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The Comeback Cane

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A great story of lost and found

BETHLEHEM – Dick Robie has spent more than 10 years looking for something that’s been missing for decades – until Tuesday, when he became the youngest recipient of the Boston Post Cane.

“It’s been 35 or 40 years since it’s last been seen,” said Robie, who is a member of the Bethlehem Heritage Society.

The town of Bethlehem is one of 700 communities in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maine and Rhode Island that were presented with the gold-headed, ebony cane from the old Boston Post newspaper in 1909, according to the Maynard, Mass., Historical Society, which keeps track of the canes.

These towns were directed to pass the cane on to their oldest resident and in return, the newspaper asked to be informed of the recipients, with circulation-boosting tales about what they attribute their old age to.

It is a tradition that has lasted far longer than the newspaper, which went out of print in 1957.

Over the last 102 years, some communities have lost track of their canes. As near as Robie has figured, the Bethlehem cane was last seen in the 1970s and its whereabouts unknown since then.

On Tuesday, an article in the *New Hampshire Union Leader* prompted an end to the mystery. Robie had put the word out that the town is seeking its oldest resident to present a replica cane to and he wistfully said how nice it would be to find the Bethlehem cane.

About a mile and a half away from Robie's house, Russell Burt read the article that morning and it jogged his memory. He went to a tiny closet in the living room of the home he shares with Joan Iserman.

"It's a closet we never go into and Russell called me at work and said 'I think we have it!'" Iserman said. The couple called Robie over to their house later that day. Burt, a prankster, solemnly showed Robie the other forgotten occupant in the closet, a shelaleigh.

"He said, 'Is this what you're looking for?' and showed me this gnarled stick that looked like a woodpecker's head and boy, my heart just went down," Robie said.

Burt laughed and presented him the Boston Post cane and there concluded a search that Robie thought he would never end.

"I never expected to see it again," he said.

The cane is in fine shape. The African Congo mahogany may not gleam and the the 14-carot gold head has a dent or two, but there is no doubt as to what it is, for the fine inscription says 'Bethlehem, NH.' But curiously, it has a rubber tip not found on the original canes.

It's discovery may have ended Robie's search, but it has set Iserman on one of her own.

"I really didn't know I had it," she said, "and I don't know how I came to have it."

She figures it came into her possession after her mother died in 1989 and she stored away some of her things. An aunt, her mother's sister, had died earlier and her mother had cleaned out her things.

The aunt had resided at a local nursing home and may have been friends with a previous recipient of the cane, sometime in the 1970s.

"Since it had a rubber tip, all I can think is that someone had it and she needed one and they gave it to (the aunt)," Robie said, "and she used it. Somewhere along the line, that rubber tip was put on it."

Iserman has been calling family members all around the country, trying to figure out just how it might have landed in her closet.

In the days since Robie put the word out about looking for the oldest citizen, he has been surprised at the number of calls he has gotten from people wondering if they might be the eldest elder in the town.

Robie did not want to divulge the age of the oldest one he's heard about so far, but he would say that number is over 90.

In many New Hampshire towns, the tradition of presenting the cane has been retired, for those qualified to receive it have perceived it, as several town officials have said over the years, that it is the "kiss of death."

Robie will suggest that now that town has its Boston Post Cane back, it should be retired to the Bethlehem Heritage Society.

The tradition of honoring the oldest citizen will carry on, since it resumed in 1999, when a replica cane was made for the presentation denoting an achievement that is a mystery all its own – achieving old age.

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Written by Great Northern Ink Spot

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