

Three Black Crows

A situation unraveled the other day that illustrates how things never seem to change; it has to be human nature, pure and simple. Here's the story:

My maternal grandfather (born in 1868) told me this story when I was quite young, along with the admonition to always be alert to the facts, and not allow my mind to embellish a set of facts, at least as I had been told.

A man who lived in a small village where everyone knew everybody else had taken ill with some unknown ailment, and hadn't been seen for a few days. A friend heard that this fellow had eventually thrown up three black crows which had then spread their wings and flown away, after which he had made a full recovery. This information he relayed to another mutual friend, who found it pretty hard to swallow, and asked who might have told this story. The name was immediately offered up, and the man sought out. Yes, he had told the story, but his neighbor had gotten one small item wrong; it wasn't three black crows, it had only been two. Not satisfied, the questioner asked who he had heard this from, and was supplied with a name. This fellow, when questioned, said the story was accurate except for one thing; it hadn't been two black crows, it had only been one. Even one crow was pretty amazing, and he was asked from whom he had received this information. He replied that he had heard it from the man himself; right from the horse's mouth, so to speak. A trip to the now-recovered former invalid produced the following information: the man, when presented with the story, looked puzzled at first, then his face brightened up, and he said: "Oh, now I know what you are talking about; let me tell you the whole story. A while back I took sick, so sick I really didn't think I was going to pull through. After a couple of days, I threw up something black – something as black as a crow. After that I became as fit as a fiddle, as you can see."

Now for the present-day version of this story:

Last month Colebrook lost one of her staunchest friends with the death of Jim Draper. Jim and his wife Shirley, who passed on a few years ago, lived in the old Rockwell estate located next to the Colebrook Store. Jim and Shirley had been the only non members of the Rockwell family to have lived on the premises, although there was a family tie in that Shirley was godmother to the Eggers' children, and the Eggers were direct descendants of the Colebrook Rockwells. The central portion of this house is the oldest domicile in Colebrook, having been built by Erastus Wolcott in 1766. The front portion, by far the most imposing, was built in 1796, and it is this building, or more specifically, its attic, that we are dealing with.

In the attic of the 1796 portion of 561 Colebrook Road, nailed securely next to the peak of the roof, is a 16-foot long wooden structure consisting of a central octagonal, six-inch thick axle, attached to a two-foot diameter wheel at each end and four strips of 1x3 timbers connecting the wheels. Years ago Jim asked the historical society if we knew what the device was intended for, and the results of the research were most interesting. Eventually we were able to supply a name – it was a component of a loom, made specifically for the manufacture of rugs with the name of a yarn beam. This information did little to lift the veil of mystery that surrounded the hidden-away object; what in the world was it doing there? There never was a loom or a yarn

beam attachment in the Rockwell homes; Rockwell women did not weave rugs. Yarn beams themselves became obsolete with the advent of the industrial revolution, when this type of rug making was taken over by power driven machinery, so by probably 1805 it was unlikely that rugs were made locally. Continued research revealed that during Shays' Rebellion in the late 1780s, there had been a skirmish between Berkshire farmers (Shaysites) and the federal militia, in which the Shays men utilized a local woman's yarn beam to give the illusion of possessing a huge canon, which, when pointed at the troops 150 or so yards away was enough to cause them to withdraw, thus giving up a "victory" to the Shays forces. I checked with several members of the Rockwell family at one of their annual Colebrook gatherings, and no one could shed any light on the subject, although it was apparent that the Rockwells at the close of the Revolution were philosophically aligned with the Shays, and if they weren't actually present at that "battle" in East Lee, Mass., they at least admired the spirit of the dissidents. Speculating that the yarn beam in the Rockwell attic may have been a physical manifestation of this philosophy was the only plausible reason for such a huge item to be nailed to the roof of the attic.

In July, 2010, the Draper home was being cleared of all furnishings prior to its being placed on the market. When everything had been removed, I was brought in and asked what exactly that object was up in the attic. I related the story that you have just read, whereupon I was informed that in all likelihood the historical society would be given the beam, as the future owner might not preserve it; they only had to check with the lawyers.

Several days later we received an e-mail from the law firm handling the estate, in which they stated that the object in the attic was a cannon, once covered in black material, that had been used by the two Rockwell brothers who had successfully used it in a battle against the British Redcoats during the Revolutionary War, and that therefore they were reluctant to remove this important part of the home's history. They went on to say that if a future buyer finds no value in it, serious consideration would be given to donating it to the Colebrook Historical Society. "Till then, it would be best to simply leave it in place."

I composed an answer, basically the same as what is written here, and in a reply to this e-mail, I received the following: "Thanks for the background and thoughts on the best way to display the item."

It wasn't three black crows; it was simply a black object!

Historic Bytes

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