**Gypsies, Street Entertainers and Medicine Men in Early Herndon**

*The odd and amusing visitors in turn-of-the-century Herndon*

By Barbara Glakas

Lottie Dyer Schneider was born in 1879, the year the Town of Herndon was incorporated. Her father served as Town Sergeant and as Mayor in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Her husband was a town merchant who ran a general hardware store on Lynn Street from 1909 to about 1919. Mrs. Schneider was among the first supervisors of Fairfax County Schools and later moved to Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

In 1962 Mrs. Schneider wrote a book about the village in which she grew up, the book entitled *“Memories of Herndon, Virginia.*” Her recollections covered the time period 1879-1920. An interesting part of her book was the chapter she called “Visitors,” in which she described some the amusing or odd visitors that would come to the village during her childhood years.

One such visitor was “the medicine man,” a visitor who would occasionally come into town to sell bottles of dark liquids that supposedly had miracle qualities, often made for aches and pains. Lottie described how she and the children enjoyed watching the medicine man as he would stand on top of a box, yelling out the miraculous qualities of the products he had to sell.

Another visitor she recalled was a man who brought a brown bear on a chain. The man would sing a merry tune while the bear would dance. Lottie described the children as being curious and fascinated but also fearful of the animal, which had a fierce face and powerful looking claws.

Yet another fun visitor was a “little foreign looking man with the hand organ and a monkey.” Lottie described the sight as being “thrilling.” The small monkey was dressed in a bright suit, wore a red cap and sat upon his master’s shoulders. The man played happy tunes as the monkey hopped onto the organ. It would hold out its cap to collect pennies and nickels from the fascinated on-lookers.

Bands of gypsies would also occasionally come into town. Her father would not let them camp in Town, but often local residents would allow them to stay on their land for a few days. Lottie described them as having happy dispositions but also having a reputation of stealing things. They wore dirty clothes and were often pushy, working their way into houses and businesses, at an effort to tell fortunes and get money or food. Occasionally, when they became angry, they would sometimes spit on people. Lottie said the townspeople seemed relieved when the gypsies moved on to other destinations.

Beggars also frequented town. They would come with a small pack of belongings they would have bundled together and would attach to stick which they rested over their shoulders. They often came asking for food. Some would offer to pay for their food by doing such tasks as cutting wood. Others would just take the food and leave. Lottie thought that some of the beggars would notch marks on some fences or gates, indicating to other beggars where food could be easily obtained or where fierce dogs resided.

Lottie’s younger sister, Ruth O. Williams, also recalled peddlers in her own book, “*Lest We Forget*.” She described these wandering peddlers as having suitcases filled with useful wares such as needles, thimbles, jewelry and fans that supposedly came from the Orient. She watched with delight as the peddlers would display their wares on the front porch of her house. She said, “Mother always bought something from them to encourage them, but if father was around he would scare off the poor fellow, for he felt that all people who led a wandering life were evil.”

Lottie described Herndon as a typical compact Virginia village with the characteristics of other little towns of that time period. All of its various visitors added to the flavor of Herndon life.

*About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular* Herndon Patch *feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at* [*www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org*](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org/)*.*

*The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at for more information.*

*Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact Charlie Waddell at 703-435-2520 or charliewaddell@cox.net.*