

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Grenfell Rug Survives Dog Team Fire

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

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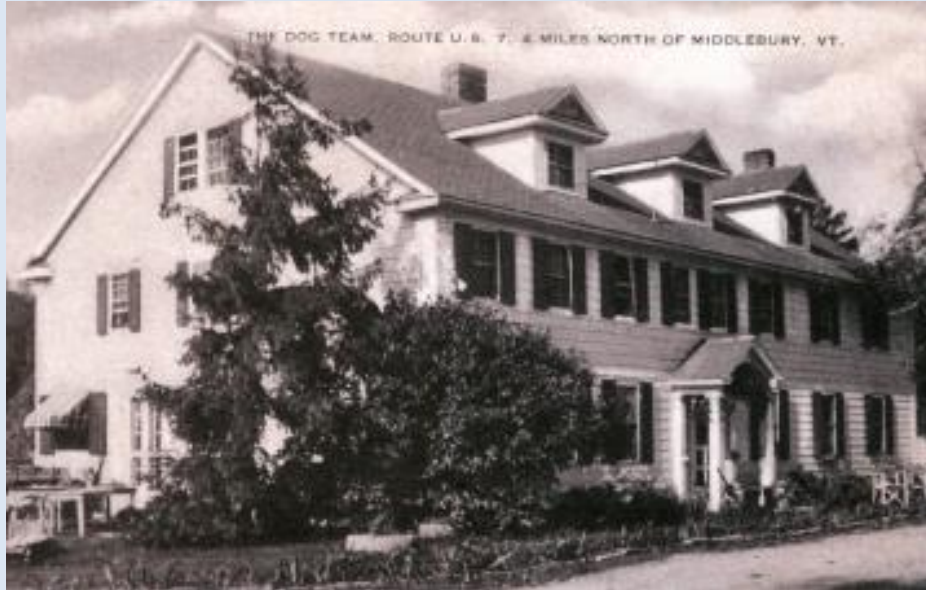
Dog Team Tavern rug, Collection of
Henry Sheldon Museum



Five sturdy sled dogs run across the frozen snow. The sled they pull has a heavy load—a large box and a kneeling man—but the dogs look sprightly in their traces. A man runs alongside the sled, as fit and sleek as the dogs themselves. The scene is bathed in the warm pastel colors of an Arctic sunset, peach and mauve, as the happy team of men and dogs speed home through the silent landscape.

The scene is caught forever, worked in silk on a canvas back, hanging on the wall of the children's room at the Henry Sheldon Museum. Ever since a tragic fire destroyed the landmark Dog Team Tavern on September 1, I find that I keep coming back to our own dog team rug, and brooding over what has been lost.

*Dog Team Tavern,
Postcard, c. 1945-60.
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum*



The fire that consumed the Dog Team on September 1 has saddened the whole community. The loss of a human life is the greatest tragedy. But I have also been struck by the visceral reaction people have had to the loss of all the beautiful objects that gave the Dog Team so much of its atmosphere.

Many a recent local conversation has revolved around memories of special things people had enjoyed revisiting whenever they went there for dinner. Remember the funky doll house? Remember the coffee table with seashells? Did you ever see the fabulous 1857 H.F.

Walling map of Addison County in the upstairs hallway, with drawings of some of the most beautiful local houses in the margins? The College crowd loved looking at the old Middlebury yearbooks, showing how today's very senior faculty appeared when they were fresh out of graduate school. ("Hey, did you see the one of David Price looking like Mick Jagger?") What about the trade signs in the bar, along with that wonderful notice about asking permission to fish on the property? (How was that worded?) There were watercolors and crockery covering every wall and shelf. All gone.

Nothing hurts more than the loss of the Grenfell rugs that had been the original making of the place. The Dog Team was decorated with over a dozen hooked rugs, showing dog teams, polar bears and other images of life in Labrador and Newfoundland. In the well-known local tale, Sir Wilfred Grenfell and his wife, Lady Anne, founders of the Dog Team, had made it their mission to alleviate the poverty of the fishing folk of eastern Canada by marketing their handicrafts. The New Haven restaurant was first established as a tea room and charity shop to sell these goods to Vermont's early motoring tourists.

In the 1920s, the Grenfells had noticed that many of the Labrador fishermen's wives did rug hooking, but their early patterns were generally not very attractive. Lady Grenfell is thought to have designed many of the patterns, with their charming scenes of men and animals in the frozen North. The patterns, burlap backing, rug hook and colored silk were distributed to the women in kits that they would work on the long, dark winter nights. The silk came from the stockings of society ladies in Canada, the U.S. and

England—their donations solicited with the snappy phrase, “When your stocking begins to run, let it run to Labrador.” The finished rugs, mats and handbags were sold in scattered shops through the English-speaking world, at prices ranging from 75¢ to \$3.75. The women who made them would receive vouchers that they could exchange for \$2-\$10 in used clothing. Today, these rugs sell for at prices anywhere from \$400 for a small one to over \$10,000 for the very rare large examples.

The Dog Team’s beautiful rugs are gone now. They will be missed by the thousands of people who enjoyed them over the years. How strange that these objects from the frozen North had come to seem such an essential part of Vermont.

History is a funny thing. We cannot always anticipate how changing circumstances will render certain things especially poignant to us in the future. It is a relief to know that at least one Grenfell rug remains in Addison County, at a place that is open to the public so that anyone can stop in to see it. It came to us in 1997, donated through the generosity of Gayle Finkelstein of Charlotte. Here at the Sheldon Museum, the little sled dogs will continue to pull their weight in the pale apricot of an Arctic sunset for many years to come.