

Sally Hart – Storyteller, Prankster, CCS Staff Member, Knitter Extraordinaire and a Chicken Named “Mrs. Hart”

By Brenda Underwood



Photograph of Sally Hart by Lazlo Gyorsok

Sally Hart lives beside a large marsh, home to multiple species of wildlife. It is not unusual to see a crane standing on a rock, one foot raised, contemplating its surroundings while busy birds flit back and forth. Furtive, unseen rustlings among the reeds and bubbles breaking over the surface of the water hint at a hidden world.

Outside Sally’s living room window are two welcoming bird feeders, one with small seeds and peanuts, the other with black oil sunflower seed, both of which were being actively visited by some of those birds: woodpeckers, “downies, hairies and red bellies,” finches, and black capped chickadees.

Inside the home where Sally and Raymond have lived for sixty years, is a large, tawny, sphynx-like cat named Goober who is completely unconcerned by the activity at the bird feeders but interested more in the human comings and goings inside. “He is a very friendly cat,” said Sally as Goober purring profoundly climbed onto her lap and tucked his head under her arm for a quick nap. He is also aptly named. “When he was a kitten, he was as small as a peanut and my son decided to name him Goober.”

Sally Smith was born in 1932 in Plymouth, Massachusetts but, “not on the Mayflower,” she added with a laugh. “There was a family rumor that we were related to Peregrine White who came over on the Mayflower but I’ve never researched it.”

After the Second World War Sally’s parents decided to leave Plymouth. Her father had been working with asbestos for the war effort and his doctor advised him to get a job outside in the fresh air. A friend was employed at Frank Calhoun’s farm and Sally’s father was offered a job there.

Sally was 16 when the family moved to Cornwall and she finished her junior and senior years at the Housatonic Valley Regional High School (HVRHS). She was a member of the glee club but thought of herself as an indifferent student at high school.

Other activities included dancing classes at Rumsey Hall partnering the boys who went to the school. “They needed girls,” said Sally, and we looked forward to it as it was something to do.”

After graduation from HVRHS, Sally started work for the State Department of Public Assistance processing welfare bills.

The Smith family became active members of the United Church of Christ (UCC). Sally remembers during her first year in Cornwall being asked to be an angel in the Christmas pageant. “In those days the angels wore dresses made from cheesecloth, carried real lighted candles and at the end of the pageant walked through a screen of cut evergreens. Although it was probably beautiful I don’t think that would be allowed today.”

Sally met Raymond Hart whose family had been farming in Cornwall for many years. “Raymond helped his father run the family farm on Cherry Hill Road along with his seven brothers and sisters. We met at church,” said Sally. “I was in the choir and Raymond sat in the congregation and winked at me.”

Those winks made an impression as Sally married Raymond in 1951 when she was 17. “I didn’t have any driving ambition to be a teacher or a secretary or a nurse, jobs available for women in the 1950s,” said Sally, and when their first child Janie was born she gave up work to devote her time to raising children.

In the course of time, the Harts had three children: Jonathan, the youngest who died of cancer two years ago, Diana, the middle child, who now works in the cardiology unit at Sharon Hospital, and Janey, who works at Geer Village.

When their children started school at CCS in the 1950s and 1960s, Sally became active at the school joining the Mothers’ Club which, among other things, mended books for the library. Her mother-in-law, Doris Hart, was the librarian at the time and because she only worked at the school three days a week they needed help for the other two days. Sally signed on to work in the library on Thursdays.

Her workload at CCS eventually expanded to include reading to the children, accompanying them on field trips, distributing milk at lunchtime and becoming a recess monitor.

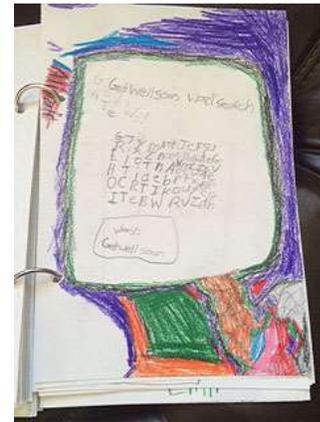
Dean Potter, CCS Class of 1989, writes from Alaska about his recesses. “Mrs. Hart was out there every day, in all weather, keeping an eye on a hundred or so kids. She blew a whistle to get our attention, but I don’t recall much intervention. I do remember on beautiful spring days when it was too nice to go back inside, hearing the whistle at the end of recess and Mrs. Hart declaring: “Ten more minutes!”

Fond memories of Sally abound at CCS. “Mrs. Hart is a beloved member of our community,” said Michael Croft, the principal. “She is a ray of sunshine in our hallways and always has a joke or story for you.”

Susan Francisco recalls the time when Bill Oros, the principal, was about to celebrate a birthday and Sally told him she would make him a sponge cake. “Sally is a very good baker,” said Susan, “and she set about making him a sponge cake. It was beautifully iced and nicely presented on a plate with a serrated knife beside it.” The principal was invited to cut his birthday cake to solemnize the occasion only to discover that it was made of real sponge, not the edible kind but the kind used for stuffing pillows!

Sally recalls a similar prank at the Couples Club at the church. “Once a month, we got together and planned a meal and an entertainment. There were progressive dinners, treasure hunts, minstrel shows, something we wouldn’t have now, and costume parties. At one of these evenings Bill Washburn won the door prize and they brought out a real door!”

Sally has recently been diagnosed with *temporal arteritis*, a chronic inflammatory disease involving the arteries which has made it difficult to participate in activities at the school. The children decided to make her a book “with reasons why I should get well soon.”



Sally has been a member of the Cornwall Woman’s Society for a number of years but has been a rummage sale volunteer “from the time that my son was about three years old.” She started out being in charge of linens in the early days of the rummage sale and recalls that the linens then were “just a step above rags.” But, over the years, she said the quality has improved and now her specialty is children’s clothing. “They thought I would understand about children’s clothing as I worked at CCS.”

“In the early years we did the entire rummage sale in the Parish House. We sorted the clothing in the church and laid it out on the pews. One year, as the rummage sale grew, we used the Rumsey gym for the clothing and for several years the Marvelwood dining hall.”

Sally grew up with three sisters: Nancy, who now lives in Tucson, Barbara who lives in Torrington and Ann who passed away from complications of diabetes. Sally has nieces and nephews as far away as New Zealand and as close as Cornwall. Two nieces, Betsy Mauro and Ellen Hart, live in Cornwall.

Her two granddaughters live relatively close though: Alison who is 27 lives in Torrington and Riley who is 26 lives in Maine. "I thoroughly enjoyed my granddaughters when they were small and still do now that they have grown up."

Today, Sally volunteers at CCS one day a week. "And, I love it," she adds. In the morning she reads to the Kindergarten children and then the First and Second grades. After lunch, she reads to the Third grade and Fourth grade classes and then goes home. "I usually follow the busses out."

Dean Potter recalls that, "Mrs. Hart read hundreds of books to thousands of kids. Every child in Cornwall heard "The Boxcar Children," "James and the Giant Peach," "Beezus and Ramona," "Soup and Me," "Charlotte's Web," and many more. "In her library," said Dean, "books were part of a package that included affection, entertainment and imagination."

It is this quality which endears her to both teachers and students alike. "The children love to have Mrs. Hart come and read to them," said Mrs. Burdick and Miss Pramula, the first and second grade team teachers. "She receives many hugs when she enters the classroom."

"I'm going to read you my favorite book today," Sally says to the children when she sits down. "Oh, Mrs. Hart, you say that every time you read a book to us." And she responds, "That's because I love to read."

She is also a good listener. A fifth grader who had just finished a report on sea turtles went up to Sally as she was putting the book on turtles back on the shelf and said: "You know, Mrs. Hart, they can lay up to 2,000 eggs a night." Sally responded that she had seen that on a program on the television. "But, you know," he said, "the sad part is most of them never reach adulthood." Sally tried very hard to keep a straight face.

It is not everyone who has the distinction of having a chicken named after them. In their farm unit, the first grade children incubate and hatch eggs. One year there was a bumper crop of eggs which all hatched and the kids decided to name each chicken after somebody in the school. One of those chickens became "Mrs. Hart."

Sally remembers an impromptu farm unit one year. "We needed a substitute teacher because everybody had the flu. There was only a skeleton staff, not many students and the regular substitutes were all sick. So they called the wife of the Episcopal priest down at the Trinity Center and she said, 'Oh, I would love to come but I can't because I have to feed a baby lamb every two hours.' "Bring it! So she came up with a play pen which she set up in the hall in front of the first grade door, put the lamb in it with some straw and the kids all fed the lamb. What an experience for them."

Recalling another anecdote, Sally remembers the time she made "snow cake" with the Kindergarten children. It was Friday afternoon and everyone except the Kindergarten children was skiing. "I explained to the children that first you take your cake pan out and pack it full of snow. And, then you bring it inside and put it in the oven at 350 degrees and when you go back there's no cake. One little girl was so mad so the next week we made real cake."

And when she is not making “snow” cake or “sponge” cake, Sally loves to knit and crochet. One of her specialties is crocheted animals which “are fun to do” and much loved by her little charges at CCS. She doesn’t have a particular child in mind when she makes her crocheted animals. She puts each crocheted animal in a paper bag, staples it shut and each child chooses a bag.



She is also active in the Woman’s Society knitting group that meets at the Cornwall Library to make hats for chemotherapy patients. The recipients of Sally’s hats will often get a playful hat with ears and eyes.

Sally walks almost every day with her friend, Pat Thibault. They started walking in 1998 when Sally looked out of her window one morning and saw Pat go by. “I didn’t think anything about it until the next day when she walked past again and then again the next day so finally I went out on the porch and said, would

you like somebody to walk with?”

“I would love somebody to walk with,” said Pat. And the two friends have been walking together now for 18 years.

Over her fireplace, Sally has a sign that says “Be kind to your neighbors” with a mouse comfortably sitting on a cat’s head. “Helen Hedden gave me that because Goober is always going up to her house to visit her cats and watch the goldfish.”

Although Goober is the epitome of a contented cat around the house, purring constantly, when he is outside he is a mountain lion. “He doesn’t like strange dogs in the yard,” said Sally. “He spits at them and will chase them out... and he has been known to chase a wild turkey.”



Wildlife is at home in that short stretch of marshland next to Sally and

Raymond’s house. Recently, they think they saw an eagle. “It wasn’t hawk,” said Sally, “it was too loud and raspy for a hawk. We saw a huge bird soar out of the trees, circle around and fly up the road. He then turned back and went up over the mountain toward the lake. We were certain it was an eagle.”

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****Many thanks to Christina Gyorsok for proof reading this profile of Sally Hart.****