record hop at the Henry Park tennis courts, square dance exhibitions and a pageant with scenes from Vernon's history. Local men competed in a beard growing contest. The gala parade that wrapped up the anniversary was the subject of a separate book, lavishly illustrated with photographs.



One of the floats from the 1958 parade moves down Main Street

The 175th anniversary in 1983 was honored with two publications and town-wide parade. The book prepared by the Anniversary Committee featured material from Vernon Vignettes by Hazel P. Lutz and from Vernon Our Town, published by the Vernon Historical Society. Town officials, committee members, state and local proclamations and a timeline were included. Vintage photographs and historical articles appeared along with advertisements from local businesses and civic and social organizations.

The *Tri-Town Reporter* also prepared a souvenir book for the 175th anniversary. Printed in the larger format, this book featured short articles by local reporters and a longer essay from Ardis Abbott of the Vernon Historical Society. There were histories of Rockville, Vernon Center, Talcottville, and Vernon Depot. Other topics covered were: local businesses, the Tolland County Fair, the American Mill fire, the closing of the mills in 1951, the fire at First Congregational Church of Vernon, the Maxwell mansion and Snipsic Lake ice.

In October 1983, the 175th anniversary parade stepped out, marching from Rockville High School to the Tri-City Plaza. Several drum corps, sponsored by local organizations joined bands from high schools in Rockville, Ellington and Tolland. There were 30 floats. A local bank sponsored a Wells Fargo wagon. There were clowns, state police dogs, emergency vehicles, ethnic dancers, all joined by representatives from local civic and social organizations.

Special anniversaries are always worth commemorating as people, groups or communities use these times to reflect on the past, acknowledge the present, and express their hopes for the future. Vernon has thrown a good party for each past anniversary. There is still time to enjoy the festivities for our Bicentennial.