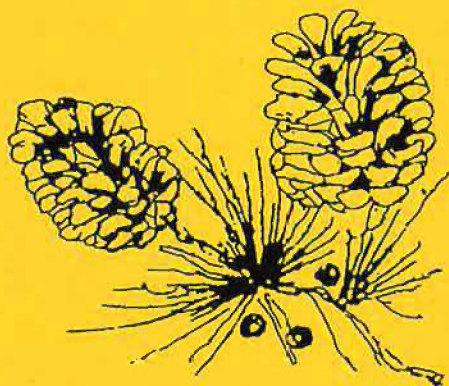
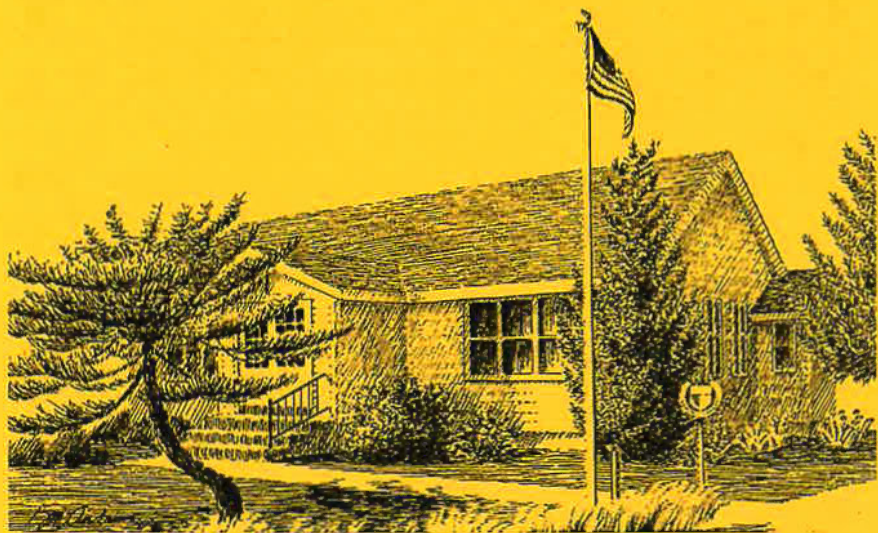


*Village Improvement  
Association*

**A History – 100 Years**



**1909 - 2009**



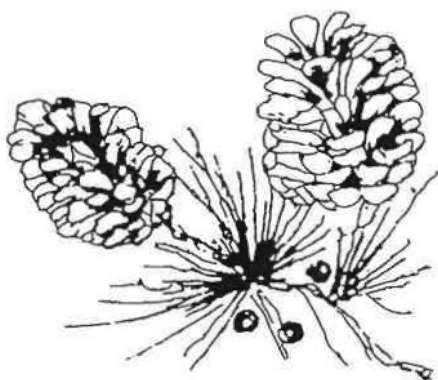
Sketch by D. M. Andrew

### ***Pledge to the Flag***

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands; One Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

# *Village Improvement Association*

## **A History – 100 Years**



**Published**

2009

**Publisher**

Village Improvement Association

*With deep appreciation and most sincere thanks  
for financial underwriting of this book from the  
**Rehoboth Beach Homeowners Association***





Photo by Barbara Beatty

*Welcoming members and guests to the  
VIA Clubhouse in 2009 are  
(l to r) Treasurer Suzanne Jones,  
Centennial Historian Judy Palmer,  
Past President Faith Duncan and  
President Pamela Blessinger.*

## ***Prayer For Our Club***

ALMIGHTY GOD, whose great commandment is that we love our neighbors as ourselves, and who has taught us that we should do to others as we would have them do to us, we ask Your blessing upon the work of this Club. Our purpose is to help our fellow man and promote all that is good in the life of our community, so we pray that You will strengthen our hands in all our undertakings, and that our work may spread the spirit of fellowship and goodwill among all men. AMEN

### **1909 Officers**

President	Mrs. Harry Newmau
Vice President	Mrs. Frederick A. Ross
Secretary	Mrs. A. W. Dick
Corresponding Secretary	Miss Lida Lindall
Treasurer	Mrs. E. B. Riley
Auditor	Miss Effie Truit

### **2009 Officers**

President	Pam Blessinger
1 <sup>st</sup> Vice President	Susie Dominguez
2 <sup>nd</sup> Vice President	Carolyu Billingsley
Recording Secretary	Kathy Nave
Corresponding Secretaries	Barbara Gehlert
	Fay Kempton
Treasurer	Suzanne Jones

## ***To Last A Hundred Years***

To last a hundred years,  
A building must be made of concrete and steel

To last a hundred years,  
A song must be versatile

To last a hundred years,  
A road must be going the right way

To last a hundred years,  
A painting must be loved and pampered

To last a hundred years,  
A tree must be nourished

To last a hundred years,  
A poem must be relevant

To last a hundred years,  
An organization must be all these things

To last a hundred years,  
A club must be the VIA

By Pamela Blessinger, President

# **VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION: A HISTORY – 100 YEARS**

## ***The Early Years***

At the turn of the twentieth century, Rehoboth Beach was a quaint church camp village and a summer residence to many who valued the ocean's healing powers. Just as today, it was Delaware's premier beach town and was a prime vacation and honeymoon destination. And just as today, improvements were needed. In those early days, it was not the idyllic, clean and charming beach community we now enjoy. Transportation traffic was mostly horses, wagons and buggies. Women with long skirts and fragile shoes, found walking in the town a messy challenge. There were no paved sidewalks or crosswalks, street lamps, lifeguards, benches or trash cans. Lake Gerar was a smelly trash swamp and Silver Lake was a mosquito breeding ground.

In order to address some of the unpleasant and unsightly problems of the day, a number of lady friends made a courageous decision to join together to improve Rehoboth. They met and in December of 1909 formulated the Village Improvement Association. So, with humble beginnings, lofty intentions and positive action, this group of Victorian women sought to right the problems they felt beset their beloved village. At that time in our nation's history, women could not vote but certainly were not powerless!

One of the first things the newly formed Village Improvement Association tackled was the lack of sidewalks and the ladies were able to convince town leaders to add crosswalks and sidewalks complete with crushed stone. This was not exactly altruistic, because they were frustrated getting their long skirts dirty nearly everywhere they went. The ladies worked hard to raise the sidewalk money through lawn fetes, tag days, minstrel shows, card parties and bazaars. By 1910, these new walkways were implemented, in particular on First Street as well as around Lake Gerar so passage was cleaner and safer.

Not to rest on their laurels, in 1911 they saw to adding a concrete plaza in front of the Rehoboth Public School, the purchase and



placement of benches on the boardwalk and rubbish cans around the town and by 1912 had established the town's first public library, supported entirely by the Club and private donations until 1942 when a library commission was formed to collect state and local funds as well as private donations. The VIA still supports the Rehoboth Beach Public Library with an annual grant for new books as well purchasing books in memory of deceased members.

Another problem for women of the early twentieth century was bathing attire that covered much of their bodies. When the suits became wet, they were very heavy and it became difficult to safely leave the surf and get back onto the beach without help. So, the ladies of the VIA solved this problem with a safety line from the ocean to the beach in order for the bathers to pull themselves out of the water. Ingenuity was a hallmark for VIA thinking! See a problem, find and fund a solution. Each idea and subsequent drive to bring fruition of that idea, required planning, many meetings, cooperation, hard work as well as money - funds raised by the women.



Photograph Courtesy of Delaware Public Archives

*VIA funded the building of a surf safety line so bathers with heavy, water-logged bathing suits could pull themselves out of the water and onto the beach.*

In 1912, Mrs. Frederick A. Ross, VIA's second president, wrote, VIA was formed "...because of a genuine desire to promote moral and intellectual improvement; to foster, encourage and if possible to assist in all ways practicable in the improvement of Rehoboth Beach; to have the beach and pines made as clean and attractive as possible; in short, to make Rehoboth Beach a pleasant place in which to live year round and as delightful to our visitors as Delaware's only seashore resort should be."

Also during 1912, the VIA joined the fledgling Delaware State Federation of Women's Clubs (DSFWC) and in 1923, a VIA past President, Mrs. John McCabe, was elected President of the state organization. One of her accomplishments was the inclusion of all Delaware's Federated women's clubs into the General Federation of Women's Clubs. GFWC represents thousands of communities across the world by volunteers working to enhance the lives of their neighbors, making towns safer and more beautiful, and extending the hand of support and friendship to individuals near and far. All GFWC members are women of diverse interests, talents and backgrounds and are united by a dedication to community improvement through volunteer service. The VIA has remained a strong supporter of both DSFWC and GFWC and hope the next DSFWC President will be one of our own VIA past Presidents.

The minutes of those early years are riddled with amusing discussions. For example, in July of 1912, the ladies suggested to the town council "...that steps be taken to stop the annoyance of shooting on the Pier and in the city limits." It was also requested, "...speed limits be posted for automobiles and teams." Another of the many concerns for the ladies was the late hour that the lamp lighter was putting out the lights. They were chagrined when he explained, "I wait 'till my children are home before I turn out the lights." Other issues of public safety and decency were addressed over and over throughout the club's history.

In the 1920s the ladies turned their attention to mosquitoes. Many people joke today that the mosquito is Delaware's state bird, imagine what it would be like if the VIA had not declared War on the pesky insect back in 1923. The General in that war was Mary Wilson Thompson, a native of Wilmington, who summered in Rehoboth Beach. Mrs. Thompson was a very attractive lady, but also an

extremely formidable one. In her autobiography of 1937, she paints a vivid picture of life in our town, "The only blot upon the horizon seemed to be the mosquito question. When I first began to plant my garden, I did so with newspapers wrapped around my ankles, gloves on and a scarf wrapped around my neck. The situation was intolerable, and I was often forced to take refuge behind the screens." Mrs. Thompson began collecting money and cleaning up. "For three years, I raised all the money, kept the marshes and ditches clean, carted away and burned car loads of filth and refuse from the dunes, inspected every house in the village – with the result that for two years we had no mosquitoes."

Five years after the completion of her campaign, the Agricultural College of the University of Delaware surveyed the state and reported that Rehoboth Beach had the smallest number of mosquitoes of any town. Mrs. Thompson was overjoyed with the results even though she would be called the *Mosquito Lady* for the rest of her life. She also talked her friend and fellow VIA member, Mrs. Irene duPont, into cleaning up Lake Gerar. The site was more like a toxic swamp than a lake. Mr. and Mrs. duPont, who had a house overlooking Lake Gerar, spent \$80,000 to clean the site, stock the lake and build a bridge connecting the two sides of the town.

While Mrs. Thompson was tackling the mosquitoes, other VIA ladies decided to build a clubhouse. They had been meeting in the homes of individual members, Ann Hazzard's classroom at Rehoboth elementary school, as well in the forerunner to the Belhaven Hotel. The idea of a clubhouse of their own was much a part of their plans, even as early as 1911. They persuaded the town to deed them the lot next to the one leased for 99 years to the Pennsylvania Railroad organization. Early correspondence shows the same arrangement was expected by the VIA but the final papers came through giving the VIA the site for as long as it remained a viable social organization.

Mrs. Ralph Poynter, VIA President at that time, was not shy about asking for help. One history reports that members actually stopped men on the street, in stores or wherever the women met them to ask for building materials or furnishings at cost. Once the building site was selected, each member chipped in \$5 for the building costs, this was in addition to the \$1 dues. In 1925, Ralph Poynter was pressed

into service and built the clubhouse for \$2,644.88. Then the ladies collected furnishings, including two dozen chairs donated by Mr. T. Coleman duPont at a cost of just under \$50 and at one point all members were assessed thirteen (\$.13) cents for silverware. The clubhouse was completed and ready for use in 1926 and it took only eight years for the ladies to raise enough money to completely pay-off the mortgage, which was burned on October 26 of 1934.

Children and learning have always been a focus of the VIA. In 1930, a Well Baby Clinic was established on the premises and VIA members worked to establish the Rehoboth Day Care Center, put kindergarten classes in the public schools and begin a hot lunch program.

Mrs. Ethel Leach and her VIA arts and crafts committee put the clubhouse to good use. Mrs. Leach was a well known Delaware artist who had a home in the Pines area of Rehoboth. In 1929, she inaugurated the first art exhibition in our clubhouse with her paintings. The work of other artists such as Howard Schroeder and Jack Lewis were added next and later local and visiting artists were invited to participate. In 1944, Ann Hazzard was the art show chairwoman and paintings were submitted by Stanley Arthurs, William and Ethel Leach, Laussat Rogers, C. W. Strickland, Verda Rodney Dodd, Hannah Burtwell, and others. Also shown was an exhibition of weaving, embroidery, pewter, pottery and furniture refinishing. These art exhibitions continued for three weeks each summer until the great storm of 1962.

The Rehoboth Art League grew from Mrs. Leach's passion for art and her dream of having a place where art classes could be taught. In 1938, with her good friend, Louise Chambers Corkran, they founded the Rehoboth Art League. At the urging of Mrs. Corkran, Colonel Wilbur Corkran loaned a site for the first studio. This was a 2 room wing of an abandoned farm house built by William Paynter in about 1780 that was purchased by Col. Corkran for \$15. It was then moved to its current location where it was renovated and used as the Art League's first classroom. Upon her death, Mrs. Corkran left her house and land to the Art League. Because of this historic connection between two dear friends dedicated to the same passion for art and art education, the VIA President sits on the Art League Board.



photo courtesy of Amie Sloan.

*Ethel P. B. Leach painting in 1910*

Since beautification had always been a goal of the VIA, the 30s and 40s were golden years for VIA gardeners. Louise Chambers Corkran served as chairwoman of the flower shows held at the clubhouse. These events became very popular with residents and visitors alike, so much so, that other members worried the foot traffic at shows would wear out the new rugs! From Mrs. Corkran's gardening efforts, the Sussex Gardeners were formed and still continue to this day.

According to Ann Drummond's 85 Years of VIA History, "...around 1930, they (VIA) convinced the town commissioners to set aside a triangular plot ... on which to place the replica of the Old Cape Henlopen Lighthouse which had been serving as a real estate office." The ladies purchased it for \$30 and raised money to refurbish it, surround it with trees and shrubs so it could serve as a "beacon" to the growing town. Although the City took over maintenance of the lighthouse during the '70s, we still were responsible for painting it—no small job. Today it rests atop the berm in the entrance circle to Rehoboth Beach.

Temperance and decency were paramount for some VIA members, for in the 1920s bathing suit dances were protested. In 1933 the ladies requested a letter be sent to the Postmaster General requesting that people in bathing suits not be allowed on the post office premises. They also requested a letter be sent to the Town Council requesting that persons walking on the street in indecent bathing suits be arrested.

Life for the VIA ladies changed drastically during World War II. The entire shore line was placed on nightly blackouts as soldiers were moved into Fort Miles in Cape Henlopen State Park. The troops rode horses on patrol, racing up and down the beach. Women and children were ordered to stay off the beach at night. The ladies turned from flower beds to victory gardens and social hour became time for Red Cross classes and they started an emergency food bank.



VIA Archives Photograph

*The Cape Henlopen Lighthouse replica  
was purchased by the VIA in the 1930's.*

## *Mid-Century*

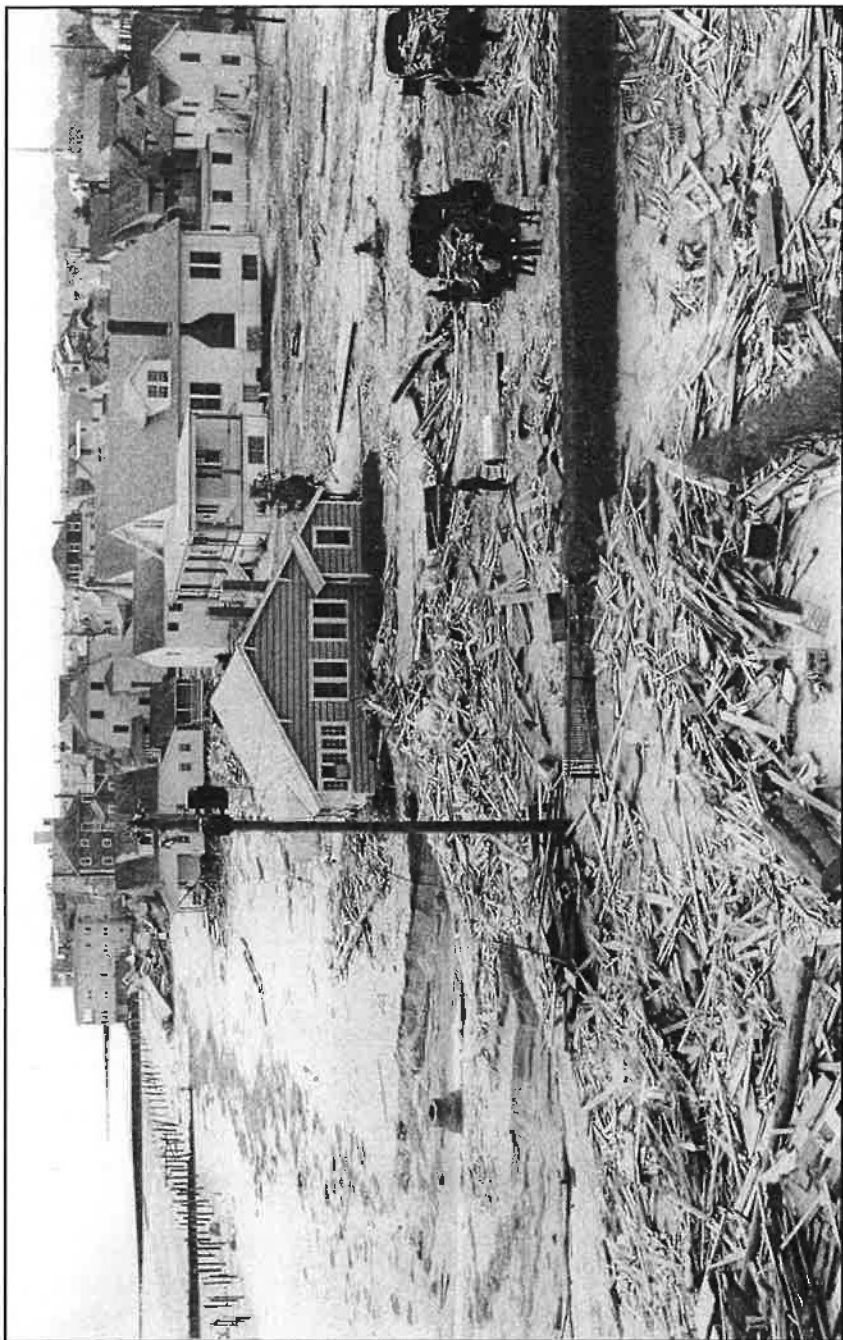
After the war, the women resumed their local charity work, art shows and town beautification projects. Major repairs and improvements were made to the clubhouse in 1958, just in time to be severely damaged by the storm of 1962. This Nor'easter sustained high winds during a full moon and high tides. It relentlessly whipped the shore for three days. The tireless club women rallied to collect treasures and safeguard them temporarily in their homes. After the storm, while there was nothing but devastation all around our little clubhouse, it sat relatively untouched as though a gentle light shone upon it and carried it through the storm, perhaps in some cosmic recognition of all the good it had seen throughout the years and all that was yet to be seen.

The clubhouse did, however, sustain significant damage and a vote was taken among the membership, should they stay and rebuild or find another location? The answer was strong, resounding and determined. Rebuild! According to Betty Barnes, "The women just worked their tails off to get the clubhouse back in order so we could meet there and continue to prove to the city that we were functioning well as a social group on that spot!"

The house was repaired at a cost of over \$6,000 which the members were able to pay-off within three years. And a souvenir from the storm still remains by Lake Gerar. The ladies, seeing the terrible destruction wrought by the storm, decided to fund the construction of a Children's Fishing Pier built from the remnants of various structures that were destroyed...a virtual Phoenix rising from the ashes. The fishing pier was scheduled for demolition in 2007 when the bridge over Lake Gerar was to be replaced, but the VIA petitioned city leaders and today the pier is comfortably nestled beside the new beautiful brick bridge.

During the 1960s, with the growing Vietnam War protests and hippie movement, the VIA dug in and again campaigned for an ordinance on decency, which included a requirement to wear a cover-up over bathing suits while on the boardwalk and city streets. It was during this era we began the Beebe Nursing School scholarship, sponsored a free diabetes testing clinic and a chest x-ray program. A micro-nature park was planted in front of the clubhouse to demonstrate dune conservation and is still part of the VIA





VIA Archives Photograph

*Viewing the aftermath of the Nor'easter of 1962, the VIA clubhouse remained relatively safe while many surrounding buildings were completely destroyed.*

Conservation Committee's focus. Under VIA President Mrs. Phillip Howard, the VIA successfully protested the construction of high rise buildings. Mrs. Howard went on to become Mayor of Rehoboth Beach the first and to date only woman to serve in this position.

The 1970s and 80s witnessed more women who stepped forward to serve the Rehoboth community. They continued to donate books to the Rehoboth Public Library, give Christmas gifts to residents of Stockley Center and present scholarships to Beebe School of Nursing. In cooperation with other Rehoboth organizations and churches, a Day Care Center was opened in February of 1970, the culmination of a two year project. Beautification and safety were as always, a concern. Members worked with Beebe respiratory department setting up reference files. We tutored students at Cape Henlopen High School, raised money for Special Olympic programs as well as for Tau House in Georgetown and were involved in the formation of the Cape Henlopen Senior Center where a VIA member still represents us on its board.

In the 1980s, we worked with neighboring communities to obtain economical transportation between points in Sussex County. Members addressed their concerns about sewage treatment with the growing population, zoning and traffic problems. VIA worked with the geologist in charge of beach management to protect and preserve the dunes and have plantings of beach grasses in front of our building and the Pennsylvania Railroad house. Member volunteers, time and money were given for the Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership (HOBY) program.

During the 1990's, VIA was asked to host a Centennial Ball, in celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the town. This event raised over \$6,000 which was donated to the City for renovation of Convention Hall. The next year, one of our most financially successful fundraisers, "*Flavors of Cape Henlopen Cookbook*" was published. In its first three years, selling at only \$10 each, it raised over \$20,000. All of the proceeds from the sale were donated to charity. The cookbook is now in its fourth printing and still selling strong. At the same time, we raised money to remodel the clubhouse entry and kitchen, adding a handicapped restroom, a wheelchair accessible entry ramp and a new split rail fence enclosing all three sides of the parking lot.



Photo by Barbara Beatty

*Built from the remnants of buildings destroyed during the Nor'easter of 1962, the VIA funded Children's Fishing Pier is nestled by the brick bridge over Lake Gerar.*

Another violent storm in 1992 destroyed most of the boardwalk, relocated much of the sandy beach and washed away VIA's precious dunes. The clubhouse, remarkably, remained unscathed. With funds from city, state and federal government, the boardwalk and dunes were reconstructed, all with new handicapped accessibility. This prompted members not only to replant our dunes but to donate beach wheel surf chairs allowing the disabled to go out onto the beach and into six inches of ocean water. The roster for 1994 showed 303 members, many of whom read to children, taught adult literacy, volunteered at the library and hospital, delivered meals to the homebound and ill, assisted boy scouts by building a playground at the YMCA, collected canned goods for local needy families, supported the symphony, convinced the city to chip in with us to obtain nine life-sized iron reindeer to stand on the Christmas Island at the entrance to town, helped minority children with their homework and so very much more. Some '90s fundraisers included: bus trips, weekly bridge games, flea markets, workshops, cocktail parties and holiday bazaars. A Finance Committee was established to prepare budgets and recommend long range plans.

## *The New Millennium*

With Y2K a non-problem for the VIA , we looked to the new millennium and the opportunities that the 2000s would bring, never expecting the 9-11, 2001 attack on the American people and the resulting war in Iraq. Flags flew, patriotism was high, we packed huge boxes full of food, snacks, powdered drinks, toys and other unobtainable items and sent them to our troops in the middle east where they were greatly appreciated by the troops who shared much of this bounty with the Iraqi children.

As our beautiful village grew into a city and the cost of solving problems ran into the millions of dollars, it was impossible for the VIA women to keep up with completely funding some of the community needs as we had in the past. Redesigning and restructuring streetscapes, replacing streetlights, and rebuilding the beach and boardwalk are completely out of our financial range. We just can't bake that many cookies! But, we have accepted some very important projects such as, collaborating with the council of churches to help foreign students coming to Rehoboth to work for the summer. And, in this difficult economic climate of 2009, we have given more of our money to the Food Bank and members are bringing canned and dried food donations to every meeting, so we can help feed hungry families who have fallen upon hard times and perhaps have lost jobs and homes. We advocate for "cell phones for middle east US soldiers," a healthy heart lifestyle and cancer awareness. We volunteer in the information kiosk in town, provide volunteers for the tremendously popular Main Street Chocolate Festival and have led the Main Street Parade as the prestigious Citizen of the Year!

As we move into our second century of service to Rehoboth Beach and environs, we, the women of the Village Improvement Association, remain dedicated to our mission. When asked how VIA has changed throughout the ensuing one hundred years, the answer is; little, except for hemlines and hair styles. Our dedication, concern, money and time given to the well being of our beloved Rehoboth Beach and surrounding communities, the residents and visitors has been, still is, and will continue to be, constant.



VIA Archives Photograph

*VIA volunteers planting beach grass*



VIA Archives Photograph

*The First St. Nicholas Tea (an elegant fundraiser)  
 Standing (l to r) Trip Wilkinson, Carolyn Billingsley,  
 Suzanne Jones, President Pamela Blessinger and Barbara Beatty  
 Seated (l to r) Laurie Meacham, Gail Shaffer,  
 Melynda Peet and Elaine Perry*

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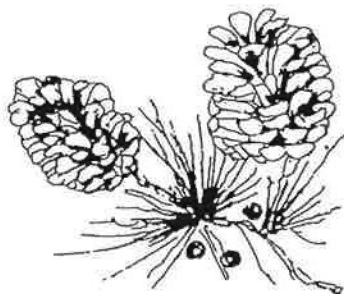
Joan Sciorra

Mary Ann Scott

Gail Shaffer

Carolyn Shriver

With Thanks to The VIA History Committee



## *Collect for Club Women*

Keep us, oh God, from pettiness;  
Let us be large in thought, in word, in deed.

Let us be done with fault-finding  
And leave off self-seeking.

May we put away all pretense  
And meet each other face to face,  
Without self-pity and without prejudice.

May we never be hasty in judgement  
And always generous.

Let us take time for all things;  
Make us to grow calm, serene, gentle.

Teach us to put into action our better impulses,  
Straightforward and unafraid.

Grant that we may realize it is  
The little things that create differences,  
That in the big things of life we are at one.

And may we strive to touch and to know  
The great, common human heart of us all.  
And, oh Lord God, let us forget not  
To be kind!

**MARY STEWART**



Grenoble Place at the Boardwalk  
Rehoboth Beach, Delaware