

Interview with Dick Whitney: Southbridge's Unofficial Historian

BY: CINDY HOWARD

How long has Dick been the Unofficial Town Historian of Southbridge? Or is it Official?

The term "town historian" is purely unofficial, as Dick does not consider himself "the authority" on town history. Instead, he sees himself as one who helps to make information available to the public at large. People like Margaret Morrissey (Adult Services Librarian at Jacob Edwards Library), and both Steve Brady and John Moore (authors of a book on Southbridge) are among those who have a more detailed knowledge of Southbridge. Dick is the expert for American Optical History, but enjoys constantly learning new historical facts about both AO and the town. He is especially interested in collecting recollections and photos of town, and anticipates writing a book using both in the near future.

Dick has an extensive web site documenting both AO and Southbridge History. This web site can be found at <http://www.dickwhitney.net> or by typing Southbridge History in Google or any other search engine. Recollections and photos of Town and AO are what he considers being the highlight of his website, and is always looking for new contributions.

Can Dick tell us a little history about himself?

Dick Whitney is a Southbridge Native and employee of the former American Optical - ophthalmic lens division (now Carl Zeiss Vision), where he has worked since 1974. He grew up on Litchfield Ave in Southbridge and his mother Janet Whitney still lives in the home he grew up in. Dick attended Southbridge public schools, graduating from Southbridge High in 1969. He subsequently went to the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and graduated from the class of 1973 with a degree in Astronomy.

His present position is Manager of Global Standards for Carl Zeiss vision, and chairs the Vision Council of America (VCA) Lens Technical Committee, and serves on both ANSI and ISO standards organizations.

He is Curator and President of the Optical Heritage Museum, where he is working on plans to establish a Southbridge Heritage and Industrial



Photo from Dick Whitney web site

Dick Whitney as a young man, part of the "Selected stories by Dick Whitney" at www.dickwhitney.net/dickwhitneyautobiography.html

Museum at 368 Main St (Formerly the Universalist Church).

Dick is also active in many organizations, including over 10 years service on the Board of Directors of Rehabilitative Resources, Inc. in Sturbridge. Dick is also a newly appointed Board member of Jacob Edwards Library in Southbridge. He also coordinates AO Reunions twice a year in June and December. His hobbies include photography, writing and creating and maintaining multiple websites. He and his wife (Peg Nass Whitney) were both born at Harrington Memorial Hospital, and Southbridge is where they reside. Dick and Peg have two children, Erica and Christopher. Each has their own apartment in Southbridge as they are now 24 and 27.

Did he do any of this work before the advent of websites?

No, Dick never thought of himself as especially interested in history before

starting his website in 1999. At that time, he first explored starting his website as a tribute to his father Donald Whitney, who had passed away from Leukemia the year before. Prior to Don's death, he had written a partial biography and included many comical and interesting stories that others found interesting. Dick wanted to share Don's writings and photos with others, which is why he started his website as he wanted to share it with others. The website soon grew in popularity, and he found himself expanding its scope to include much more than family information.

When and why did he get interested in the history? Did it start with the AO or the town first?

Dick's interest in history started at the time he had begun the website, and at first was focused upon collecting information about American Optical. Since he began working there in 1974, and his father had been employed there since 1947, Dick had first hand knowledge of the AO's history during that period. With the advent of his website and the downsizing of the company, Dick came to the realization that some of the information and memorabilia collection would be lost if not preserved.

His serious interest in local history began in May of 2000, when he received a call from Margaret Morrissey (Adult Service Librarian at Jacob Edward Library). She stated that she enjoyed his website and invited Dick to attend the dedication of the new addition to the Library. Dick and Margaret soon became friends and began collaboration on adding historic information to his website. Margaret was keen to help make the Southbridge History website the resource it has become. With exposure to Margaret's intimate knowledge and contacts with regard to Southbridge history, Dick soon got the bug and he realized how much there was to learn.

What are some of the most interesting facts that he has discovered?

Some of most interesting things learned relate to personal recollections that people have provided for publication on the website. Each of us has a

story to tell, and he is thrilled when others contribute to expand his growing library of remembrances. Through the internet, Dick hears from people around the world and has found there is a large audience interested in our town, not all of whom have ever lived here.

What else would he like to see happen in town?

Dick would like to see the Southbridge Public School system improved upon, with increased funding and community involvement.

How does he see the future of Southbridge?

Dick is encouraged by the future of Southbridge, and points to its diversity as a strength. He is especially encouraged by a number of positive signs:

- 1.) New private sector initiatives like the soon to open Crane Street complex, which will house many shops, a restaurant, brewery, pub, artist complex, theatre, etc.
- 2.) The proposed redevelopment plan put forth, where the Central Street area down to Hook street and over to Hamilton are proposed to be totally renovated.
- 3.) Upcoming events like the June 9 Southbridge Festival, which has had many talented and hardworking community leaders from the Chamber and Downtown Partnership collaborating to put together a day that will not soon be forgotten.

Can he tell us about his museum project?

The Museum plans are for it to be established at the historic Universalist Church location at 368 Main street where Dick has recently relocated his office from the cement building in the Southbridge Business center. Those who drive into town regularly have probably noticed the outside renovations which began last October, and this is why. While the Optical Heritage Museum (AO collection) will be the major theme in its displays, the plan is for it to expand to be an Industrial and Cultural Museum of Historic Southbridge. The next step in establishing the Museum is to seek funding and solicit community support as well as identify volunteers to help in this project.