

Dr. John T. Schlebecker

by Lynne Belluscio

It's certainly not a name that rolls off the tongue. When I received a call a couple of weeks ago from Bruce Henbest, President of the Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums, telling me that I was going to receive the Dr. John T. Schlebecker Lifetime Achievement Award at this year's annual ALHFAM (that's short of the Association of Living History, Farm ... etc.) meeting at Old Sturbridge Village, I was certainly surprised ... humbled ... and at the time ... if you can believe it, not sure what to say.

As I said in my acceptance speech, I was so excited about receiving "the Schlebecker" but I didn't know who to tell. It almost sounded like I was going to have some kind of medical procedure - - "the Schlebecker." And somehow, after I took the time to explain what ALHFAM was and who was John Schlebecker, the award got lost in translation. It was like an inside joke - - except the award is no joke.

John T. Schlebecker is one of the leading agricultural historians. At one time, he was the director of the agricultural collection at the Smithsonian Institution - - that's when I first met him. And in 1970, he was one of several men, who believed that it was important to organize a group that was committed to preserving the techniques and objects of early American agriculture. The group was known as the Association of Living History Farms and Agricultural Museums. (In time, the group decided to put a comma in the name, so that it became known as the Association of Living History (comma) Farm and Agricultural Museums).

My involvement with ALHFAM began in 1970. I was still teaching in Rochester and my husband and I were on one of our many trips to Old Sturbridge Village. We happened to stop by the Meetinghouse at Old Sturbridge and sat down to hear a talk about grafting heirloom apple varieties onto dwarf apple stock. As it turned out, it was part of the organizational meeting of what would become ALHFAM.



I became a member in 1973 or '4, never thinking that I would eventually go into museum work, however in 1976, I was on the staff at Genesee Country Museum - - working one day a week at the log cabin. By 1979, I was involved with special events, planning and organizing the first Agricultural Society Fair. Part of that event included a display of Heirloom vegetables. I worked with Bob Becker and Roger Kline, of Cornell University and Joseph Harris of Harris Seed Company to promote the project, and collaborated with Becker and Kline on a book.

In 1983, I was asked by Tom Woods of ALHFAM to present a paper on Genesee Country's Heirloom garden project and although I could not attend the meeting in Colorado, I sent a paper and slides which was presented.

In 1985, I attended my first annual ALHFAM meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia. I soon discovered that this was no ordinary museum association. These people really believed in living history. We helped raise a barn at Carter's Grove. I sat in on sessions about Merino sheep. We discussed the interpretation of slavery and the controversial techniques of "first person" interpretation which was being offered at Plimoth Plantation. This was a group of people who had a passion for what they were doing. I have attended every annual meeting of ALHFAM since 1985 - - going on a cattle drive in Texas, sailing on a two day adventure

out of Old Mystic Seaport, playing town ball on the square at the Henry Ford Museum, haying in Milton, Ontario - - the list is quite long.

Through the years I have presented a number of papers, on brick bake ovens, Jell-O, special events planning, military re-enactments and this year, a panel on maple sugar and syrup production at museum sites. Next year I hope to lead a discussion for small museums about collecting agricultural tools - - what's important and how to avoid being the "last stop before the dump."

Several years ago, I served three years on the ALHFAM board, and recently I served as vice president and president of the organization. In that capacity I served as the representative to the American Association of Museums' Council of Affiliates, the Association of State and Local History and the European Association of Open Air Museums, traveling to Finland, Scotland, England, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark. If the truth be told, I have received much more from ALHFAM than I have given the organization.

Today there are nearly 1,000 ALHFAM members worldwide. The president, Bruce Henbest is from Upper Canada Village. The vice president, Pete Watson is from Howell Farm in New Jersey. One of the members of the board is Bob Powell from Scotland. Our visiting member was from Denmark.

Next year's annual meeting

will be held in Jackson's Mill, West Virginia, a site that boasts the first 4-H camp in the country. This coming March, the Mid-Atlantic Region of ALHFAM will be hosted by Genesee Country Museum and the LeRoy Historical Society for an in depth look at brewing, maple sugar production and a very unique clothing collection recently acquired by Genesee Country Museum. The regional meeting will be open to anyone who is interested in participating in these activities. The group will stop by LeRoy House for a quick breakfast and a tour of the Jell-O exhibit.

Although the LeRoy Historical Society is neither a living history site nor an agricultural museum, I am a strong proponent of preserving our agricultural past. After all, the economic beginnings of LeRoy and Genesee County was based on agricultural commodities. Agriculture is still the major factor of Genesee County economy. As for living history, that's why kids who visit LeRoy House participate in "Hand-On-History." They need to feel and smell and taste history. Whether it is the first taste of churned butter, or the smell of fresh biscuits on the griddle or the weight of an old sad iron, they experience history and it becomes a part of their memory. I remember a quotation from a science program that I taught in the '60s: "I hear, I forget. I see, I remember. I do, I understand." I'll never forget the first time I walked behind a team of oxen and tried to keep the plow in the furrow or the time I tried to cut hay with a sythe. John Schlebecker wanted to preserve, not just plows and sythes, but the knowledge of how to use them. I believe in that. If a culture has no memory of its past, it will have no course for its future. That's why I love what I do here at the Historical Society.



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