



The Rotary Club of Williamstown, Massachusetts

Club Number 6549; District 7890 Every Tuesday, Noon, The Williams Inn

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Anne R. Skinner, Editor

200 years of Cuban history in 30 minutes!



Actually, Jim Mahon covered 150 years rapidly, in order to get to his main point. As a political scientist he is very interested in the future of Cuban governance, but to understand that one has to realize that for most of the last 2 centuries, the dominant attitude in Cuba has been (not unjustifiable) antagonism to the US. The US quashed Cuban independence from Spain in 1898, largely to protect US business interests in the island. Relations have not generally been as fraught as in the 1962 missile crisis, when a recently discovered cable had Castro asking Khrushchev to launch a first strike against the US! National sovereignty has been the rallying call, and for Fidel Castro that meant rejecting all past commitments. The US embargo, which has been more sound than fury for many years, plus Fidel's personal charisma, helped create a united front. With Fidel's death, the regime is facing a number of challenges. It has rewarded loyalty with jobs and cash (especially in convertible pesos, CUC). In its adherence to Communism, it is determined to prevent Cubans from becoming rich, something that has happened in other transitions such as Russia and Vietnam. As a result, the economy is inefficient. An invasive plant is gradually taking over productive land, but there is no incentive to fight it by those who don't own the land. Economic problems were masked for a number of years by subsidies, first from Russia and then from Venezuela. While Russian trade is still significant, it is not subsidized, and Venezuela is rapidly collapsing. American tourism, still restricted to 'educational and cultural' groups, is not likely to provide a large boost to the overall economy. Turning to China is questionable; having been burned by Venezuela, is not eager to support a regime with a weak prognosis (and besides, with contacts in most of Latin America, thanks in part to Trump's announced policies, China does not need friends in this hemisphere). So, the current leaders, Fidel's allies since 1959, are aging. They do not entirely trust their potential replacements, who may have joined the party simply for the power it represents, but they have no choice but to let in some of them. Jim feels 2018 will be a critical year. Raul Castro has promised to step down as president, but remain as party chair, so governance will be shared, most probably by Miguel Diaz-Canel. Cuba has made many strides in the revolution. Cuba has (besides sugar and cigars) a thriving biotech industry, some of whose developments are being tested in the US. (However, some of the scientists who

worked on this are driving cabs for money as their salaries, in non-convertible pesos, are meager.) Hard-liners who continue to view capitalism as the worst catastrophe the country could encounter may reduce Cuba to something like the Dominican Republic. Let us hope for more rational thinking.

Forgot your password?



Well, who hasn't, and then tried to remember the security questions! Brent Heeringa, of the Williams computer science department, wants to help. The basic problem is that random assortments of numbers and letters are hard for most people to remember. There are commercial password organizers – they put all your passwords in a 'box' and then you only need to remember one password, which reduces but does not eliminate the problem. This concept has not taken off; very few people use it. Instead Brent worked with a psychology colleague who noted that it's easier to remember pictures. And now Brent has developed an app that embeds pictures in a grid of pictures such that the user can reconstruct his (or her!) password. To market it he is forming a company with a former Williams student supported by local seed capital. He hopes to bring this to market in the next year or so, with innovative advertising, starting in Australia shortly. Why Australia? It allows him to test the product, get some reviews, and stay under the radar in the US. The name of the company is "Valt". If anyone has ideas, send them along! You might get a share of stock in the next Facebook.

What's the next big thing in the area?

Jeff Thomas started as a biochemist and went into biotech. This interested him in entrepreneurship and now a big commitment to regional economic development. He wants to encourage enterprises that draw revenue into the Berkshires from outside (as opposed, perhaps, to WalMart, which provides employment but where the profits go to Arkansas). To do this he has started Lever, a business incubator. Lever looks for ideas that can grow rapidly (a requirement to attract investor capital), and ways to create jobs that attract younger people. One of his current projects is Brent Heeringa's MindBurner, about which we heard (see above). Another is Marty's Local, started by a Williams alum to increase the local food economy by finding ways for farmers to get their produce to wholesalers such as restaurants. The farmers often don't have the time for marketing, so Marty's Local picks up the produce and gets it to the buyer, providing fresher food at a competitive price. In his first year he handled \$250,000 worth of food, replacing food 'imported' from, for example, California. In addition to advising and funding startups like these, Lever does research to identify local needs that can inform choices on supporting ideas. For instance, how can big entities such as Williams find local procurement sources? Even if only a few percent of procurement moves to local providers, that can be a big boost in job creation. Another research project has already shown practical results. Health care providers such as BMC have a lot of data that they have no time or resources to analyze. Steve Miller (Williams College



mathematician) gave the data, suitably scrubbed of names, to his class. The students identified several factors that affect the chance of hospital readmission (a bad thing for both hospitals and patients) such as the number of drugs the patient was taking. In response, BMC added a pharmacy consultant to the discharge process. The students followed up by bringing to the college Business Plan Competition the creation of an app for clinicians to predict readmission. Jeff says nothing of this sort exists elsewhere. Lever is not Jeff's only activity. He has taught winter study courses in entrepreneurship and runs a co-working space, Cloud 85 for tech people, and another, Makers Mill, for artists. Where does Lever get its' money? Quite a lot from Williams alums, some of whom invest directly in his suggested start-ups, which validates his opinion. Asked about startups that move out of the Berkshires, perhaps for lack of local talent, he notes that their success elsewhere not only validates his judgment but, since Lever retains an interest in the company, provides a return that can be reinvested locally. Terrific energy for the region!

Like animals? Or music? Or history? Or art?



Jennifer Trainer Thompson has been CEO of Hancock Shaker Village since January. Currently they are featuring baby animals, but to our regret she didn't bring one with her! Jennifer's previous experience is with MassMOCA; while HSV is very different, she hopes to use some of that experience to turn the museum from a sleepy occasional visit to a 'must-see' part of the Berkshires. The Shakers are an interesting phenomenon. Originally a break-away

sect from the Quakers in Manchester England, they came to this county in the late 18th century and settled in Hancock about 1790. Although at their height they had only 5000 members, they exerted an outside effect. They believed in gender equality and sustainability, some 200 years ahead of most of this country. They were innovative, not rejecting such modern devices as the automobile, and their schools were so much ahead of the local public schools that many students came to them. Unfortunately, their organizing principles, such as celibacy, were not sustainable! By 1959 there were only 9 left, and those decided to convert the farm to a museum, paid for by a group of locals, despite having a more generous offer from a developer. So what are some of Jennifer's plans? She wants to add a music program, something that has been most successful at MassMOCA. Then there is the "Food for Thought" series on sustainability and featuring their heirloom vegetables. The first will be this month, 5/13, with Deval Patrick. She wants to have a show of contemporary art – the Shakers' works were not only practical but also art! Later this year there will be a holiday festival (lots of animals again)! HSV is less than 10 miles from Tanglewood, which could draw families, and it has the distinction of being an authentic historic site (Sturbridge, and others, being reconstituted from a variety of sites). There will be many reasons to visit; find yours and make your plans.

Club News

More help from the Commons

Note that our Spaghetti Supper is **May 4th**, almost immediately! It starts at 5, so workers please come by 4:45, and EVERYONE bring friends and families!

And come celebrate our latest project!

May 9th is the day when we meet at Berkshire Food Project to officially admire their new stove! A reminder – BFP is in the Congregational Church, right up there by the statue! You can park on the street. BFP starts serving at 11:30, so anyone who can get there early would be appreciated. The rest of us should show up at noon, put on our Rotary aprons, and make ourselves useful!

Don't forget there is a wider world out there!

May 9th is Election Day in Williamstown and there is a contest on the ballot. So before or after your lunch stint, get to the Elementary School and vote! Then on the 16th is Town Meeting, 7 p.m. at WES. Again, be there! This is no time to abandon civic responsibility.

PREVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS

May Schedule

- May 1st — Board Meeting, 5 p.m., Williams Inn
- May 2nd – Mandy Greenfield from WTF
- May 4th – Spaghetti Supper at Williamstown Commons
- May 9th – Meet at BFP for a day of service and celebration
- May 9th – Town Elections in Williamstown!
- May 16th – Jason Dohaney; Susan Briggs from the CoC
- May 16th – Williamstown Town Meeting!
- May 23rd – TBD
- May 30th – Ruthann Eagan, the Boy Scouts

The editor thanks Fred Ley and Linda Sweeney for photos and notes.