

Remembering Mel Low and Priscilla Jenness

by Alex Herlihy, Town Historian, March 2025

Rye lost two stalwart civic leaders in March.

Mel Low and his wife Jean moved to Rye from Lexington MA in the early 1960s. Mel was a master gardener and soon his huge garden on Washington Rd. showed off his green thumb. When Rye had its farmers market earlier in this century, Mel was one of the vendors along with Herbie Drake, another great gardener.

Mel was active in town grassroots movements and town government throughout his life in Rye. In the 1970s he joined with Frances Holway and others to initiate the creation of the new transfer station/recycling center on Grove Rd which the town voted to approve later in the decade. Mel even rode on the group's float in the Bi-Centennial parade in 1976, exhorting citizens to get behind their plan, one of the first such pioneering efforts in the county.

Mel was also a leader in the successful grassroots effort to save Parsons field and woods for public land. He was the president of the non-profit Parsons Park Corporation in 1977 which raised the down payment for the land and then sold it to the town in 1978 and 79. The corporation dissolved in 1981. The last time I saw Mel in January, I gave him the names of the 151 families of the corporation who raised the \$50,000 down payment. It was quite a ride down memory lane for him, remembering all those generous people.

In town government, Mel was a strong leader on the Select Board in the 1990s and on the planning board in this century.

He was also a leader in affordable housing through his work on the Parsonage Apartments in Rye Center and the White Cedar units on Airport Drive.

Priscilla Volkman Jenness was a Rye native and was married to the late building inspector Bill Jenness. Her mother, Vivian Volkman, used to work at the Sea View House Hotel, (closed and dismantled in 1918) where St Theresa's church and the Rye Beach community Hall is today. Priscilla was an artist and for many years taught art at Portsmouth HS. In 1990 she contributed some sketches to the historical society's new publication - Rye and Beyond: The Poetry of Jessie Herlihy.

Priscilla was elected to the Select Board early in this century and served for a good part of the first two decades where her graciousness was always appreciated. One of her lasting legacies to

town government was her effort to infuse Rye history in the annual town reports with her deep knowledge and many images. Priscilla's knowledge of Rye history was always a benefit to select board deliberations. She was certainly one of Rye's public historians.

After retiring from the Select Board c. 2019 she continued to work on her Rye memoir which she had hoped to publish. She contributed an excerpt of that memoir to my new Rye history to be published later this year.

These are just some of the highlights of Mel and Priscilla's service to the town. I knew them both very well and will always remember their vibrant personalities and what good people they were.

Their spirits live on.