



thinking about retirement???

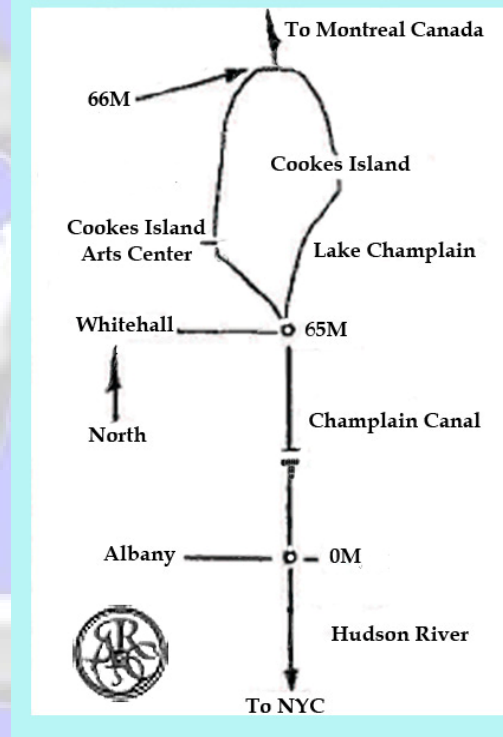
I was about to enter a new and wonderful world

You're Never Too Old

by David L. Mohn

Had someone told me as a young lad of ten (1941), born and raised in Reading, Pennsylvania, that some day in the future at the age of seventy, I'd be in a small town in upper New York State building a theater on a bridge, I could only reply -- "you are daffy". Further, as my life progressed, this "daffy" projection of the future became even more remote with my receiving of my Electrical Engineering degree and a pioneering career in the explosive semiconductor industry (computers, cell phones, Ipods, etc, etc). Never-the-less, as life went on, my horizons broaden, I married and helped to raise our family of five children, three of which now qualify for membership in AARP. My work was taking me to all points of the world (Ireland, Switzerland, Japan, India, and China). Finally, when I was approaching the age of '69', I started to ask myself the questions of "my God! How did I make it this far so fast??" and should I not to at least start

Water and boats were always an attraction for me. **Sooo in '1988'**, following an unfortunate divorce from my first wife, I convinced my then fiancée, Marjorie, to join me on an adventurous trip up the Hudson River from Newburgh, New York, through the Champlain Canal and into our final port somewhere on Lake Champlain. Since our vessel was but a mere 17 foot-in



board/outboard, we planned to stay at bed and breakfasts along the way. As fate would have it, our good ship "Danny Boy I" broke down just as we were entering the small canal town of Whitehall, New York. As we entered the harbor, coming from the south, there seemed to be a mist over the water while high on the mountain, to starboard, there was this beautiful, but mysterious looking mansion which we found out later was Skene Manor, and where we were staying for the evening.



Skene Manor

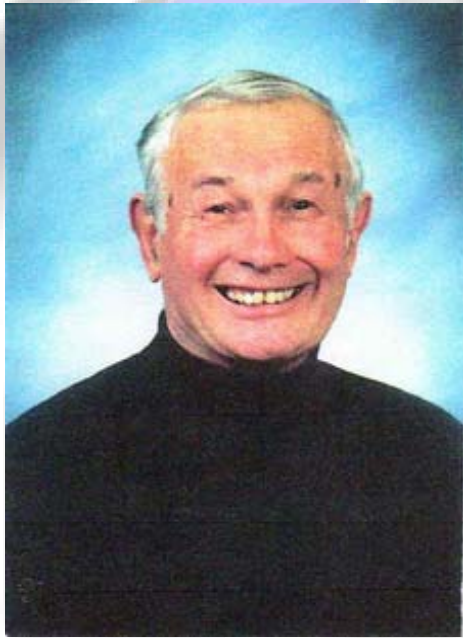
It was indeed time to enter the Twilight Zone, thank you Rod Serling Don't ask me what happened, but we both fell in love with this place called Whitehall. Not only was Whitehall nestled between the Adirondack Mountains of New York and the Green mountains of Vermont and able to provide water and hiking activities, but we found the history to be the greatest selling point. Whitehall's history goes back to

the pre-revolutionary days when it was called Skenesborough; after the first British governor, Philip Skene. It was in Whitehall harbor where then American hero, Benedict Arnold, built the vessels that he sailed north on Lake Champlain to meet the British fleet at Valcour Island on October 11th, 1776. He lost the battle and most of his navy, but delayed the British from coming south until the following spring when he, Arnold, led the American troops to victory at the battle of Saratoga.... Accordingly, Whitehall has earned the title, recognized by many as:

"The Birthplace of the American/United States Navy."

In 1990 I was 59 years old and wondering why life is going by so fast. Retirement was starting to look better and better. Marjorie and I took our vows of marriage in June following one of my last business trips to China concerning a technology transfer contract. Prior to leaving for China, we made the major decision to make the move to Whitehall, New York where, like kids in a candy store, we purchased an 1836 Greek revival home and directly across the street on the Champlain Canal an 1839

commercial/newspaper building. By the following September, the move was complete and "ahh" retirement was to start. **Wrong - wrong - wrong.....**



David L. Mohn

Now living in Whitehall we were able to see a community with so much potential that needed a lot of help. We took a pledge that many formerly active retirees have taken and that is "it's payback time-what can we do for the community?" I found myself being asked to join the local Whitehall Chamber of Commerce which when I did, I next found myself elected to the Chamber Board of Directors serving as the President of same for two years.

This was followed by an invitation to run for a public office for which I declined. I did not want to be involved in politics. I felt from my background experience that efforts via the Chamber of Commerce would be where I could make a contribution in the revival of Whitehall. I was right in making this decision. The more we got involved, the more challenges appeared at our doorstep. No retirement at this address, but you know it felt good to be part of positive progress.

Before you know it, 7 years fly by. It was at a special planning meeting that another new phase of my life would begin. One of the areas where we wanted to exploit was that of increasing tourism business opportunities in the Whitehall region. "How about having a theater?" a local restaurateur suggested. He further invited me to take in a luncheon at his restaurant when he was having a theatrical company perform. I was about to meet my 'partner in crime' for the next 14 years. Not being a show time person, I did not know what to expect when I was introduced to Martin P. Kelly -- a writer, an actor, a producer, a director, a critic, an atomically active individual who at first glance could make you shutter in your boots. However, once you get to know him, he is the kindest and most understanding person you ever want to meet. His bi-line in most of his conversations was always "rolling

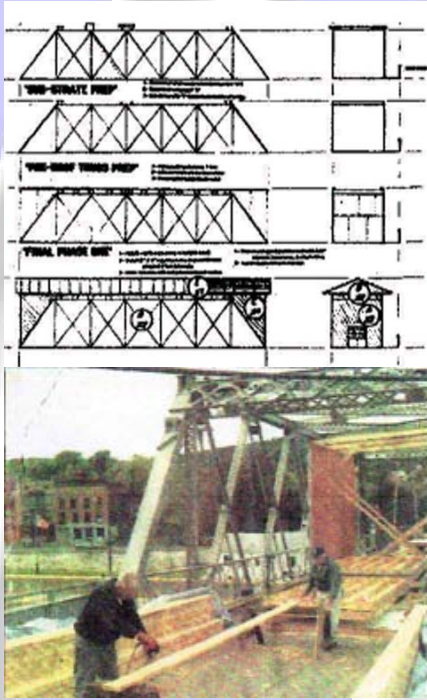
along, singing a song." Martin had a few years on me-- six to be exact. He was involved in WW-2 in the Pacific theater while I was serving my county during the Korean conflict. Martin, like me, found a niche in his retirement. Our relationship grew from that point forward.



Martin P. Kelly

We all thought that a theater would be a positive drawing card for the tourist trade. The next question to be answered was where to place the theater? An answer came forth from the very clever restaurateur ... "why not

place it on the Clinton Street Bridge (closed to vehicular traffic for structural reasons)." The Clinton Street Bridge was approximately 500 feet south of his restaurant and spanned across Lock 12 and the spillway of the Champlain Canal. What an idea. We jumped into action!! Luckily, we received excellent assistance from the New York State Department of Transportation, owners of the bridge which after many negotiation sessions resulted in \$1 a year lease, plus the repainting of the bridge. I with some other key volunteer personnel formed a 501c3 non-profit corporation which we called Arts & Recreation Commission of Whitehall, NY, Inc. (ARCW). The planned theater was named the Bridge Theater which later was boasted as "America's Most Unique Theater". Martin Kelly's troupe, Riverview Entertainment Productions, was the resident performance group along with a local theater group, Potter's Players. The acting talents of Potter's Players were eventually integrated into the Riverview troupes with Martin being the overall Artistic Director for "The Bridge Theater".



Building of the Bridge Theater-

Following a few rounds with NYS Department of Parks and Historic Preservations, we were able to design a theater structure that would fit within steel work of the thru-truss section of the bridge span. Because the bridge was built in the early few years of the 1900's, it was classified as a historic structure. Therefore, we were not able to employ a design that would 'hide' the thru-truss section. It is of interest to note that we later-on received a design award from the Washington County Historic Society. Following the design phase we were next

confronted with the task of funding the project. Fortunately we were blessed back in 1997/98 to have what one would consider 'old time banking' in that our then small branch bank arranged to have their organization's 'foundation' fund us with better than \$22,000. Now all we had to do was to build it. Toward these ends, we had the local trade high school (BOCES in NYS) build the pre-fab panels. These panels were then assembled into the final structure in 1998/99 by an all volunteer ARCW group. During the winter of 1999/2000, we were putting the finishing touches on the inside of the building with temperatures some days running well below zero. By June of 2000 we were ready to start off on what would be nine years of memorable performances during which from time to time the structure was tweaked both cosmetically and functionally. Following an impressive opening ceremony, the Bridge Theater was officially open for business. The keys were turned over to Martin Kelly and the shows began. Martin's first season production was "Victory In Defeat"/a historic accounting of the Benedict Arnold's navy taking on the British fleet at the battle of Valcour. Every year following, Martin would come up with new plays as well as various musical revues covering a wide range of music, but primarily from 30's/40's/50's. This vintage music made the Bridge Theater an

attraction for many senior citizens. I personally could not get enough of this music. To come into the theater and hear songs of my youth such as "When I Grow to Old to Dream" ... and ... "The White Cliffs of Dover" would bring tears to my eyes. Following the horror of '9-11', Martin would have his lead singer, Janet Stasio, sing "God Bless America" after each performance. I'll never forget after one performance when it came time for Janet to sing, a distinguished looking senior proudly stood up and called in a loud voice "Attention"...all there jumped to their feet and sang along.....wow.



Janet Stasio

Changing Rolls - It seemed like all of a sudden the construction

work was completed and theater productions were the order of the day. In general this was true for all our volunteers except for one exception - me!! While the shows went on, I had also contacted a company which owned a small piece of property which they had left unused and in disrepair for many years. This property was approximately 1,000 feet due north of the Bridge Theater, was lake front on the west shore of Lake Champlain, and was opposite Cooke's Island. There was also an 1860 vintage structure on the property which we envisioned could serve as a centralized office and multiuse area for our non-profit corporation. Following about one year of negotiations, the company, Suburban Propane Corporation, 'gifted' the property to ARCW, and a new round of construction work commenced. Little did I know at that time, how much we would rely on having this property in the future?

In the mean time, I had to readjust my sights on working with the theatrical group regarding advertising, public relations, playbill programs, staffing, fund raising, staging props, reservations/ticketing, etc, etc.--the list went on and on. Following an initial learning cycle, we were able to establish

a reliable staff of volunteers who kept things "rolling along - singing a song" at the theater. At the same time, Martin Kelly was writing, producing and directing show after show which every year from its inception covered a minimum of eight weekends each summer.



Catastrophe & Challenge - Then it happened without warning. It was the latter part of June, 2009 when I received a call from New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) who advised me that we had to vacate the Bridge immediately. The Bridge had failed the safety inspection which for nine of the preceding years had always been done by April. For 2009, the inspection was done in June leaving only 10 days from the time of failure notification to the scheduled opening in July. Yes, there was some panic as we reviewed our options, which were:

- a) Stand fast and fight the eviction
- b) Give up on the entire '2009' summer season
- c) Set up a new theater and move all necessary asset items possible

Options 'a' and 'b' would have no shows for the Bridge Theater in '2009'. After reviewing all the available information, the decision was made to go with option 'c'. Where to go was the first question to be answered. Here's where Martin had the foresight to move to the large porch area at our Cooke's Island property. At first, I was hesitant, but as always Martin's beaming self confidence, based on years of experience was best conveyed by his comment "I can do a show in a phone booth if I must". That was it... I gave the 'charge' signal and we were off moving everything possible. We lost only one weekend out of the eight weekends for the summer season. What a great job by our dedicated volunteers. By the 2010 season, we had improved the porch area at Cooke's Island to the point of where we could handle audiences in the 40 - 50 range. Part of our option 'c' was to get a copy of the failure report from NYS DOT and utilize same to obtain bids from outside contractors for the stabilization of the bridge structure. It was probably within a two week period from our receiving 'close down' of our bridge notice that NYSDOT inspected and closed down

abruptly the Crown Point bridge between New York state and Vermont. This action took immediate priority with a major swing of engineering talents being focused on the Crown Point situation. Because of this, the receipt of the Bridge Theater failure report was delayed until the end of 2010. We are determined to at if all possible to get back to using the Bridge Theater in the future.



Onward we go - As I noted in the beginning of this article, who would of thought that a couple of old (never) seniors would be involved in such all encompassing project(s). Sometimes I feel that I'm in an old Boris Karloff movie where he states "hehe stop me before I kill again" sorry maybe it was Peter Lorie. In any event, I can't stop thinking of new projects. Right now, we will be raising funds for not only the Bridge Theater project, but also the expansion of the Cooke's

Island Art Center, along with the obtaining of Cooke's Island from the feds for development into a nature park to the establishing of an American First Nations vintage 1700 Indian village ----- OK-OK Marjorie --- I'll stop or maybe just slow down a bit.... But, I still get my inspiration on hot summer evenings at dusk when Marjorie and I take our faithful black lab, Tonic, for a walk. I swear that when we pass the empty Bridge Theater that we hear someone inside shouting "Attention" followed by a rich soprano voice singing "God Bless America" and then Marjorie whispering in my ear "**You're Never Too Old**"(30)