

Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

April 9, 2020

Volume 3, Issue 7

Out of Town Workers in Industrial Downingtown

In 1956, a study was done by Downingtown Borough Manager Robert McKinney on the town's industrial employers. Borough Council instructed McKinney to conduct the survey to bring the occupational tax list up to date and to find out where employees of the town's industries were coming from. Questionnaires were returned to McKinney from 14 large industrial employers and several small ones.

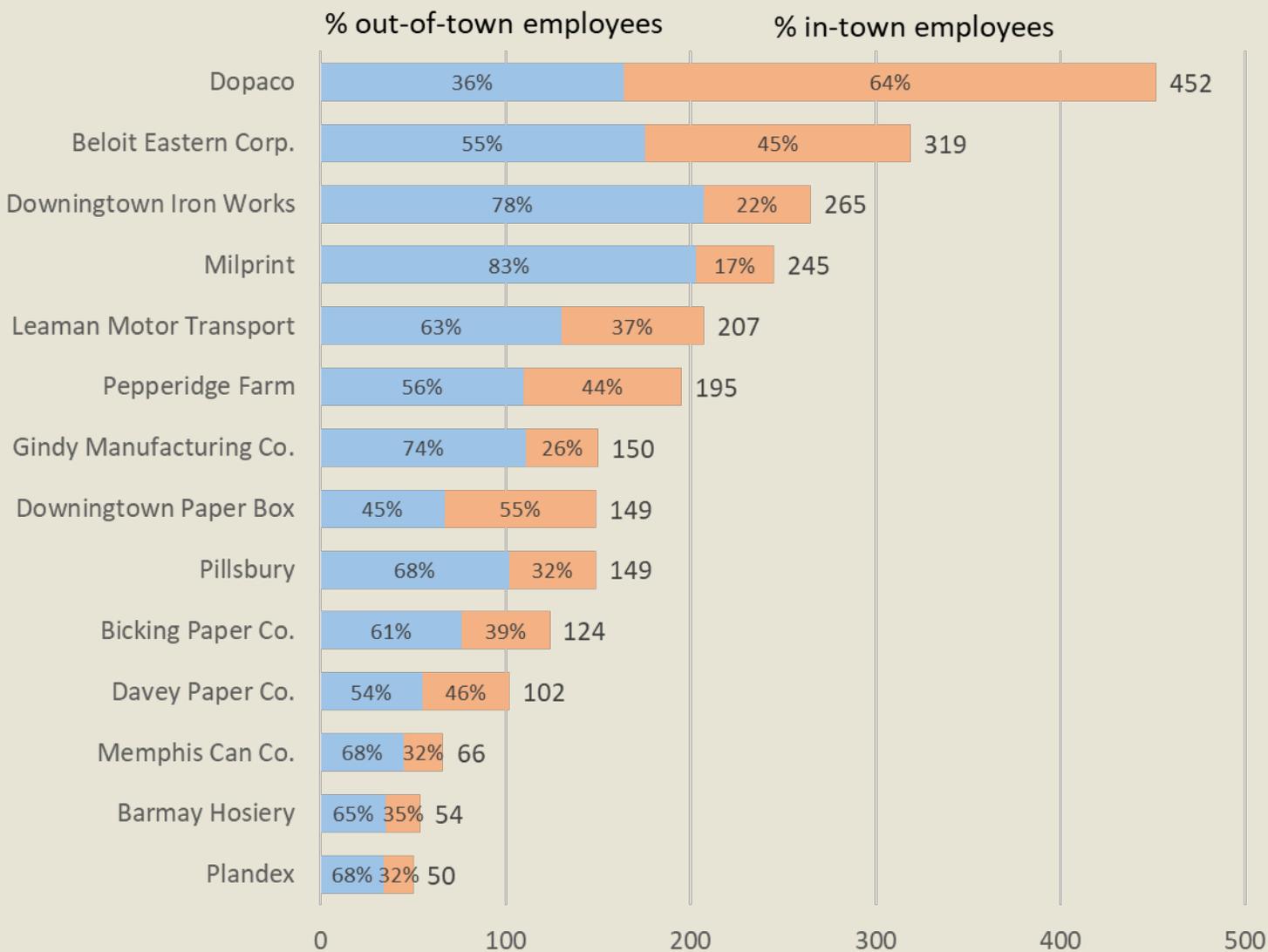
The results showed that a "jolting lopsided ratio" of industrial employees lived outside Downingtown, most coming from either West Chester or Coatesville. In 1956, about two-thirds (67%) of employees working in Downingtown's industrial firms came from outside of the Borough. Just one-third lived within the Borough limits. Milprint, which later became Reynolds Packaging, was one of Downingtown's newest factories in 1956, but only 17% of its 245 employees lived in town. Similarly, Downingtown Iron Works, which was located on Wallace Avenue where Rite Aid is now, counted just 58 (or 22%) of its 265 employees as town residents. On the other hand, one of Downingtown's oldest and largest firms at the time was Dopaco (or the Downingtown Paper Company) and of its employees, 64% lived in the Borough.



The Milprint plant on Lincoln Avenue is seen here in the 1950s. This photograph and those on the next three pages were taken by Don Greenleaf.

(continued on next page)

Though it was not its purpose, the study nevertheless revealed what many had been thinking – that Downingtown had a severe housing shortage, and this in turn had an impact on the commercial establishments in the Borough. “Once an employee leaves Downingtown, chances of his returning to spend a portion of his salary, however large or small, is very remote”, the Downingtown Archive wrote at the time. The paper went on to encourage businessmen and the Chamber of Commerce to bring new housing to Downingtown where employees could live closer to their jobs and spend their earnings at the town’s stores and restaurants.



The chart above shows the results of a study done by Downingtown Borough manager Robert McKinney in 1956. McKinney surveyed the industrial companies in Downingtown to determine how many of their employees lived within the Borough limits and how many lived elsewhere. Most of the town’s industries responded to the survey.

This wasn’t the first time Downingtown faced a housing shortage. In the late 1800s and early 1900s local business leaders also noted a lack of quality affordable housing. As Downingtown transformed from an agricultural to industrial town, it did not have the housing to accommodate all the new workers needed to run the factories and mills. New developments built during that time included 20 small homes which became East Church Street and 11 homes on Viaduct Avenue by West Lancaster Avenue. When the issue arose again in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, Downingtown once again responded to the housing shortage. Hundreds of new housing units were built across the Borough including the Lake Drive area in the east end of town and along Pennsylvania Avenue, Highland Avenue, William Street, Mary Street and Church Street in the west end of town.

(continued on next page)



Taken in the mid-1950s these photographs show Garfield Avenue (above) and Pennsylvania Avenue (below).



(continued on next page)



The photograph above was taken in the mid-1950s and shows the Beloit Eastern plant which was located west of Green Street between Washington and Jefferson Avenues. The site is now Main Street Village. The photograph below shows Downtown Iron Works on Wallace Avenue. Rite Aid is now on the site.



Downingtown Then & Now

The Lancaster Pike toll house in Downingtown is seen here in the top image ca. 1900. Based on several old maps we were able to pinpoint the location (or as close as we could get) of the old toll house and take a photo in the same location (bottom image). The Turnpike opened in 1795 and was the first of its kind in the country... a long-distance paved road that collected tolls for usage. It was 62 miles and connected Philadelphia with Lancaster. Some mile markers can still be seen here and there. The road saw a significant decline in usage and maintenance in the latter half of the 1800s due to the railroad but picked up again in the early 1900s with automobile use. It eventually became part of the Lincoln Highway system. Tolls were collected until 1917 when the Turnpike was purchased by Pennsylvania's Highway Department.



Made in Downingtown

In 1979, Business Arts Signs on West Lancaster Avenue in Downingtown painted a sign that was displayed on top of a World War II weapons carrier that was in Philadelphia as part of a demonstration supporting the 50 hostages held in Iran. Co-owners of the business, Harry Crosson (driving) and John Morris (standing), are seen with the sign outside their business. Photo originally printed in the *East Branch Citizen*.



Downingtown Did-You-Know?

Did you know that in 1948 Downingtown was the only municipality between Lancaster and Philadelphia with police on duty 24 hours a day? At the time there were only four police officers working in the borough and each worked a 48-hour week. The starting pay for an officer in Downingtown was \$2,400 a year.

There was also only one squad car and it didn't have a police radio. If the police were needed after the day shift ended a light went on outside Borough Hall. When the officer on duty drove by and saw that the light was on, he went into the police department and called the local Bell Telephone office which was on Green Street and the operator would provide the officer the details of the call.



Downingtown's Dogs

Downingtown's first dog ordinance was enacted on May 8, 1882. Specifics of the ordinance were:

- Downingtown's Chief of Police was responsible keeping a register of all the dogs in the Borough. The register would include the name of the dog's owner, species, size, color, and any other identifiable markings.
- Yearly payment for each dog registered was \$1. Once received, the Chief of Police would give the owner a metal tag with a hole in it to hanging around the dog's neck. The tag would be impressed with the year issued and the letter "R".
- It was the responsibility of the Chief Burgess (mayor) to appoint as many people as needed "for the purpose of causing to be caught, killed, and buried" all unregistered dogs running at large in the Borough.
- Once impounded, owners had 24 hours to reclaim their unregistered dog along with a payment of \$2 to the Chief of Police and \$1 to the person who impounded the dog. After 24 hours the dog was supposed to be killed and buried. If an owner could, to the satisfaction of the Burgess, show the dog was registered, then the \$2 payment was waived but \$1 still needed to be paid to the impounder.
- If a person allows a dog on his premises to "give reasonable cause of annoyance to any person by barking or howling" that person would be fined \$5. Half of the fine would be paid to the Borough and half to the person who made the complaint.
- If a person stole a tag from one dog and placed it on their own dog, or if a tag was placed on a dog for which it was not issued, the owner would be fined \$5 with half going to the Borough and half to the informer.
- The owner of any female dog running at large in the Borough while in heat was to be fined \$10. Half would be paid to the Borough and half to the informer.



An Expensive Coffee Break

In June 1957, Samuel Crawford, a 1943 graduate of Downingtown High School, took an expensive coffee break at his job. Crawford grew up at 517 West Pennsylvania Avenue, but was living out-of-state at the time. He was an avid coin collector who kept most of his collection in his bank's safe deposit box but liked to keep some of his coins in his desk at work as conversational pieces. When he decided to have a coffee break one day, he reached into his drawer for the small change he kept there and used it in his office's vending machine. Before he finished his break, he realized the nickel he took was a rare post-Civil War nickel valued at the time at \$18. He contacted the vending company which made a diligent search for it but was never located.



In The (Old) News – Items that Made Headlines Back in the Day

1871 – Ten persons of the McGraw family in Downingtown nearly died from carbon monoxide poisoning the night of February 16. The entire family were “greatly stupefied, some of them being rendered insensible, and all subjected to violent bilious vomiting and diarrhea.” The cause was the pipe of a coal stove that was pushed too far into the chimney which caused the draft to stop.

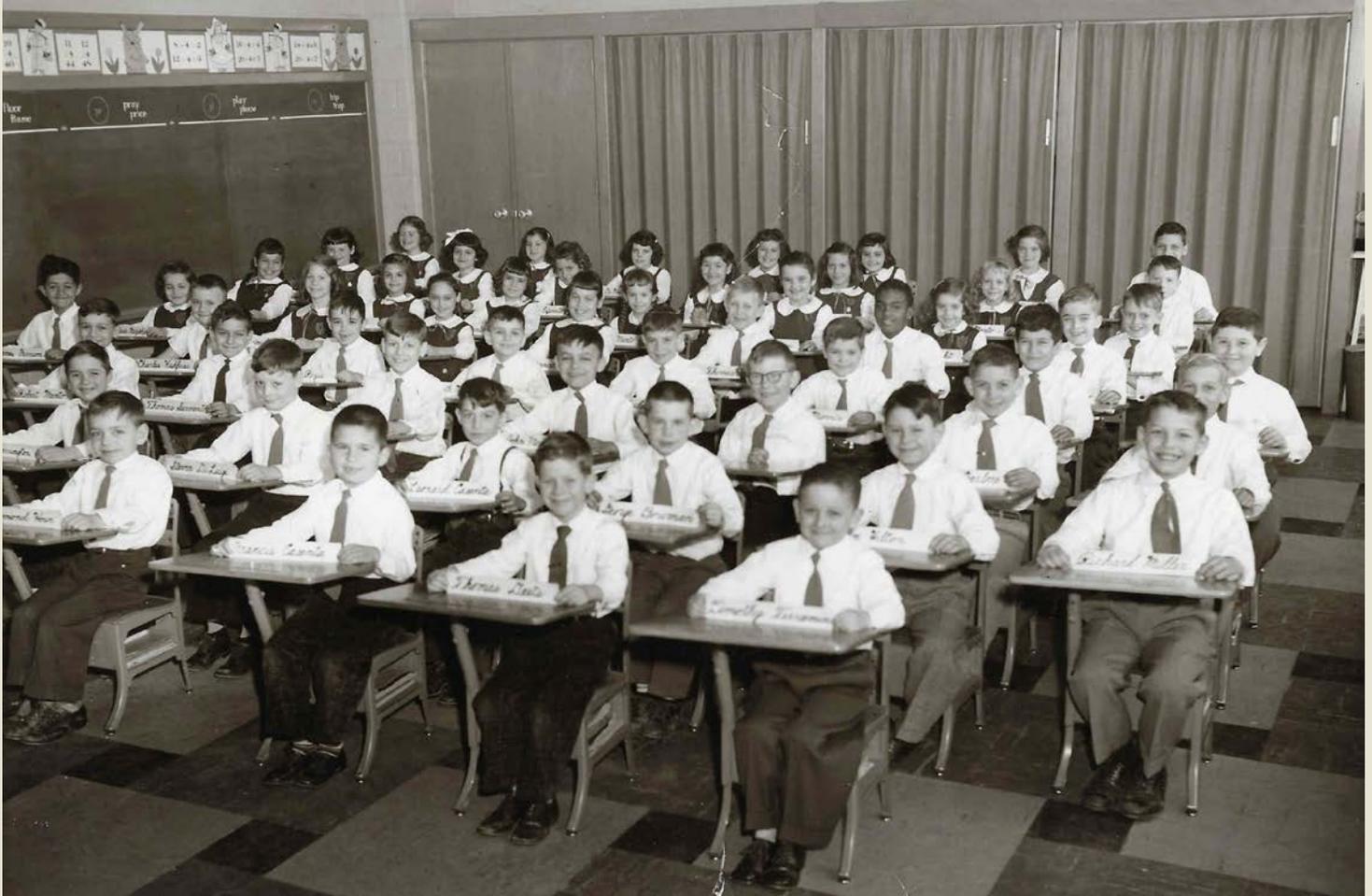
1907 – On the night of April 23, thieves broke into the store of Lewis Carton and stole shoes, clothing, neckties and watches. To add insult to injury, before they left Carton’s store, the thieves changed out of the old clothes and into the stolen clothes, leaving the old clothes behind.

1939 – In May, a court decided that the Reading Railroad had to pay its share of the cost of the new Chestnut Street Bridge that had burned down several years earlier. Though the Reading only had one set of tracks going under the bridge (compared with the Pennsylvania Railroad which had at least half of dozen) the judge ruled it still needed to share the cost and was ordered to pay \$3,000.

1979 – In January, someone broke into the “New” East Ward School on East Lancaster Avenue by breaking a window. Several school offices were entered and ransacked. Stolen items included a saxophone, trumpet, electric typewriter and a radio. The “Old” East Ward School next to it was also broken into but nothing was reported missing.

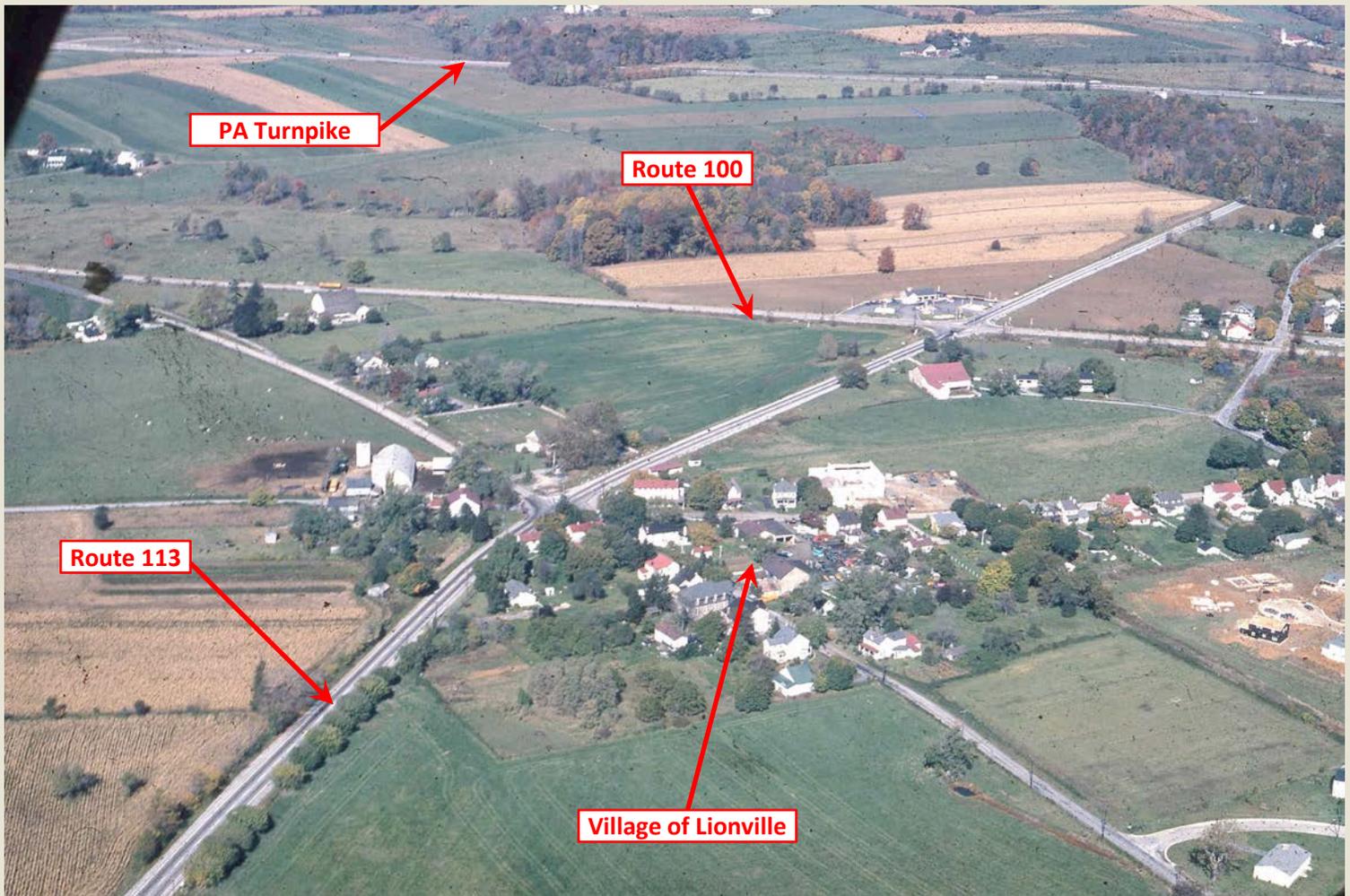
Downingtown Area Group Photo

The image below was sent to us by Camillo (Rocky) Pizii of his class at St. Joseph School. Rocky, who is in the left center of the photograph, wasn’t exactly sure of the year but thought it might be 1956 or 1957 when he was in second or third grade. If anybody is positive about the class and year, please let us know.



Downingtown Area From Above

The photo below was taken by former Borough Manager Don Greenleaf in 1966 of the Lionville area.



Downingtown Students Ride the Aerotrain

The Aerotrain was a demonstrator project built by the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors in the mid 1950s. The streamlined trainset had a futuristic design and went into service on several railroads including the Pennsylvania Railroad between New York and Pittsburgh in February 1956.

In April of that year, the fourth and fifth grade students at Downingtown's West Ward School had the opportunity to ride the Aerotrain. Parents of the students drove them to Paoli where they were dropped off to wait for the train. The students took the train from Paoli to Coatesville. When passing by Downingtown, the kindergarten and first grade classes waved from the school field by the tracks at their fellow students riding the train. The students then got off the train and were taken back to Downingtown by their parents who had driven there from Paoli.



The Aerotrain is seen here at Paoli in an undated photo.

Last Issue's Mystery Pic

Karin Dooley is a truly perceptive scholar because she was the first person to identify the location below as the Whitford Country Club at its ribbon cutting ceremony in June 1957.



Downingtown Area Mystery Pic

Can you identify the location in this photograph? The first person to correctly identify the location of this photo will be recognized as a truly perceptive scholar. Please send your response to: dahs19335@gmail.com.



Advertisements for Non-Profits

Due to COVID-19 most, if not all, events that the Historical Society has posted for non-profits have been cancelled. When you reopen or when your event has been rescheduled please email the information to the Historical Society at dths1709@gmail.com to have your advertisement re-posted.

Historical Society's Wish List

The Downingtown Area Historical Society is a non-profit organization proudly maintaining the 311-year-old Ashbridge House and a large archives. The society can always use gifts in kind with an immediate need for:

- General household items and tools including:
 - Spade shovel
 - Light bulbs
 - Paper towels
 - Large and small trash bags
- Amazon gift cards or gift cards to Home Depot or Lowes. Sometimes we need to make quick purchases so gift cards would come in very handy.

To make a tax-deductible cash donation, use this link or send a check to the address below. Thank you!



Downingtown Area Historical Society

P.O. Box 9, Downingtown, PA 19335

610-269-1709

dths1709@gmail.com

<https://www.downingtownhistory.org>

Like us on Facebook:



Check out our *Then & Now* series on YouTube:



DAHS Board of Directors

President: Jim Sundman

Vice President: Phil Dague

Recording Secretary: Marion Piccolomini

Treasurer: Lauren Fagan

Directors: Mike Dunn, Robin Ashby, Jordan Staub,
Virginia Coates

Presidents Emeritus: Roger Grigson, Parry Desmond