

Eating A Philopena

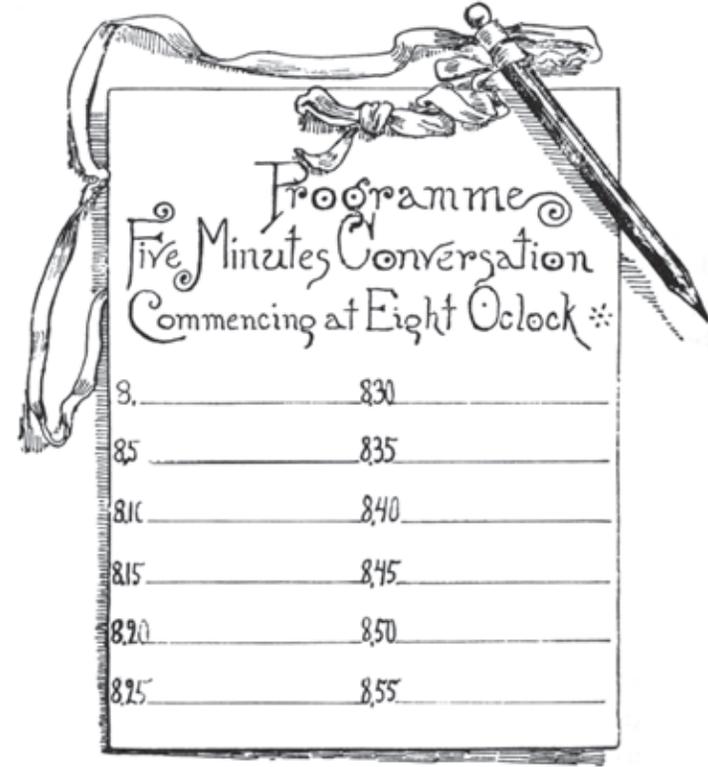
by Lynne Belluscio

We recently purchased Willie Stowell's 1869 diary on Ebay. Willie was fourteen when his father bought him the diary and Willie faithfully made an entry each day. I have been transcribing the diary and writing an article for the Historical Society's newsletter.

The Stowells lived on a farm on the South side of east Main Road just past Asbury Road. Willie's mother had died when he was seven and his father remarried in 1869. Willie attended the LeRoy Academic Institute which cost his father \$7 a semester.

On July 26 his diary entry reads: some rain finished cutting wheat I got a philaphene and got a tooth brush" Later, in August he writes "A fine day we helped edgar finish drawing barley and I got a Philiphene present of a comb." So I Googled and really didn't come up with anything.

I posted a note on a museum chat room and discovered that Philopena was a type of a game popular in the mid 1800s. It originated in Germany where it was called viel liebchen which when it is pronounced sounds a little like philipkin. The game begins when someone finds a double-meated almond and gives half the almond to a friend and says, "Will you eat a Philopena with me?" If the other person accepts, they eat the nuts at the same



time. However, when they meet again, the one who can remember to say "philopena" first wins and has the right to name some type of small prize. But to name the prize outright is considered rude, so they might say "I wear size 6 gloves," or "I see you notice that my parasol is getting old."

In Germany, the game was a little different. After the philopena is eaten and the two people meet again and the word philopena is spoken, it becomes a game of wits. The object is not to accept

any offer of the other. If the girl asks the man to take off his hat, he must keep it on. If he invites her to take a walk, she must refuse. Each person is trying to catch the other off guard. If a small gift is offered and accepted, then the game is won by the person giving the gift and of course they then receive a gift.

In a small community it was not uncommon for several couples to be playing this game and when several of them came together at a party, it became "ludicrously

amusing." By today's standards, I suspect that Philopena wouldn't be popular with young folks, but Willie Stowell apparently was pretty good at playing.

I did find a reference to "Five Minutes Conversation" which is a Victorian version of speed dating. It was described in an 1885 book, "How To Amuse Yourself and Others: the American Girls Handy Book." There were rules that had to be followed.

First a programme had to be printed with a small pencil attached. Each guest would receive a programme when they arrived. You would make an "engagement" by writing your name on a friends card. Two or more consecutive engagements were not allowed. Once everyone had filled their programme, the time keeper would ring a bell and the conversation would begin. At the end of five minutes the bell would ring again and all talking had to stop. Then everyone exchanged positions and the bell would ring and the next five minute conversation would begin. "The time-keeper should be strictly attentive to her duties, for the bell must be ring regularly at the end of every five minutes. The hour allotted to this new mode of conversation will pass very quickly and cannot become in the least tiresome, as the time spent in talking to any one person is very short."

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