

Bill Rathbun's Several Lives

URI's second oldest alumnus
doctored animals, practiced law,
covered the news, once laid low
a man bent on murdering him

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

WILLIAM S. RATHBUN, 81, is the second

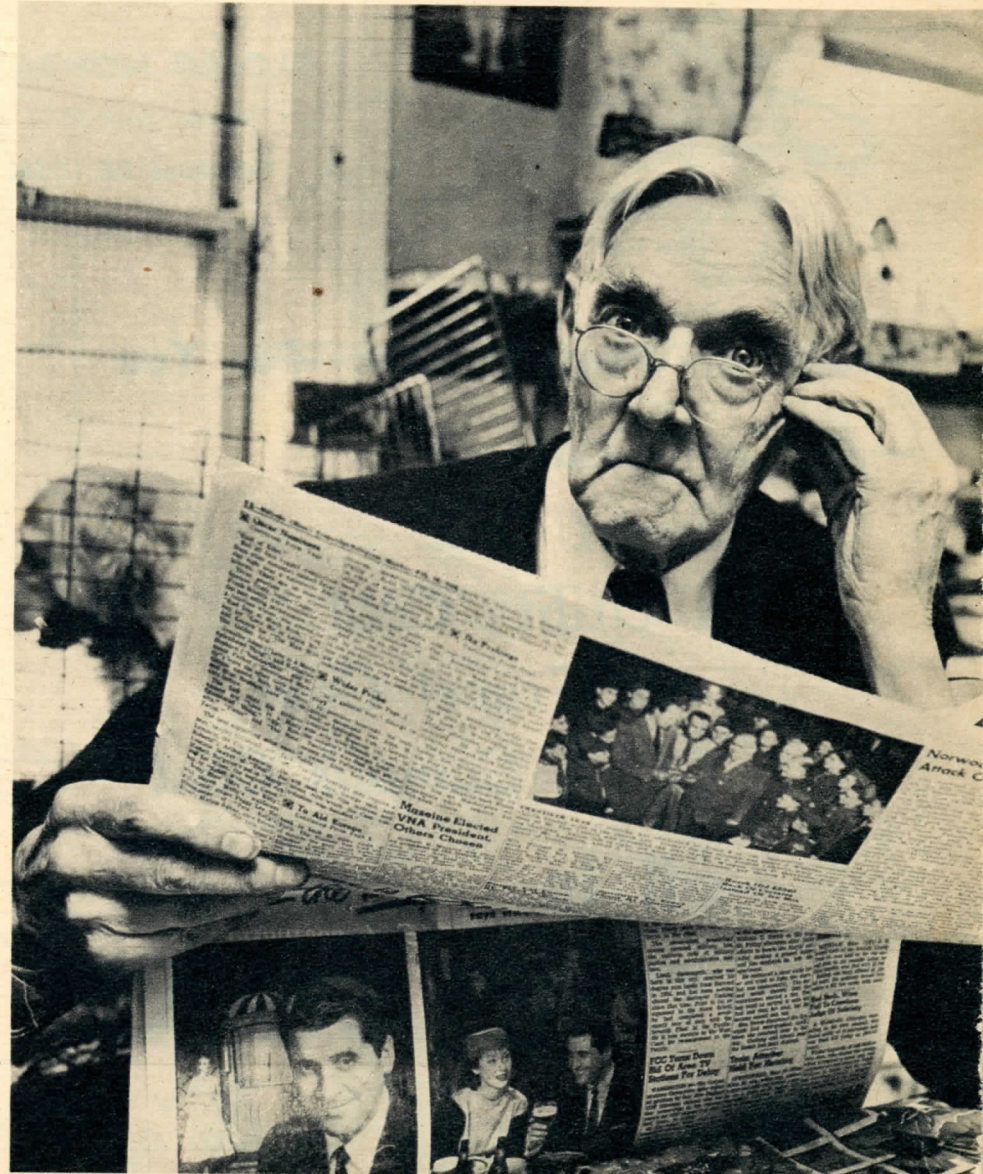


Photo by William J. ...



oldest alumnus of Rhode Island University. He is also a veterinary surgeon, a pharmacist, and an attorney-at-law. But in an overall sense he is a newspaperman, and newspapermen were once creatures of uncertain habit, and women who could not adapt to their ways should have married plasterers.

Mr. Rathbun's wife was away at the movies and he could see no good reason for leaving her a memorandum apprizing her of a resolution he had formed while he was being interviewed at his home in South Hadley, Mass., about this thing and that thing. "I am coming back with you," he said firmly, and that was that.

It was all right with me, but wouldn't his wife worry?

"Well," Mr. Rathbun replied thoughtfully, "she may," and got in the car.

It developed that what Mr. Rathbun had in mind was a visit to Kingston and the URI campus, and that he proposed to stay overnight with relatives in Lafayette, which he insisted on referring to as "Wickford Junction." He abandoned this plan while we were having dinner in Sturbridge and said he guessed he would put up at some Providence hotel.

But when we got to Providence he learned that there was a train to Kingston at 10:04, and was last seen boarding it in a cloud of steam and reminiscence, having spent a very pleasant evening in the Union Station, where he met many friends, including a man who asked him if he remembered selling a barrel of whisky a week in Si Wright's drugstore in Peace Dale.

Mr. Rathbun did. His memory is excellent.

* * *

William S. Rathbun comes of an old South County family. He entered the newly established Rhode Island Agricultural School in 1890 and studied veterinary surgery. The state school became a college in 1892 and he was graduated with the first class, but, owing to a legal defect in its charter, State College couldn't grant degrees in animal surgery, so an arrangement was made to have them granted by the University of Toronto.

OLD-TIMER Bill Rathbun has been a newspaperman since the turn of the century. By him and his likes was a great tradition created.

Young Mr. Rathbun couldn't see going all the way to Canada for a mere sheepskin. "I went right to practicing," he says, "and removed two tumors the size of a plug hat from a horse belonging to the widow of Gen. Isaac Peace Rodman, who was killed at Antietam." He opened an office in Silas G. Wright's drugstore in Peace Dale, where he had clerked since 1889.

As a preparation for a journalistic career, the two professions he had embraced cannot be excelled. What you don't know about a community after doctoring its horses and cows and compounding its human prescriptions is known only to God. Mr. Rathbun became Kingston correspondent of the *Wickford Standard* in 1896, then worked for the *Westerly Sun* until 1906, when he joined the staff of the old *Providence Tribune*. "They worked the life out of me," he said.

In Mr. Rathbun's undergraduate days, he had a part in an event which is famous in URI annals—the firing of the sunrise salute which wrecked "Ben Butler," the broken cannon which stands on the university quad. The story is well known.

It was Mr. Rathbun who supplied the cartridge for that catastrophic discharge. "I made it," he recalls, "out of a good-sized woman's stocking filled with blasting powder.

"I was at a window in the northeast corner of the third floor of Davis Hall when the gun exploded. When I first looked out, Lester F. Albro sat in front of the cannon playing with the swab. Ernest H. Mathewson, '94, Frederick W. Proseus, '95, and Reuben W. Peckham, '94, were adjusting the primer.

"The explosion made a little noise; there was a sputter and a black streak shot from the place where

the gun had been to a deep hole about 30 feet behind the breech.

"That homemade lanyard of baling wire from the pest house outside the veterinary building may have saved two lives. It was longer than a regular lanyard and gave more room for the flying gun to pass the two men on its left."

So much for the explosion of Ben Butler. Less publicized is the gun's previous history and the fact that it was obtained from a man under indictment for first degree murder.

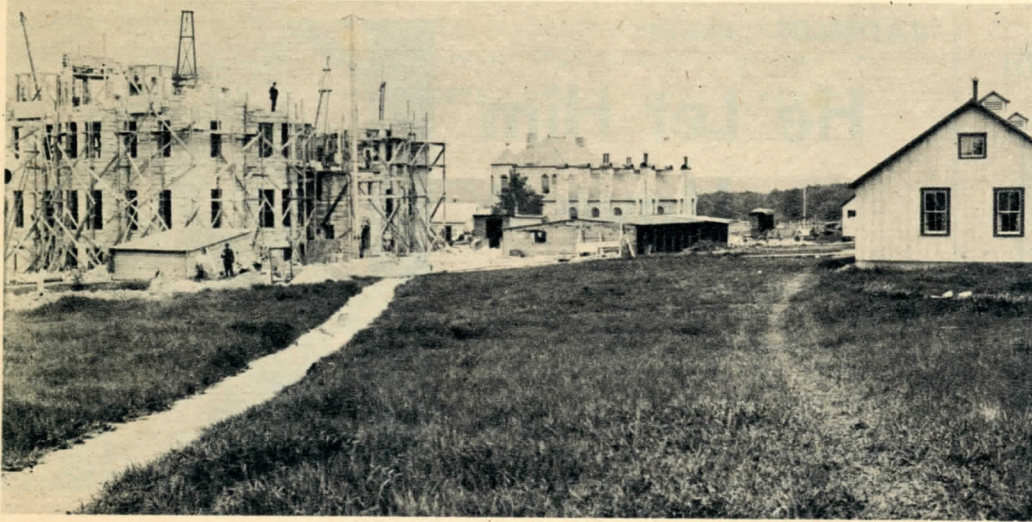
No more picturesque South County character ever lived than Capt. George N. Kenyon, one of the leaders of the old square-rigger captains and hard as the came. It was widely believed that during his seafaring days he murdered two South Kingstown hands by sending them aloft and popping them off the end of a yard with a rifle.

Often during his travels in the West Indies, Captain Kenyon touched at Havana, and on one of these occasions he saw on the wharf a Parrot 20-pounder left there by a Confederate blockade runner during the Civil War.

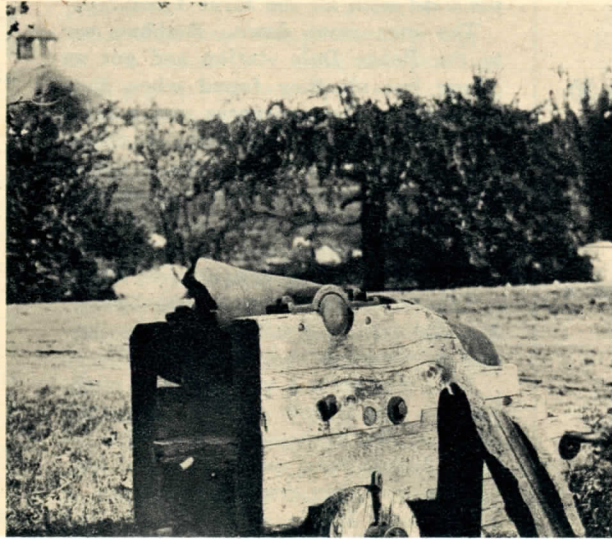
This piece the captain laid hands upon and brought home; formed for it a morose affection. It became his personal household artillery.

Quitting the sea, he entered the hotel business and behaved in such a manner that attempts were made to have him placed under restraint. Whenever he judged such a project was making up, it was the captain's wont to mount his cannon on the lawn, loaded with horseshoes and other langrage and beat to quarters. He did this at the Ocean House on Block Island and at another hostelry (known as "Kenyon's Folly") on Bonnet Point. *at Narragansett Pier*

of a stiletto. Photo by William L. Rooney.



DAVIS HALL in 1895, a year after a notable and varied career in many areas of effort took of in several different directions.



BEN BUTLER. He fired the salvo that told the world of a great event in UPR history



and then blew up. The student who made the cartridge tells tale of Ben's 'busting.'



CLASS OF 1894 has a singing period. William S. Rathbun is seen between Misses Annie Barber and Helen Clark, his classmates.

Photos from URI archives

The captain christened his cannon "Ben Butler" because of his admiration for Gen. Benjamin Butler, whose political aspirations he warmly supported. Captain Kenyon was quite a one for backing off-beat characters. When ex-War Governor William Sprague mounted guard with a musket over a slice of Canonchet property he and the government were arguing about, the captain offered to support him with Ben against the whole U.S. Navy. The ex-governor declined the offer with dignity. He said he preferred to take care of such matters himself.

By the spring of 1891, the captain had moved inland to the old Stuart snuff mill. On May 12, 1891, he murdered Jack McGuinness of Narragansett, a carpenter whom he had employed to restore the "Hammond Grist Mill" to its condition in Gilbert Stuart's father's day.

Captain Kenyon shot McGuinness for demanding money for his services and threatening to get a lawyer. He shot him in the back and McGuinness' body fell on the bridge in front of the house.

JUST as the shot was fired, a wagon drove around a sharp curve a little west of the bridge and the driver saw the captain with a smoking rifle in his hand.

Captain Kenyon was indicted for murder and released on bail. This was the formidable individual whom two trembling undergraduates approached in the spring of 1892 to negotiate for a cannon to celebrate the passing of the bill making their alma mater a college.

The captain received Ernest Mathewson and Fred Proseus courteously and said sure they could have Old Ben Butler. You never can tell about people, can you?

Captain Kenyon was tried for the murder of Jack McGuinness late in the fall of 1892, in the election room of the town hall at Wakefield.

It was a sensational trial. The captain's wife, Susan Saunders Kenyon, took the stand as a witness for the prosecution. Mrs. Kenyon had been the navigator of the captain's ship in his seagoing days. Once she almost caused a mistrial by exclaiming, "This is the third time I have. . . ."

"Stop!" yelled the judge. "Mrs. Kenyon, you confine all your remarks to the day Jack McGuinness was shot!"

By such a narrow margin did Capt. George N. Kenyon miss being lucked out of a murder rap.

"I think I am the only living person who saw him sentenced," Mr. Rathbun says. "The jury went out in the early evening and deliberated until nearly midnight. Another boy and I had been talking with Captain Kenyon before the jury came in and were less than three feet from him.

"He looked at the jurors a minute, stood up, put on his glasses, turned to me and said, 'Boys, it's all over and it's gone wrong.'

"Captain Kenyon was then 70 years old. The judge gave him 20 years and suggested that no attempt be made to have him pardoned."

There is a queer postscript to Mr. Rathbun's story of Captain Kenyon. Years later, after he had been admitted to the bar, he was retained in a case involving a real estate transfer in Amherst, Mass. One of the parties became miffed at the real estate agent who figured in the deal and exclaimed, 'I thought I'd had to deal with the meanest, ugliest person who ever lived, Capt. George N. Kenyon, but you're worse than him!'

The speaker was the wife of a former warden of the Rhode Island State Prison. She later told Mr. Rathbun that the captain entered the institution in a very ugly mood, wouldn't work, broke all the rules, and had to be placed in solitary. He stuck it a long time, finally sent for the warden.

"Warden," he said, "you have had laundry methods here, much better cooking can be done, and there is room for considerable improvement in the meal service. With my hotel experience, I can make some wonderful improvements here without increasing expenses. What do you say to giving me a chance?" The warden did. Captain Kenyon made good on all his promises and kept so busy the rest of his life that when he died his death was actually regretted.

Mr. Rathbun is a small man, physically. It will be half a century ago this coming summer that he defeated an attempt to murder him and demonstrated the fact that a compositor's plate base is mightier than the stiletto.

He was then handling spot news for the old *Providence Tribune* and running the *South County News* on the side.

That summer, there was a big weavers' strike in a Peace Dale mill, which he covered to the hilt. Feeling grew bitter, strike breakers were called in, and a man named Francis Mallory was beaten up by the goons.

The night after this first incident of violence occurred, Mr. Rathbun, whose weekly depended somewhat upon boiler plate reading matter, needed to borrow some "furniture." So he dropped over to the *Narragansett Times* and got a 19-inch plate base and

He Let Him Have It

came back carrying it in his right hand. "I didn't," he explained, "have enough plate base to fill me."

It was a very dark night. Entering the Church Street underpass in Peace Dale, he saw the figures of two men at the western entrance. They appeared to be excited and as he passed them he saw one raise his hand. Something glittered, and then, said little Mr. Rathbun, eyeing me gently over his spectacles, "I let him have that column plate base over the head with all the force I had."

The man went down. Rathbun ran to the Peace Dale station and got an officer but all they found when they returned to the underpass was a mess of blood on the sidewalk, a three-cornered file honed to make a home-made stiletto, and a trail that showed where a body had been dragged over the railroad tracks and through a field to the banks of the Saugatucket River.

"There was never any body found," Mr. Rathbun said mildly, "and no further information about the affair."

That was quite a year for Mr. Rathbun. On the Fourth of July, during the races of the Wakefield Yacht Club on Point Judith Pond, one Robert Mooney, a blacksmith, got drunk and fell out of a catboat. He was pulled out and resuscitated by Capt. Herbert M. Knowles' Lifesaving Corps and suffered no ill effects.

As a matter of fact, the rescued Mr. Mooney got drunk all over again that afternoon and was found later in the day with his face submerged in a puddle of brine in a buckie shed. He was back at his anvil again next morning.

But in the meantime what a to-do there was about the resuscitation of Robert Mooney! The story of his escape from drowning was telephoned to Providence by Mr. Rathbun and the "desk and leg man" who took it tele-scoped the reporter's accurate "four to five minutes under water" into "45 minutes under water."

Mr. Rathbun claims that this error, given a big headline and perpetuated over the years, has resulted in the saving of many lives by encouraging life-guards to keep on working over people who take a lot of reviving.

In 1907 Mr. Rathbun went to the *New Haven Courier* as proofreader and special writer. Later, he worked for a weekly in Barnet, Vt., and went to Holyoke in 1910. He took over the city desk of the *Holyoke Telegram* in 1917 and held the job until the *Telegram* merged with the *Transcript* in 1927.



He began the study of law in the early 1920s and was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1925. From 1934 to 1940, he published the *South Hadley Times*, which he printed in a rear room of his home at 100 Abbey St.

About that time things began to get tough for small weekly papers. All sorts of restrictions hemmed them in during World War II. Mr. Rathbun finally gave up trying and went into war work at the Worthington Pump and Machinery Company plant.

He's pretty proud of the fact that on Sept. 10, 1941, he made the first cut in the two-ton base of the first anti-aircraft gun ever manufactured outside a U.S. arsenal.

And where did he get his machine shop experience?

"In a boring mill when I was hung up after the Barnet paper folded."

* * *

It was on a Thursday night that I saw him off to Kingston. Saturday morning he dropped in to see me on his way back to South Hadley and we talked some more about his younger days in South County and the people he used to know.

Included among them was "Doctor" McGuire, the renowned salesman of Kickapoo Indian Sagwa, who liked to make his pitch in college towns and announce himself as an alumnus of dear old Whatzis. He pulled that one once too often when he hit Poughkeepsie, N.Y. and spoke eloquently of the happy years he spent at Vassar.

And how did Mr. Rathbun make out in Kingston Thursday night?

"Fine. I phoned ahead to the Kingston police. They met me," said Mr. Rathbun jauntily, "with the prowl car. When the Lodge couldn't take me in, the Chief fixed me up for the night. It must be getting nearly bus time."

I walked over to the terminal with him. As he got on the Springfield bus, he remarked, "I sometimes wonder if the newspaper isn't on its way out."

I wouldn't know about that one, but I know that they don't make newspapermen like William S. Rathbun any more.

COVER PICTURE shows William S. Rathbun, grand old man of horse-and-buggy journalism, in an expansively reminiscent mood at his home in South Hadley, Mass., where he talked of South County and old days at "State College," also of a stiletto. Photo by William L. Rooney.







The RHODE ISLANDER

(Registered with U. S. Patent Office)

Providence Sunday Journal
MAGAZINE

APRIL 22, 1956

He Burst Ben Butler

*Died, May 19, 1959 - So. Hadley, Mass.
Age 84 yrs.*