



# Johnson Historical Society Newsletter

May 2022

What is history? It is the story of yesterday and the day before. It is the people who were there yesterday and the day before. But how do we remember yesterday and the day before? Some one may write a book. Sometimes the story is told by objects that were used back then. But where are these special objects now? They are collected and cared for in a place called the Johnson Historical Society. There you can see items from many yesterdays ago: little shoes worn by a baby, a uniform worn by a soldier, a diary telling stories from long ago. But how does the Historical Society keep all these items? People. People come together to collect and maintain these items and create a place where anyone can come and learn about yesterday and the day before, forever and forever. That place is the Holcomb House located at 188 Main Street. That is, as long as there are people today who care about our yesterdays. Are you one of these people? Please help the Johnson Historical Society so Johnson's history is kept safe for years to come. Contact: [johnsonhistoricalsociety.org](http://johnsonhistoricalsociety.org)

Written by Jane Marshall

## Searching for “The “Donut Man”

By Mary Alexander Peet

The distance from Jericho to Glover isn't much more than 60 miles, but with a carload of kids crammed tight inside our Travel All, it sure felt like we'd never get there. Our grandfather's farm and Shadow Lake, both in Glover, were our destinations. We did our share of quarrelling along the way, but we also sang songs and played car games to pass the time. All that bickering, singing, and chattering must have made a terrible racket, so it was no wonder that Dad always made a few stops along the way to break up the trip.

My favorite stop was in Johnson where there was a bake stand on the side of the road in the center of town. It was a small wooden structure, painted green and white to match the house that stood behind it. There was a buzzer on the outside which was used to summon an older man from the house who, as I remember, had snowy white hair and wore a white apron and a white paper baker's cap. He would slide open a glass window and serve us freshly baked bread, rolls, cake donuts, and my favorite: raised, glazed donuts. It has been over fifty years, yet my mouth still waters when I picture those simply irresistible, plump, soft, sugary donuts!

For the past forty years I have driven up to the Northeast Kingdom hundreds of times, and when

I pass through Johnson, I often think of the donut man and wonder who he was and where precisely was that bake stand. I wish I had thought to ask my dad, while he was still alive, if he had learned anything about him. Surely my father would have known the donut man's story. After all, he was a historian of an inquisitive nature and the ability to strike up a conversation with anyone he met. Some of my siblings recalled our stops at the donut stand, but with only a few additional details than I remembered, unable to totally satisfy my curiosity. This past fall, I finally decided it was time to do something with my interest.

In Late September, apologizing ahead of time for my somewhat strange inquiry, I sent an email to the Johnson Historical Society (JHS) to see what they might know about the donut man and his roadside stand. I was delighted to receive an email back from JHS's historian, Linda Jones. Linda informed me that the man who operated the donut stand was Bill Lower. However, what really should not have surprised me, was when Linda enlightened me that it was actually Bill's wife, Ila Lower, who did all the baking! Linda had one photo to share – a street view of the Lowers' stand, which Bill had built. It looked exactly as I remembered it in the 60s and 70s. Apparently, before they bought the big house in back of the donut stand, the Lowers lived in an upstairs apartment next to that house. Ila started making donuts in that apartment in the late 1940's. Linda graciously put me in touch with a friend of hers, Mr. Dean West, also on the board of the JHS. He had grown up next door to the Lowers.

That same week I had a delightful conversation with Dean West, who indeed had more details to share. As a child, Dean remembers smelling the delicious aroma of donuts coming from the Lowers' place while Ila was baking. He, his sister, and other neighboring children would frequently call on Ila who always gave them the donut holes to enjoy. Dean believes that the house and donut stand stood approximately where the Community Bank is situated today on Lower Main Street in Johnson. Dean also remembered that the Lowers raised their grandson, Ernest LaBrie, from infancy. He knew that Mr. LaBrie had moved away to the Montpelier area years ago, but did not have any contact information for him. I have to credit Google for supplying me with a post office box address for Ernest. I sent him a letter inquiring about his grandparents' baking business, and eagerly waited and hoped for a response.

When I shared what I had learned about the Lowers with one of my sisters, Joan, she gladly got involved in my pursuit. With her accounts with ancestry.com and newspapers.com, she was able to uncover more details. Joan suggested we go on a "field trip" to Johnson to find the Lowers' gravestone, and to try to pinpoint, from the photo, just where their home and donut stand stood all those years ago! We made a date for the following week to meet at the Charlmont Restaurant in Morrisville for lunch, and decided we would drag our sister, Martha, along to join in on the fun!

We took our time with our soups and sandwiches that chilly, rainy late-October afternoon at the Charlmont. We were surprised how many people, despite being in the middle of a pandemic, were in the restaurant. We joked that we might get more information going from table to table with the photo from the JHS, questioning any local diners who looked old enough to remember the Lowers. We laughed and decided best to leave folks to their lunches, and instead poured over the printouts Joan had brought from the Lowers' obituaries and family trees.

Looking over the ancestry info, we read that Bill Lower was born April 27, 1898 on a farm in Lebanon, N.H., the 7th child of a general laborer and housewife. By the time he was 20, Bill worked as a spinner in a nearby woolen mill. In 1922, at age 24, he married Goldie Miller, 16, and, over the next two years, they had two children, a son and daughter, Dorothy and William. In 1930, on Christmas Day, sadly Goldie, at the young age of 25, died of diabetes, leaving her two children at the young ages of seven and eight. Five years later, in 1935, Bill married Ila Tatro in Claremont N.H. Soon after, Ila and Bill moved to Johnson, Vermont where they both worked at Johnson Woolen Mills down the street from their home. Bill was a spinner for many years, and Ila was a seamstress for over 30 years.

From the Lowers' obituaries we also learned that Bill died in 1971, at the age of 73, of acute heart disease, and Ila died four years later, in 1975 at the age of 67, from fibrosarcoma. They were both buried in the Lamoille View Cemetery in Johnson. After our lunch that day, we set out to find the Lower's gravestone in that cemetery. It was still cool, overcast, and drizzling; however, with our raincoats and our determination, we were on a mission. It was a large cemetery, but because we knew where we might find gravestones typical of the 1970s, we felt we were looking in the right area. Joan and Martha went toward the back of one section, and I went toward the front, weaving my way in between headstones, scanning the engraved names, resisting the urge to stop and read the entire inscriptions on each and every stone. About 30 minutes into our search, I wandered toward the center and hollered, "Here it is!"

The family monument was a lovely polished, black, marble stone with beautiful bas-relief with flowers and a cross, as well as a statue of the Virgin Mary placed behind it. The headstones, flush with the ground, were on either side of the gravestone, Bill on the right, and Ila on the left. While I waited for my two sisters to make their way over, I walked around back and read the years of Bill and Ila's deaths, and, to my surprise, the names of twins, Adrian and Adrianna, who had a birth date and a death date of 1935. We hadn't learned of these twins yet as they were not in either of the Lowers' obituaries.

That same afternoon, Joan, Martha, and I took the JHS photo of the Lowers' bakery stand and walked up and down the sidewalks of Johnson trying to locate where it once stood (likely a curious sight to

those passing by). After studying the architecture of the surrounding houses in the photo, we concluded that those houses were no longer there. We walked into Ebenezer Books, and Joan went right to the local books section, and bought “The Images of America Series” history of Johnson (written by some of the JHS members). The book showed the same photo of the donut stand that Linda Jones had initially sent me, and did confirm that the houses on that block had been demolished. We also walked into the Johnson Woolen Mills and approached the sales clerk, who was a bit perplexed with our request, to see if their business might have any photos of the Lowers in their archives. He couldn’t help us, but suggested we submit our request through their on-line website. Later that day, I did send an email inquiry to Stacy Manosh, fourth generation owner and CEO. Stacy wrote right back saying she remembered the Lowers and their delicious baked goods, but unfortunately had no photos of them working at the Mills.

That night, I was flooded with emails. Joan was finding a lot of treasures on the online newspaper websites containing several newspaper articles that showcased Ila’s baking talents! It turns out, Ila was a first-prize winner in many baking contests at the Champlain Valley Fair throughout the 1960s. She won prizes for her plain donuts, glazed raised donuts, cinnamon donuts, jelly donuts, cakes, breads, and baked beans!

It wasn’t until the end of November that I picked up my research on the Lowers again. In looking back over my notes from my phone conversation with Dean West, from the JHS, I had missed his mention of “Lorette Cusson”, from Hyde Park as someone who helped Ila Lower with her baking business as it grew. Again, Google helped me to discover that Lorette was no longer living, but that her son, Allen Cusson was a CPA in Morrisville. I was able to find the website of Allen’s business and emailed him with the subject line “Nothing to do with taxes, I’m here to talk donuts.”

That same week, Allen Cusson reached out to me by phone. Allen confirmed that his mother, Lorette, along with his father’s sister, Willimae Dubray, who had cleaned for the Lowers, worked for Ila in her bakery business in Johnson. In the mid 1960s, Lorette and Willimae concocted a new recipe and went on to make donuts for their own home business, “Big Loaf Bakery,” in Hyde Park, where Allen grew up.

When I had just about given up hope in hearing from him, right after Christmas I was thrilled to receive a voicemail message from the Lowers’ grandson, Ernest LaBrie! It was as if I had heard from a long lost friend! In his message, he let me know that he had received my letter, explaining that it had taken some time to get to him due to an incorrect address and because he had been out of state for a few weeks.

A few days later, “Ernie” and I connected and had an enjoyable phone conversation. He confirmed

that he came to live with his grandparents, Bill and Ila, when he was three months old. According to Ernie, Ila started baking in her own home in the early 1950s, rising early to start the donuts before reporting to work at the mill. At first, she sold donuts to the neighbors, and then it grew from there. When Bill and Ila would vacation on Lake Champlain in the summer, Ila was selling donuts to other campers in the campground. When Ila began making bread, Ernie remembers a gentleman from N.Y. coming over once a month and filling the back of his station wagon with both bread and donuts. He would then go back and sell them to neighbors in his housing development.

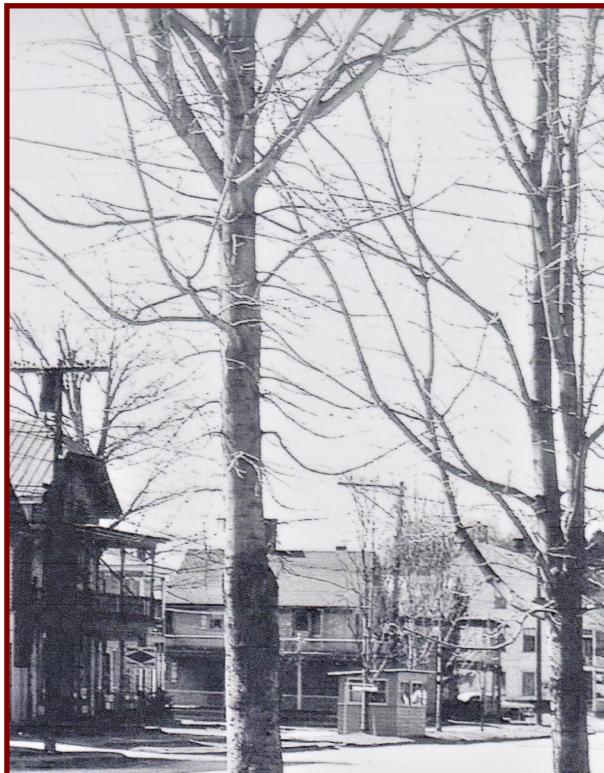
When Bill retired from the Woolen Mills several years later, Ila quit her job as a seamstress there, and it was then that they went into full swing, creating a substantial business of baking pies, cakes, bread, and of course, donuts. The Lowers then converted their garage into a bakery, purchasing a big commercial oven to bake multiple loaves of bread. They had a large donut fryer custom-made to fry a dozen donuts at a time. Ila would use an ice pick to turn them over, set them on a rack, and the grease would then run back into the fryer. The Lowers started selling donuts and bread to the Windbridge Bakery on Main Street in Jeffersonville, as well as motels on the Mountain Road in Jeffersonville and stores in Hyde Park and Hardwick, as well as from the roadside stand. When I asked Ernie if he ever grew tired of eating his grandmother's donuts, I was surprised by his response. "I actually didn't like the donuts until they were a couple of days old, when they were chewier and less soft. My grandmother always set a few aside for me."

Some people may wonder what my drive was behind this obsession with the Donut Man. I'm not really sure how to answer that. Perhaps it was the novelty of stopping at a roadside stand to buy donuts before there were "Dunkin Donuts" in our area. Or maybe it was the warm connections I made with memories of making donuts with my own grandmother, and a special childhood friend whose mother always had homemade glazed donuts waiting for us. It's possible that we all have faint memories that leave us wanting to know more. Whatever the reason, my curiosity has led to uncovering a sweet piece of history in the rural town of Johnson, Vermont. I never imagined that my search would be such a fun and fascinating adventure, meeting interesting people along the way, and that it would lead me to find both the "Donut Man" and the "Donut Woman!" Bill and Ila Lower may have been gone for 50 years, but plenty of people still remember them!

*Mary Alexander Peet, a retired teacher living in Richmond, Vermont who has never made a batch of donuts herself, would love to hear from anyone who might remember the Lowers and their baking business and/or have photos to share. Please reach out to Mary at [mpeetfarm@gmail.com](mailto:mpeetfarm@gmail.com).*



This photo shows a parade of congregants on Main Street in Johnson on their way to the ground breaking ceremony for the new United Church (c.1970). If you look closely at the first building on the right (which would have been the Grand Union Store) there is a sign advertising Ila Lower's fresh baked goods. (photo courtesy of the United Church collection)



This photo shows the Lowers' bake stand, near the edge of Main Street in downtown Johnson, back in the late 60s and early 70s. It was most likely demolished, along with the other surrounding buildings, to make way for the present-day structures.  
(Photo courtesy of Linda Jones, JHS)

# Johnson Woman Bakes Her Way To \$50 Prize

Winner of the gold ribbon pin and \$50 award in the yeast baking sweepstakes at the Champlain Valley Exposition is Mrs. Ila Lower of Johnson, for a loaf of whole wheat and honey bread.

There were 105 entries in the five classes which competed for the sweepstakes award.

Mrs. Dorothy Mack of South Hero won the white bread class; Mrs. Lower, dark bread; Mrs. George White of Jericho, plain rolls; Mrs. O. C. Judd, Mrs. Anne Solomon, Burlington, sweet rolls.

Other classes in the culinary exhibit will be judged later in the week. Mrs. Helen Lawrence of Jericho is superintendent; Mrs. Lydia P. Hitchcock, judge.

From "The Burlington Free Press," 08/29/1961

## TOP YEAST BAKER AT FAIR WINS SPECIAL AWARD



"Best of Show." Those were magic words at hundreds of county and state fairs across America this year, as women competed for the coveted Fleischmann's Yeast Best-of-Show Award in yeast baking. Mrs. Ila Lower, of Johnson, was the winner at the Champlain Valley Fair, Essex Junction, Vermont. The special prize—given in recognition of this traditional homemaking skill—is a cash award and a diamond-studded gold ribbon pin. Here is the prize-winning recipe:

### HONEY GRAHAM BREAD

2 packages or cakes Fleischmann's Yeast, active dry or compressed	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup shortening
$\frac{1}{4}$ cup very warm water	3 cups white flour
$\frac{1}{2}$ cup honey	2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups graham flour
2 tablespoons salt	2 cups raisins (may be added if desired)
2 cups warm milk	

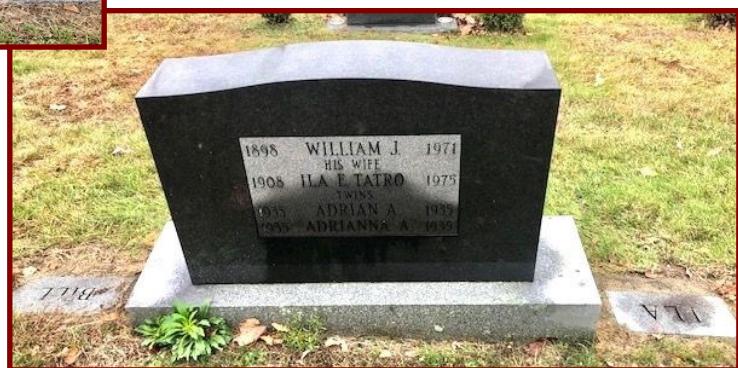
Sprinkle or crumble yeast into very warm water. Stir until dissolved. Add honey, salt and milk to yeast mixture, mix thoroughly. Add flours and shortening and mix well. Turn dough out on floured board and knead until it is smooth and elastic and is no longer sticky. Let rise in warm place for 2 hours, punch down and let rise again until doubled in bulk. Shape dough into 2 loaves, let rise for  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour in warm place. Bake at  $350^{\circ}\text{E}$ . for 45 minutes. Cool on racks.

From "News and Citizen," Morrisville, VT, 1/18/1962



Front view of Ila and Bill Lower's gravestone, Lamoille View Cemetery, Johnson, VT.

(Photo courtesy of Mary Alexander Peet, 10/2022)



Back view of Ila and Bill Lower's gravestone, Lamoille View Cemetery, Johnson, VT.

(Photo courtesy of Mary Alexander Peet, 10/2022)



Mary Alexander Peet (on right) with her twin sister, Martha Alexander

(on left) in front of the Lower's gravestone, October, 2022

(Photo courtesy of Mary Alexander Peet)

***Our Mission:*** *The mission of the Johnson Historical Society is to preserve our history by weaving stories of the past with the present, using our collections of artifacts and displays, creating a legacy for future generations.*

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*Watch for details about the  
Holcomb House open hours on  
Sunday, June 12th*