

# Johnston Historical Society

## Historical Notes

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Christopher Martin, Editor    Louis McGowan, Assistant

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### Recollections of Centredale -- Our Nearest "Downtown" (Part 1)

By Thomas C. Rhodes

*(The author of this article is the son of Thomas Rhodes, Jr., and his wife, Bertha "Kit" Rhodes, both long-time members of our group. Tom's great-grandfather, Timothy Rhodes was from one of the original migrant families from Yorkshire, England who came to Greystone to work in the Benn Mill.)*

When the Rhodes family moved from Gloucester, R.I. to Graniteville in August of 1959, we moved literally from the "country" to a much more densely settled suburb, largely composed of houses built from the latter half of the nineteenth century to roughly the end of the Twenties. While living on the Hurdis estate in Gloucester, a "gentleman's farm" owned by the widow of Milton Briden Hurdis, Sr., the nearest place for shopping and other errands, such as dry cleaning, had been Greenville, a village in Smithfield. This had been recently improved with a First National supermarket, although this brick structure would now seem rather small compared to the gigantic grocery stores of the present day. In moving to Graniteville, we had to find another source for shopping and services, although for a few years my mother continued some buying activity in Greenville. Centredale was the closest point where anything like an adequate range of shops and services could be found, so in time this section of North Providence became our "local downtown."

#### Beginning Remarks

To readers unacquainted with British spelling or usage, the very place name of Centredale might seem wrong. Should it not be spelled *Centerdale*? In British usage to this day, the spelling of centre has retained its Norman origin, as in "shopping centre." For the Rhodes family, freshly arrived from a country place like Gloucester, with its Laurel Grange, white Baptist church, and other features right out of Norman Rockwell, it was a time of change, from buying vegetables from Mr. Hawkins, from "trading" at the small shops in Greenville to a very different arrangement. Happily, my father Thomas Rhodes, Jr. had grown up in Graniteville and so was familiar with a section of North Providence called Centredale, actually the administrative seat of that town. His family had other ties to North Providence as well, for an uncle by marriage, William Edwin Hunt, married to his aunt, the former Martha Elizabeth Rhodes, had built an impressive home on Belvedere Boulevard in the Fruit Hill section of North Providence, which he visited many times, even after his widowed aunt married Francis Fitch Kellogg. However,

as a youth growing up in the Twenties and the Depression, he had most frequented Centredale. This naturally suggested that the rest of us should also think of Centredale as our downtown. Fortunately there was an A&P supermarket situated just before Centredale proper, a further inducement for us to shift our orientation to this section of North Providence. This little essay will not give any account of Centredale from an historical standpoint, but will simply dwell on certain features that existed during the 1960s and 1970s when this writer and his family most often availed themselves of its shops and services.



2038 Smith Street, the original location of Centredale's A&P, which opened here in 1915. *Image from Google Street View.*

#### Leading to Centredale: The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company

As already mentioned, one of the reasons for the Rhodes family shift away from further reliance on Greenville, was the presence of an A&P Foodstore. Though now long gone, the victim of economic recession and some unsavory practices, A&P supermarkets, many in trim brick structures, long dotted the land. The branch on the left side of Putnam Pike driving to Centredale, was, at the time it was built, a thoroughly up-to-date retail venue. While earlier markets in Centredale itself might have contented themselves with small, cramped quarters, the penalty of small urban commercial blocks, the Putnam Pike market was a store unto itself, set towards the rear of what then would be thought a spacious parking lot. By the measure of present day "superstores" this A & P would be small, measuring not much more than thirty by sixty feet. The selling floor, with its neat covering of bright

linoleum squares (in marked contrast to the dull, dirty wooden planking of several Centredale shops) occupied the largest middle section, consisting of about five aisles, while on the left were the offices and on the right a narrow stocking avenue behind the dairy, adjacent to the outer concrete block and brick wall. Behind the meat department was another area, unseen by the public, given over to warehouse work. Deliveries of foodstuffs were made from the trailer trucks to this rear area through a heavy metal double door. There the boxes and cartons were sorted, and their upper halves were cut off to reveal the packed product. The cases were then pushed along roller frames, where on ganged rollers fixed rotatably to numerous axles, they were delivered to their destination.

During a strike at certain other markets (not the A&P) during 1970, this high school student worked briefly at this food mart, during which time he was able to observe first-hand its sundry operations and staff. The manager at that time was Mr. Richard C. Gormly, a bespectacled middle-aged man, who commanded the respect of the staff despite the expected "grousing." Unlike the stores of today, where the staff seems to change with each visit, the department heads, senior clerks, and cashiers were of almost geologic longevity! A smiling, red-faced man, Earl Davis, was a communicant at St. Alban's Church in Centredale and a local "character" of note. While representing a change favoring "self-service" in contrast to the older, smaller markets, the A&P still afforded its patrons considerable attention. One service possibly unique to this chain was the custom grinding of roasted coffee beans. This junior clerk recalls operating the coffee grinding machines at the end of two of the "check out" aisles. After opening the small upright bag of coffee beans, oblong pellets were fed into the funnel of the grinder, whose workings were possibly slightly more hushed than a diesel truck! After the onset of the initial roar, the operator had to quickly position the empty but reclosable bag within a small rectangular inset chamber, where the aromatic grindings hopefully made their egress.



Centredale's business district, circa mid-1950s.  
Postcard courtesy of Louis McGowan.

### Specific Stores in Centredale Itself

During the decade of the Sixties, this writer often went to Centredale, primarily to purchase comic books or magazines from those stores offering them. Located on the corner of Smith Street and Mineral Spring Avenue was a news stand commonly known as "the paper store," not from selling stationary but simply by the fact it sold newspapers and much other reading

material, such as *The Sporting News*, *Popular Science*, and sundry crossword puzzle monthlies. It was owned by the Buonacorsi family, and sometimes was also called simply "Buonacorsi's." It had a curious layout, as the clerks were confined to a large center booth, while reading material was on the right side and sundry other products on the other. Each Saturday in fair weather this writer would bicycle down to Centredale, enter "the paper store" and lovingly survey the latest comic book arrivals, like *Superman*, *The Flash*, *Strange Adventures*, and other titles of what now is called the "Silver Age" of comics. The Pulp magazines had disappeared several years before (my late father well recalled reading *Flynn's* and *Famous Detective* in the early 1930s), but science fiction digests like *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* sometimes had striking covers. Very old publications, such as the *Police Gazette* and newer "scandal" magazines dealing with the foibles of movie stars were also on the shelves but seldom tempted even a glance from this essayist. The problem with "the paper store" rested with its uniformly grumpy clerks, who assumed that all kids in the store were borderline thieves or that this writer spent too much time "reading" the available comics instead of buying them. Once, one of the grumpier clerks, suspecting this writer of tardiness in selecting titles to buy, testily remarked "Kid, this isn't a library!" Such an unwarranted remark caused this teenager to drop whatever comics he had selected and wordlessly leave that store, vowing not to return, which brings us to the next store.

Beside the "paper store," Adams Drugstore also sold magazines and comics. It was located slightly further down on Smith Street, on the other side, in what had once been the "old" A&P market. Eva Clough, the widow of George Clough, who attended St. Alban's Church in Centredale where the Rhodes family also worshipped, recalled when it was "the Piggley-Wiggly" grocery store, managed by Mr. Leightbaum. Then again, Eva Clough may have also recalled President McKinley! Adams was physically a step up from the Buonacorsi news stand, being better appointed and lighted, as well as having a staff that was a little friendlier. Another advantage was that the magazine and comic book racks were positioned away from the registers, so this writer could leisurely browse through many comic book titles before making a final choice. Adams Drugstore also carried sundry items like Buonacorsi's, but with considerably less dust or grime covering them. This writer bought his first electric "Christmas candle" there in 1971, by which time his interest in comics, partly due to their lesser quality and higher price, had dwindled to almost nothing. By this time his taste in reading material had shifted to coin collecting magazines, especially *COINage*, which ran a feature called "Great Moments in Numismatics" where he first encountered the name of Augustus St. Gaudens, the great Irish-American sculptor who designed certain coins under the impetus of President Theodore Roosevelt. Of course, purchasing comic books, space magazines, or hobby publications were not the only attractions of Centredale for this writer.

Another favorite store was "King's Five & Ten," a small ten cent store featuring toys, novelties, "notions" and stationary, among other products. This store was simplicity itself, with wooden floors and simple wooden or metal shelves for the merchandise. There were no fancy displays or gimmicks to push sales, and business was conducted at a very leisurely pace. Interestingly,

the façade of this store looked more up to date than the inside. It was fronted by a large window over which hung the sign, done in a style of lettering popular in the Fifties, a sort of last gasp for Art Deco. It had a pleasant atmosphere, with a very "lived in" appearance, though the selling floor and merchandise racks were kept spotlessly clean and tidy. My favorite section as a child was obviously the aisle with small toys of all descriptions. While there were the obviously cheaper plastic toys, such as molded airplanes, boats, and even spaceships right out of an old "Buck Rogers" comic, King's did not lack the better lines, especially of toy cars, made from metal. The writer has kept to this day a metal toy auto, closely modeled after the 1934 Ford, made by Hubley. There was a fabric section that sold cloth cut to measure and other household accessories that my mother bought from time to time. One of the odd features of this store was the yearly goldfish sale where, at the front of the store, a large glass tank or two held goldfish, and at a higher cost, tropical fish. On tables near these tanks were dozens of goldfish bowls, made of glass in various sizes and shapes. There was also a smaller table that displayed all sorts of miniature ceramic buildings, such as stone towers or gateways for the fish to swim around. Each season in the middle Sixties my sister Valyrie (an odd spelling variant chosen by my Dad over the usual Valerie), and this essay writer would get a new goldfish to replace the one gone to goldfish "heaven," though a fish called by me "Socrates" lasted three years, possibly a record for these short-lived aquatic novelties! They were fun to watch swimming around their tiny castles in the bowl, but the need to change the water and clean out the bowls in time cured us of wanting further goldfish.



Logo from a 1965 King's Five & Ten ad.

About 1970, after dwindling sales in a period of economic slowdown, the original King's Five & Ten closed but was very soon replaced by a new operation called William's. While not a radical change, the new store had a greatly pared product line and, it seemed, a less friendly staff. The new manager, a man closely resembling Alan Ludden of the *College Bowl* television show, complete with thick black framed glasses, strutted around the store imperiously, treating staff and customers alike with a sanctimonious authority. Once, when we were in the store, my sister wanted to leave to meet some friends hanging about in Centredale, but this writer indicated his intention of remaining there. My sister then said she would meet me "back at King's." Whereupon, in a pompous tone, the new manager corrected: "It's WILLIAMS!" This had the effect, akin to the incident mentioned above involving the Buonacorsi newsstand, of chilling my regard for the successor operation, and it came as no surprise that William's itself closed down only a year or two later!

#### A Venerable Meeting Place

Shopping for goods was not the sole endeavor in travelling by foot or bicycle down to Centredale. A most necessary service

was supplied by "Pat's Barbershop" on the spot where Smith Street turned into what was called "the by-pass." This establishment was presided over by Mr. Pasquale J. Fetta, often assisted by his son Ken. Before 1966, this essay writer had gone to "Pete's Barbershop," located in a tiny wooden building seemingly built into the hill of Serrel Sweet Road, opposite "Chadwick's," better known as "the Corner store." Pete was an elderly barber with no great love for electrified barbering equipment, and actually still used a set of hand clippers. In the early 1960s, when "crew cuts" were universally given to most of the male population, this required almost weekly visits to the barber; certainly twice a month was the absolute longest interval allowed. Pete, an adherent of the "appearance over comfort" school, vociferously clipped and trimmed until almost all vestiges of hair (even perhaps of scalp), had been removed. Mercifully, he chose to retire when this writer was in the sixth grade at Graniteville Elementary, and my mother had no choice but to recourse to Centredale for my trimming ordeal. We decided on Pat's, and for the next two decades, both my father and his son patronized this local institution. Unlike the previous tonsorial reactionary, Pat had no reservations over the less harrowing electric shavers, a factor much in his favor in the eyes of this eleven year old! There were actually three raisable chairs in the shop, but only two were customarily used. On the walls hung vintage photos of boxing greats, such as Rocky Marciano, and a few other curiosities. Against the opposite wall were the seats, decently comfortable metal-framed units with mottled naugahyde upholstery. In the center of the row was the two-shelf table upon which were piled the sundry issues of *Popular Mechanics*, *Popular Science*, and other stalwarts of barbershops of that time. One could peruse such publications just to kill time in waiting or to educate one's self on the best way to mulch hedges or wire the "aerial" to one's Philco television cabinet. This writer first saw photos of Raquel Welch in *Life* magazine during the fall of 1966 and these were quite a change from the images of new power lawn mowers in *Popular Mechanics*! As in countless small hamlets, the barbershop was the meeting place for all the local worthies, and at Pat's we were sometimes amused by the lively exchanges of Mr. Cafferty with the proprietor. It was the custom, however, for certain of Centredale's "regulars" to stand in front of this barbershop, or sometimes the adjacent pub, seemingly for hours at a stretch. From this young barbershop patron, these seldom-mobile "fixtures" were given the designation "Rent-a-squares" from the blocks of sidewalk they so often occupied. Every time we drove through Centredale afterwards, pointing out the "rent-a-squares" became a standing joke. Now, of course, both the habit and practitioners are long gone.

To be continued...

~~~~~  
*Happy  
 Spring!*



## The Shoestring Club

By Louis McGowan

*(The information for this article was taken from a paper that was written in 1979 by Kevin P. Gatta, who submitted it to fulfill a requirement for a class at Rhode Island College. The story of the Shoestring Club was told to him by Joseph Mancini, Joseph A. Russo, and by Kevin's grandfather, Pasquale Gatta.)*

Sometime in the early 1950s, one man from a group of mostly Italian businessmen, while attending an outing at Joseph A. Russo's summer home at Matunuck Beach, came up with the idea of forming a social club for the businessmen present. The gathering of twenty-three men immediately approved the idea because it was said that they all got along well and enjoyed each other's company. The gathering that they were attending was an annual cookout for members of the Pocasset Casino Holding Company, which owned and ran the Pocasset Casino, also known as the Pocasset Social Club. The idea for the new club was that it would not be a formal, chartered club, but rather just a fun group for friends. Because there were twenty-three original members, that remained the total number of members for all its existence. When one person left the group, one person replaced him.

The new club needed a name. Since all the members were businessmen who started out on a shoestring, they decided to call themselves "The Shoestring Club." Twice a year they held a meeting with plenty of food and drink. The members would all wear a shoestring in their lapel to remind themselves of their business beginnings and to act as a symbol of their friendship. At the meetings, they drank only champagne which served as a reminder of how far they had come. The gatherings were said to be a good time for all. Members would catch up on what had been going on in each of their families, whose child was getting married or who had a new grandchild.

The membership was not exclusively Italian. There were two English members, Howard Thatcher, an attorney, and Joseph Brownell, who worked for the telephone company.

In his 1979 paper, Kevin mentioned that the club was going to meet that year. As of 1979, four replacement members had joined the group.

*(How long The Shoestring Club met is unknown.)*

### Historical Advertising

Here's another old ad from the Historical Advertising photo album on our Facebook page. This one is from the May 1, 1948, *Evening Bulletin*.



## Society Doings

### Recognition Day For Pat Macari

On December 3, 2017, we held a recognition event for long-time member Pasco (Pat) Macari. Thirty members and family gathered at the museum barn to recognize Pat for his many accomplishments over the years. Pat joined our group in 1981 and has remained a member ever since, making him the longest active member in our history. During that time he has served as membership chair, Treasurer, Vice-President, and President. For the past fifteen years or so, Pat has been in charge of our very active Cemetery Committee, which has been working tirelessly to inventory and repair headstones, and to clean the yards.



We presented a full-sized plaque to Pat, thanked him for his service and wished him and his wife Kathy a happy retirement together.

### Christmas Party

On December 8, 2017, members gathered at the home of Phil and Lori Lemoi for the annual JHS Members Christmas Party. The house looked wonderful.

### Open House

On February 18, 2018, we hosted an Open House and Coffee Hour. The Museum and Elijah Angel House were both open for visitors' perusal and enjoyment. There were refreshments and socializing, and Christopher Martin manned an antique 8mm projector showing old home movies he had acquired at various estate sales. Films showing North Atlantic Tuna Tournaments in the 1950s, and Edaville Railroad in the 1960s were well-received.

### Adoption of Revised Bylaws

Over the past several months a committee has been working to revise and update our Society bylaws, a process that had not been undertaken for many, many years. Prior to our March meeting, copies of the revised bylaws were sent out to the membership via email, and on March 28, a quorum being present, a vote was held. The revised bylaws were unanimously adopted. Thanks go

out to Elise and Glenn Carlson, Pat Macari, Dan Brown, Anthony Ursillo, and Louis McGowan for their hard work on this project.

## Our Properties

### *Champlin Grant*

In November 2017, we received happy news -- we were approved for our 2017 Champlin Grant! This was especially good news because the chimney on the Elijah Angell House is in bad shape. We could actually see sky when looking at the side of the chimney, meaning that the mortar was missing in many spots of the structure.

We, of course, are very thankful to the Champlin Foundations for trusting us with this grant.

### *Clemence Family Members Visit Museum*

On January 23, 2018, two Clemence family members visited our museum. Richard Clemence from North Carolina and his cousin and JHS member Austin Clemence from Gloucester, R.I., spent a few enjoyable hours checking out our exhibits and talking family history.

### *Museum*

Our museum barn is open Tuesdays, 9-11am and 6:30-8:30pm; and Thursdays, 2-5pm; and the first and third Saturdays of each month, 9-11am, for those who would like to visit the museum or examine the society's collection of printed materials. Both the museum and Elijah Angell House continue to be open by appointment -- we always welcome visits by interested individuals or groups. Just shoot us an email at [history@jhs.necoxmail.com](mailto:history@jhs.necoxmail.com), or leave a message at (401) 231-3380 to set one up.

Our museum space is also available (on a limited basis) for meetings of small groups of adults at a reasonable price. If you know of a local group or organization that is looking for a meeting space, and might be interested in using our museum, please have them contact us.

### *Speakers*

Our November 2017 speaker was Jim Ignasher, historian with the Historical Society of Smithfield, and author of numerous articles and books on forgotten Rhode Island history. He gave us a fascinating presentation on Stories of New England Aviation.

For January, Louis McGowan took up the speaker duties and presented a look at objects from our Museum collections.

Our February speaker was former *Providence Journal* editorial board member David Brussat, talking about his History Press book *Lost Providence*. We learned a lot about the city's lost architectural gems, as well as some of the less-than-appealing edifices that replaced them.

Slater Mill docent Carl L. Johnson returned to our fair town in March, this time to tell us about Edgar Allan Poe. The highlight of the evening was a dramatic reading of Poe's famous poem, "The Raven."

### *Acquisitions*

- In November, Louis donated 3 "How to" Books on Oral History and an 1890s bottle from the Gilbert R. Parker

drugstore that was located on Plainfield Street in the Olneyville section of Johnston.

- In January, Louis purchased a Johnston Special Police Badge for the society.
- In January Christopher Martin donated a red plastic milk crate from Roger Williams Dairy.
- Bobby LaFazia donated a circa 1916 photo of a Johnston Boy Scout Troop in front of the old Thornton School.
- Paul Lotito donated a mannequin.
- Dan Brown donated a number of Greystone photos and some reference books for our library.
- In February Christopher Martin purchased an octagonal curio cabinet for the Society from an estate sale.
- In March Christopher Martin donated a 2001 Johnston High School yearbook.

Many donated objects may be seen in the Acquisitions photo album on our Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical](http://www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical)). As always, our sincere thanks to all who have donated items for our collections. Keep it coming!

### *Wish List*

Following are a number of items we could make good use of:

- Display mannequins
- Old photos of Johnston
- Any Johnston-related ephemera or memorabilia
- A six-foot iron digging bar (for the Cemetery Committee)

## Upcoming Events

### **April 6, 2018**

Tea at Clouds Hill Mansion, Warwick  
2pm

Tickets (\$35 pp) are still available. Call (401) 231-3380 to reserve. First paid, first reserved.

### **April 21, 2018**

JHS Tag Sale  
8am-12pm

JHS Headquarters, 101 Putnam Pike, Johnston. Come by and buy stuff. Better yet, donate some gently used stuff that we can sell. Proceeds from the sale will benefit the Johnston Historical Society. A detailed listing will be posted to Craigslist under "garage sales" the week of the sale.

### **April 25, 2018**

General Meeting  
7pm

Our speaker will be Rhode Island postcard collector extraordinaire Joseph E. Coduri. His latest book is *Rhode Island Towns and Villages: Post Card Views at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*.

### **May 23, 2018**

Old Sturbridge Village

If you're interested in joining us for a group day trip to Sturbridge, please contact Anthony Ursillo at (401) 764-5901 or [aursillo@gmail.com](mailto:aursillo@gmail.com).

**May 30, 2018**

General Meeting  
7pm  
Speaker TBD.

**June 27, 2018**

General Meeting  
7pm

Our speaker will be Charlotte Taylor, State Archaeologist and author of the Arcadia Publishing title *Rhode Island Shipwrecks*.

**July/August -- Summer hiatus**

Executive Board meetings and General meetings are suspended for the summer.

**January 27, 2019**

General Meeting  
2pm

It's so depressing to go out on a Wednesday night in January, we decided to try a special Sunday daytime meeting. Speaker TBD.

Do you have a suggestion for a future speaker? Or do you yourself have a topic you'd like to present at one of our meetings? Please drop us a line at [history@jhs.necoxmail.com](mailto:history@jhs.necoxmail.com) or leave a message at (401) 231-3380.



As of this month our Facebook page has 840 followers! Have you 'liked' us yet? To find us type this address into your computer browser:

[www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical](http://www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical)

**Contribute To Our Newsletter!**

We are always looking for articles for our newsletter. Naturally, we would like pieces that have to do with the town's history, but if you have an interest that ties in with history somehow, why not share it with us? Maybe you collect old snuffboxes or old railroad material. Maybe you have done some of your family history that others might be interested in. Maybe you would like to talk about the old days in Johnston. Wouldn't it be fun to share your knowledge! You do not have to be a great writer to put together an article. None of us are great literary figures. If you need help though, one of us would be glad to assist you.

We think that it will make for a much better newsletter if others contribute pieces that they have written. Remember, your reminiscences about the old days in Johnston will become valuable pieces of our town's history. But if you do not get them down on paper, they will be lost forever. We should make sure that future generations know what went on in times past.

**Next newsletter deadline: July 15, 2018.**

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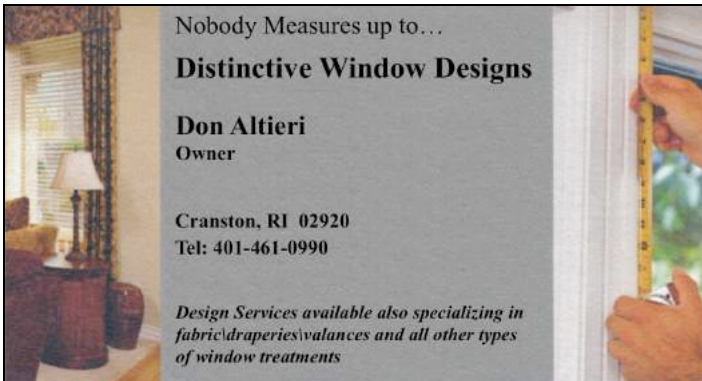
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President: Louis McGowan  
Vice-President: Dan Brown  
Treasurer: Joe Jamroz  
Recording Secretary: Elise Carlson  
Corresponding Secretary: Christopher Martin  
Trustees: Steve Merolla, Doug Stephens, Marie Thierfelder, and Anthony Ursillo.

Our Executive Board meets at 7pm in the Museum building, 101 Putnam Pike, on the second to the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (except December). All are welcome to attend.

General Meetings are held at 7pm the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (no December meeting. We hold our Holiday Party that month). The meetings are held in the Museum Barn.

Phone: (401) 231-3380  
Website: www.JohnstonHistorical.org  
Email: History@JHS.necoxmail.com  
Facebook: www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical

**Annual Dues**

Have you paid your 2015 dues yet? Your dues help us to operate. The price of a single membership is only \$20; a family membership is only \$30. Wotta bargain! So once more, please pay your 2015 dues. Send us a check today!

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