



The New Town Crier

Official Newsletter of the Historical Society of Bloomfield



BLOOMFIELD, NEW JERSEY 07003

October 2019

SAVE THE DATE

NEXT MEETING

Tuesday, October 22, 2019
7:30 PM

BLOOMFIELD CIVIC CENTER

84 Broad Street
Bloomfield, NJ

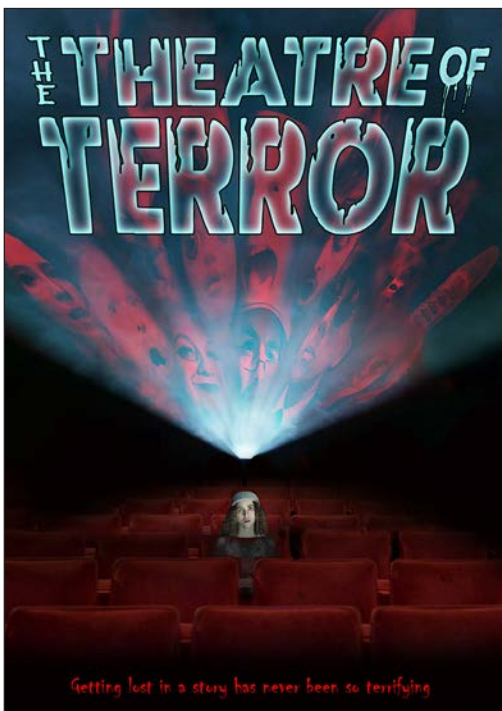
THEATRE OF TERROR

Shooting Horror Films in Bloomfield

Presented by

Bloomfield filmmaker Tom Ryan

Join Bloomfield filmmaker Tom Ryan as he discusses using beloved town landmarks Oakeside Bloomfield Cultural Center and Bloomfield Center—as well as other nearby locales, such as the Glen Ridge Library—as the backdrop for his 2018 horror anthology “Theatre of Terror.” Learn the highlights and challenges of filming a movie in Bloomfield. DVDs/ Blue Ray discs will be available for sale.



Can you identify?

Where in Bloomfield is this house? This is how it appeared in 1975. Check out the Volkswagen Beetle (circa 1966) and Ford Econoline van (1968 or 1969) out front. If you can guess the address, email info@HSOB.org with “Can you identify” in the subject line.



It was a beautiful day for baseball as a crowd of approximately 60 people joined the HSOB on September 28 to welcome The Bloomfield Buzzards Vs. The Hoboken Nine in an action-packed game of vintage baseball at Wright’s Field. Playing by 19th Century rules, Bloomfield trounced Hoboken 17–7, but all was well in the end as the teams joined for a photo in the spirit of friendly competition.

Photo by Tina Caridad



The Morro Castle Disaster and the Bloomfield Connection

By Mark Scurman

On the morning of September 8, 1934 George Rodgers—Bayonne resident and Chief Radio Engineer of the ocean liner *SS Morro Castle*—had his hands full. He was awakened by the smell of smoke coming from the ship about 3:30am. The *Morro Castle* was homeward bound from an 8-day cruise to Havana, Cuba and about 20 miles from the shoreline of New Jersey. Rodgers quickly took control of the radio room and started to send an SOS to the Coast Guard. Suddenly a wire disconnected from the generator after batteries exploded and the room filled with smoke and flames. It was an hour later that distress signals were finally sent.

Meanwhile, the ship's bridge was in chaos and on fire. The crew was also battling a horrible Nor'easter, and they weren't familiar with the fire-fighting equipment. Acting Captain William Warms (Captain Robert Willmott had died of a heart attack the night before) also made the fateful decision to turn the ship into the direction of the wind, fanning the flames of the doomed ship.

When it was obvious the *Morro Castle* was beyond saving, the underpaid stewards and assistant crew members were the first to flee, leaving the passengers to fend for themselves, escaping in the under-filled lifeboats that hadn't caught fire. By the time ships in the area arrived to help, it was too late for many who remained on the ship, most jumping into the waters of the Atlantic hoping for survival. Many burned to death. About 180 people lost their lives that morning—the total count was never determined.

The *Morro Castle* remains one of the most costly marine disasters along the east coast of the United States, and mystery still surrounds the doomed liner. Anyone who was around New Jersey in 1934 remembers the ship washing onto the Asbury Park Beach, still smoking and lifeless. It became a morbid attraction for many in the area.

Robert William Garner was born in Bloomfield in December of 1913. He was the son of Minnie (nee Beuzing) and William, a plumber who resided at 89 Bay Ave. They were married in 1913. Robert was their

first child. He had two sisters: Ilene (b.1916) and Jean (b. 1919). Robert was also the grandson of Samuel Garner, Bloomfield's Building Inspector in the 1930s.

Robert William Garner lived at 89 Bay Avenue. At age 18, he told his father he wanted to go to sea, but his father refused to let him. Two weeks before the *Morro Castle* disaster, 20-year-old Robert announced to his parents that he had signed to sail on the *Morro Castle* and would leave for New York the next day. His father was not pleased but told Robert since he was so anxious to go, it was probably best to get it out of his system now. The father's fateful words to him were "that it would serve him right if he had a rough voyage and maybe that would take the lure of the sea out of him." He was employed on the *Morro Castle* as an oiler, cleaning the machinery in the engine room and lubricating the engines. It was his first ocean voyage.

No one can say for sure what his final hours were like once he knew the ship was doomed. Everyone aboard ship was fighting to get up the stairwells that were consumed with fire and trying to stay alive. Being below in the engine room, it must have been a horrific ordeal to get up five flights and out of harm's way.

He was a strong swimmer. We do know he jumped from the burning ship, but from the coroner's report, he might have knocked himself out when hitting the water. The coroner said there were bruises on his cheek and back of the neck that seem to indicate his life preserver might have struck him a hard blow, causing the injury. When he washed ashore, members of the local rescue squad, seeing a spark of life in him, had tried to revive him for more than an hour, but the final cause of death was drowning. He almost made it home. From the rough waters and storm, it was estimated it would take about 7 hours to swim from the ship to land.

When Garner was reported missing, his parents rushed to the shore with William's brother James and friend Edward Welt, a mechanic and aviator. They had hoped Robert was one of the two crewmen that had been picked up by rescue boats, but he was not. His body was identified on Sept 10th in Sea Girt, NJ. Robert William Garner was the only resident of Bloomfield who perished in the disaster.

In 2009, a memorial service commemorating the 75th anniversary of the disaster was held by the Asbury Park Historical Society on the shore of Asbury Park. Many who gathered there did not know each other but had heard stories of their relatives perishing aboard the ship. Attending the service was Robert Garner, current co-owner of Garner Brothers Plumbing & Heating in Bloomfield, who came to pay respect to his Great Uncle. All the names of the confirmed dead were read aloud.

"It's like it's me. It was my name being called," Garner was quoted in the *Asbury Park Press*. "I still own the house where he grew up!"

In 2019, while cleaning out the plumbing shop, current employee Anthony Garner noticed initials carved in the cement in the back of the building: "R.G. 7-29." Showing it to his father Bruce and Uncle Robert, they came to the conclusion that it was their Great Uncle Robert who wrote it when he was 15 years-old, five years before he met his demise aboard the *Morro Castle*.

Sometimes family history shows up where you least expect it... these initials, scrawled in cement, unknown for 90 years, are a reminder of a life once lived and lost too soon.

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General Joseph Bloomfield

THE NEW TOWN CRIER

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF
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OF BLOOMFIELD

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First phonograph in Bloomfield played at “Aunt” Louise Sharp House

Park Avenue on the southwest corner of State Street

Originally a part of the N.H. Dodd estate, by 1871, William Sharp was living here. The first phonograph in Bloomfield was played at this site. “Aunt” Louise Sharp was born here and died here in the late 1930s.

Image courtesy of Van Tassel Funeral Home. Photo by Richard Rockwell..



The HSOB collection of historic photographs of Bloomfield houses from the Nathan Russell Collection has been expanded and reorganized.

We now have over 270 photos of houses in Bloomfield digitized and enhanced from the original glass plate negatives. The photos can be searched and viewed by street address.

Visit www.HSOB.org and click “Photo Galleries” for more details.

The Welcome Mat

A cordial welcome is extended to the following new members of The Historical Society of Bloomfield. We hope to see you at our next meeting:

Lucy Gambino
Bloomfield

Adam P. Japhet
Bloomfield

Katie Napolitano
Bloomfield