

# Newport

*this week*

VOL. 24, No. 33

## Harp Donnelly Speaks

by John McPadden

Bateman Avenue is one of the most interesting roads in the city. It winds and twists over hilly terrain in a setting typical of Newport, a community noted for its tree-lined streets and attractive neighborhoods.

The houses on Bateman Avenue are fairly perfect in their location. A mock Tudor sprawls alongside a bandbox of a house which abuts a Cape Cod home situated next to a shingled ranch. There seems to be something for everyone on Bateman Avenue, and that, along with the settled stillness of the place, gives this Fourth Ward district of town its own particular charm. Not too long ago, the Fourth Ward was the Fifth Ward.

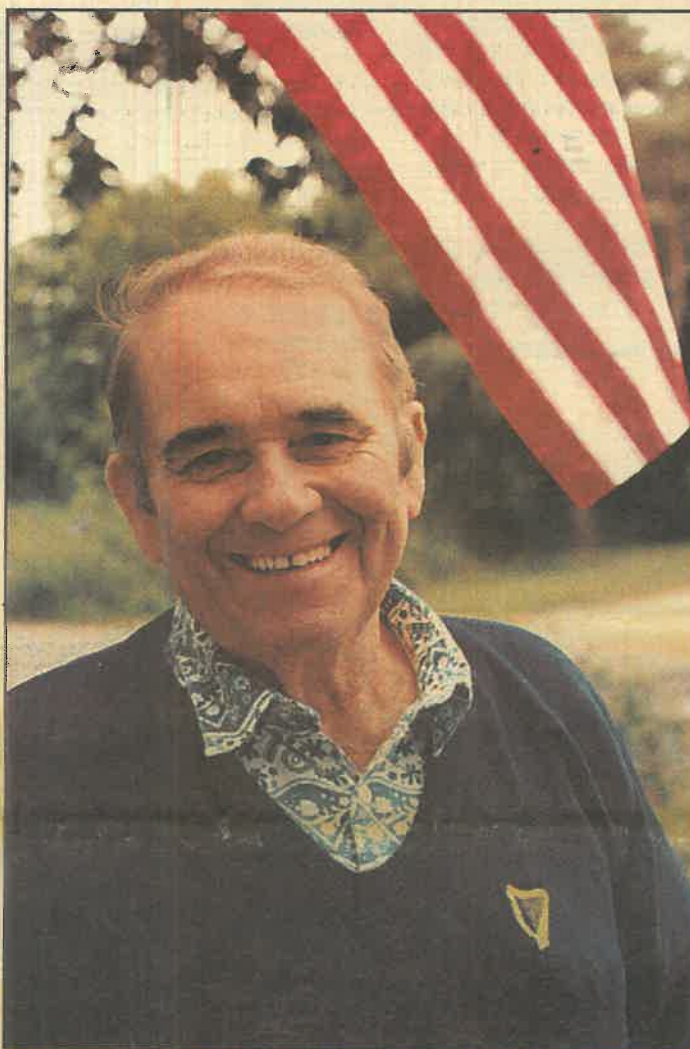
The man I was on my way to see last Sunday was once Mayor of all the wards and all the people of Newport. He is also a man I hadn't seen in quite some time and I was anxious to shake his hand, look into his blue eyes, and find out if that million dollar smile was as warm and real as ever.

The small, immaculately kept house at 39 Bateman Avenue is where Humphrey J. Donnelly III has lived for the past three years. The house and its occupant are perfectly suited; they both reflect welcome, warmth, and a wonderful peace. In a moment, the Mayor puts you at ease; you settle back, relax and listen to the man who for ten uninterrupted years served as Newport's first citizen - Mayor Harp Donnelly.

Harp's father, Humphrey J. Donnelly Jr., was a native of County Kerry, Ireland (hence the name Harp), and his mother, Edna Grace Winters, was born in Newport. One of six brothers and two sisters, Harp himself was born in Newport in 1930, and passed his early years in the family home on Simmons Street. "I really was born in the Fifth," Harp said, referring to that special part of Newport that is home turf to many of the city's large Irish population.

His school years were spent at St. Mary's, de la Salle Academy and Rogers High. He graduated from high school in 1948, and went to work for his uncle's cleaning firm, Valetaria, on

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His honor Humphrey J. Donnelly III. (Lisette Prince photo)

## Coaches Set To Roll In Newport

By Bob Ottaviano

The flavor of Newport in its heyday returns to the streets tomorrow, as the City by the Sea hosts A Weekend of Coaching on August 16-18.

Elegant coaches, each drawn by a team of four horses, will clippity-clop along Bellevue Avenue, Ocean Drive and environs on Friday and Saturday. A Sunday drive that begins on



Guard Richard O'Donnell announces John M. Seabrook's arrival on his coach, "Nimrod," at the Elms in 1992. Seabrook is president of the American Coaching Club and vice-president of the English Coaching Club. (Lisette Prince photo)

Bellevue will bring the parade as far as Sachuest (Second) Beach in Middletown.

Coach drivers, called "whips," faithfully preserve the traditions of the mid-19th century, when the art of handling "the ribbons," as the reins are called, became a gentleman's sport in England. The top hats and morning coats that modern whips wear are in most cases identical to those worn by coachmen of the Victorian era, although women guests are encouraged to wear up-to-date fashions.

"I think it's a very exciting event, because it's so colorful," said Monique Panaggio, public relations director for the Preservation Society of Newport County. With support from Sotheby's auction house, the Society is sponsoring Coaching Weekend, hosting whips from around the United States as well as representatives from England and France.

This will be the eighth such event held in Newport since the 1960s, when the tradition was revived by local enthusiasts Chauncey Stillman and John Winslow. The city's first coaching parades were unofficial social events in the 1880s, but within a few years The Coaching Club (of New York) took over and announced annual dates well in advance.

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## Hurley's, The Spotlight, and Jazz Festivals

by John McPadden

This weekend, August 16-18, the 13th Annual JVC Newport Jazz Festival comes to town. As always, George Wein, the festival's venerable producer, is presenting a bang-up show that includes some of the finest musicians ever to hit a stage. Old favorites like Manhattan Transfer, Chick Corea, Al Jarreau and Herbie Hancock, are slated to appear, as is the young dynamo David Sanchez whose saxophone transcends just about every cultural barrier known to man. Newport is set to welcome and cheer these jazz greats, bemoaning only the last-minute substitution of Vic Damone for an ailing Mel

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Newport Jazzman Norman Jackson. (Story on local jazz continued on page 20.) (Lisette Prince photo)



# Donnelly

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Thames Street. His job was cut, however with the outbreak of the Korean War. Harp, who had served in the Marine Corps Reserve from 1947-49, was drafted into the army in 1951. Legally blind in one eye and ineligible for combat duty, Harp was sent to Fort Drum in upstate New York. As a PFC at Fort Drum, Harp got a taste of things to come while he worked in the field commissary division. One day, he was abruptly ordered to take charge of the department, although the outfit included a sergeant and two corporals. PFC Harp Donnelly, the new Chief Issue clerk, had to determine the amount of food that each commissary was to get, and then he had to provide it. The negotiator in Harp surfaced during that tour of duty. "I had to wheel and deal," Harp laughed. "I was just like Sergeant Bilko."

While Harp was in the army, in 1952, he married the woman he loved, Barbara Ann Herrick of Newport. The following year, when he was mustered out of service, he returned to Newport and his old job at his uncle's cleaning shop. In 1954 he began working for the Newport Electric Company, first as a lineman and finally as a night watchman. His last position with Newport Electric was as a "Dig-say" man, in which capacity he was responsible for locating electric cables before any major digging up of streets or sidewalks was undertaken. He loved this job. "I got to go everywhere - Newport, Portsmouth, Middletown, Jamestown - I knew what was going on in all these places," Harp said. But then, Harp has always had a keen sense of what is going on; this natural talent would lead to politics and a long career as Mayor of the City of Newport.

It was Dan McCarthy, council member and owner of the Pad-dock Cafe (now the Mudville Pub) on Marlborough Street, who talked Harp into running his first race. McCarthy was leaving politics and he felt that Harp should take his place. "He was a working man on the council, and I thought maybe I ought to try it," Harp recalled. With a tinge of trepidation, he decided to run. He completed the necessary filing papers and was on his way to City Hall when a gust of wind blew the papers out the car window. He stopped the car and thought, "Shall I go after the papers, or shall I let them be and the heck with it?" Harp ran after those papers, ran for city council, and was elected as an at-large candidate in 1961.

Fred Alofsin was mayor in 1969, but when he stepped down two years later, George Weaver, father of present police chief Weaver, suggested to Harp that he try for the mayor's seat. Harp, who had occasionally stood in for Mayor Alofsin, decided to give it a try, and in 1971 he became Mayor of the City of Newport, a position he was to hold for the next ten years.

Harp's tenure was the longest of any Newport mayor serving under the City Manager form of government; Dean Lewis was the last "strong" mayor before the manager system took effect. Harp's first City Manager was B. Cowles Mallory. More were to follow, and the relationship Harp was able to develop in

working with the City Managers was to serve him, and his city, extremely well.

Harp's first two years as Mayor were easy compared to the upheaval that was to come in 1973. Newport and Aquidneck Island changed forever when the Navy pulled out or—more precisely—was ordered out. "It was strictly a political move," Harp said, "Rhode Island didn't support him (President Nixon) so he moved the fleet south. I remember getting a call from Senator Pell's office. I asked what was happening. 'Everything that floats is leaving the harbor,' they told me."

The move devastated Aquidneck Island, and Newport in particular. "One half of the downtown business community was in a shambles," Harp recalls. "Big and little businesses were moving away to Malls or closing down completely. There was a tremendous void downtown."

*"I couldn't understand why nothing was being done"*

Newport's economy had virtually collapsed, and with the fall went untold numbers of jobs and more than 17,000 families forced to leave the area. That terrible time called for strength, determination and action. Harp and the municipal governments of Middletown and Portsmouth banded together to deal with the crisis. Sharing state aid, the three communities put aside politics and tackled the issues at hand. They founded the AIDC (Aquidneck Island Development Corporation) and soon established a new economic climate with the opening of such enterprises as the John Clarke Industrial Park in Middletown. Tourism was promoted, and the area began to make a slow comeback. Newport was about to enjoy a renaissance.

The mid-to-late '70's were boom times for Newport. The America's Cup races brought in thousands of sailors and visitors, and, in conjunction with the nation's 200th birthday in 1976 and a visit to our harbor by dozens of majestic tall ships, worldwide attention was focused on Newport. Even Elizabeth II, Queen of England, sailed in on the royal yacht Britannia to officiate at the opening of a newly landscaped Queen Anne Square at the foot of Trinity Church. "It was a great time," Harp reminisced, "The races and trials brought in 'high-quality' tourists. You couldn't beat the publicity, it was incredible." So, the tourists came, and each year saw their numbers increase. With them came a surge in the economy...until, as Harp remembers, "The tide turned in the 80's and the economy fell apart once again."

The loss of the America's Cup had a lot to do with the downslide. Suddenly, jobs were being phased out in larger businesses, people were being transferred and not being replaced, everyone was cutting back, and, worst sign of all, prices of homes and apartments dropped drastically. "I couldn't understand why nothing was being done," Harp said. "No one was promoting business. In the 70's we began the AIDC to deal with eco-

nomie problems. It worked, but in the 80's, no one seemed to care. I think that was the start of party houses. Landlords were desperate to rent, to get all they could for three-month rentals in summer. Unfortunately, it got out of hand. Recent councils, though, are really trying to quiet things down. I believe eventually word will get out - if you want to come to Newport to enjoy yourself, fine, but don't make a mess. All that will take a little time, but I feel it will happen."

Looking to the future, Harp believes the most important key to Newport's future prosperity is more jobs. "I don't mean to oversimplify, but a lot of good jobs solve a lot of problems and help the economy. I don't know how people get by today. If I were on the council, or Mayor, I'd get after the State Economic Council and the Chamber of Commerce. We need to form a corporation again, like the AIDC. Even if initially we have to put up money, Federal, State and City, it will be an investment in the future. We also need to appeal to a higher quality of tourist, too, those that bring in more money. I ask you, how many of today's tourists do you see carrying suitcases and bags? Not many."

Harp leans forward when he says these words, as if eager to leap out of his chair and tackle his beloved city's problems head on. But he can't. Last February, doctors discovered an inoperable tumor and cirrhosis on his liver. Harp Donnelly has fought many battles in his political lifetime, but this personal struggle is unquestionably the toughest yet. He faces this illness with the quiet calm, dignity and strength given him by his Irish forebears, and like them he has no intention of just giving in. But it bothers Harp that he has lost the energy he—and everyone he has inspired—once took for granted. "This really knocked the wind out of my sails. I'm trying to get over this damn liver problem...I thought I could be more active than I am. There's my work for the ARC, the Association of Retarded Citizens out at the Maher Center, and the Navy League. I just wish I had more time to give."

One thing is absolutely certain. Whatever time Harp Donnelly has left to him on this earth, he'll be giving it away, just as he's always done. "Oh, yes, I'm going to be master of ceremonies at the testimonial for former City Clerk Jane McManus in a few weeks...then I'd like to get working with Vin Arnold on the Newport Irish History Museum...then there are the great grandchildren...and next year's St. Patrick's Day parade love St. Paddy's, that's my happy day..."

There's a stone leaning against Harp's front door. It was given to him recently by his friend Bob Bighorn of Aquidneck Avenue Monuments. The rock that bears the inscription is as solid as Humphrey J. Donnelly himself, and its message is the man himself... "If you believe you can, you can!" ■

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