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Sun, Sailing, Cycling and Suffrage

'Bellport: Summer, 1900' Exhibition Is at the Bellport-Brookhaven Historical Society



Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Tricia Foley, the curator of "Bellport: Summer, 1900" at the Bellport-Brookhaven Historical Society.

By AILEEN JACOBSON
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During the summer of 1900, New Yorkers traveled to the bay-side resort of Bellport to stay in grand hotels, modest boardinghouses or their own "cottages," some with ballrooms where the residents staged amateur theatrical shows to entertain one another. Women were just beginning to participate in sports like golf and tennis. And an active contingent of women and a few men attended teas, lunches and other meetings to promote women's right to vote.

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"It was an exciting time," said Tricia Foley, a designer, author and cultural historian who curated the exhibition "Bellport: Summer, 1900," currently at the Bellport-Brookhaven Historical Society, which depicts the summer community's social life from 1890 to 1915, a span covered by a timeline in the exhibition.

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The section of the exhibition dealing with the suffragists.

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Chantal Berman, a visitor.

Fueling the resort activity was the arrival in 1882 of a Bellport station for the Long Island Rail Road, which brought more affluent visitors and allowed less wealthy people to come for a day or longer. A photograph shows a hotel that was transformed into a retreat for the Jewish Working Girls' Vacation Society. The year-round population in 1910 was around 400, which swelled to around 1,000 in summer, said Ms. Foley, who lives in nearby Yaphank.

The exhibition, divided into 12 sections, contains 200 items, including period photographs, postcards, paintings, programs for those theatrical evenings, and artifacts like a bathing costume, a set of three white summer dresses, a clam basket and a life preserver from a beach club. Ms. Foley gathered most of the items from the historical society's archives, she said, but found one on display in a shadowy corner of another building in the society's complex.

That was a velocipede, a bicycle with a large front wheel and a tiny back one, that was owned by a man from nearby Patchogue who sometimes rode it from Brooklyn in an annual cycling event. "No one noticed it," Ms. Foley said.

Cycling and walking along Bellport's tree-lined streets were popular activities, Ms. Foley said, and are "still part of summer life here today." A 1900 newspaper article reports that Bellport added street lamps. "Before that, people walked in the dark," she said.

The exhibition is in the front room of a former hardware store — built in 1890 and thus "a perfect venue" for it, Ms. Foley noted. In one window she has placed artifacts evoking a beach scene, and in the other an enlarged copy of a hand-tinted photograph showing sailboats gliding over rippling waves on the Great South Bay, which separates Bellport from Fire Island. To give visitors a richer experience, she said, she planted blue hydrangeas, "typical of the period," in front of the building and added a few pots of them inside, along with a half-dozen vintage white wicker chairs and a Wedgwood creamware tea service, "the kind that would have been used in 1900."

On entering the gallery, visitors encounter another enlarged photograph, this one showing couples walking on a long path toward the Wyandotte Hotel, one of the luxury resorts of the era, from the hotel's dock. Though one man wears a bow tie and a blazer, and the women wear long white dresses, they had probably just gone sailing, Ms. Foley said, perhaps to Fire Island. A ferry took people there, too.

Both of the opening photographs and many others in the exhibition were taken by Frances H. Toms, a photographer who came to Bellport to join her brother, a doctor, when he practiced there. She stayed on after he left, Ms. Foley said, and became a pioneering female professional by selling her images for postcards and other uses.

Bellport became a center for the suffrage movement, as shown in several photographs with accompanying text. One of the leaders, Ms. Foley said, was a former concert pianist named Gertrude Foster Brown, who organized a Woman Suffrage Study Club that met for teas at her home. In 1914 she became president of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association. She is shown at a tea and on a stage, at the piano with a large group of suffrage supporters. The stage was inside a Greek Revival house named Nearthebay, the home of Birdsall Otis Edey, an author and playwright who joined the movement, too, and later became an early organizer and national president of the Girl Scouts of America.

The exhibition also features several painters who were part of the summer society,

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including William Glackens, Everett Shinn and Frederick Kost. Mr. Kost, also a photographer, captured an image of the harvesting of salt hay, which was sold as mulch, packing material, bedding for cattle and other uses. It is a rare reference to life beyond the summer residents and those who catered to them.

However, “the season,” as the summer influx was called, was a most important local event, Ms. Foley said. In a note, she wrote that “for three months, Bellport came alive.”

“Bellport: Summer, 1900” is at the Bellport-Brookhaven Historical Society, 12 Bell Street, Bellport; open Fridays, Saturdays and by appointment through July 27. Information: bbhsmuseum.org or (631) 776-7640.

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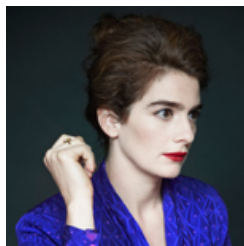
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