

SIMSBURY

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Lettie Dodge Montgomery

Witness to the Civil War and the Transcontinental Railroad

One day in 1928 Lettie Dodge Montgomery welcomed to her grand summer home in Simsbury a writer and his wife. The man, Jacob R. Perkins, was close to publishing a biography of Mrs. Montgomery's father, Major General Grenville M. Dodge, the Civil War soldier and Abraham Lincoln's choice to build the eastern portion of the first transcontinental railroad.¹ Perkins later wrote of that visit for a newspaper in Council Bluffs, Iowa, where in 1855 Mrs. Montgomery (nee Letitia Dodge) had been born.² A later biographer of General Dodge, Stanley P. Hirshson, would document more of the events of Mrs. Montgomery's life, but Perkins heard from her, a woman in her seventies, stories from her girlhood that were cherished memories.³

Grenville Mellen Dodge's ancestor, Richard Dodge, emigrated in 1638 from East Croker, Somersetshire, England to Massachusetts. For generations the family was prolific, but not particularly prosperous. Grenville Dodge was born in Danvers on April 12, 1831. At work from the age of ten as an agricultural laborer and store clerk, his early education consisted of winter terms in district schools and independent study in his spare time. In his teens he attended the Durham Academy in New Hampshire for two winter terms, then in September 1848 he entered Norwich University in Vermont, the first private military college in the country. Within two years he graduated from the Scientific Department and then received further instruction from the school's founder, Captain Alden Partridge, which led in July 1851 to a diploma in military and civil engineering.⁴

Thus prepared, Dodge headed west to Illinois where he worked first as a land surveyor and then was hired by Illinois Central and the Rock Island Railroads. On May 29, 1854, he married Ruth Anne Brown, whose ancestors included William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Colony, and General William Spaulding of Revolutionary War fame.⁵ After a honeymoon in Boston, the newlyweds headed for Council Bluffs, Iowa, where Dodge felt sure that a transcontinental railroad would cross the Missouri River someday. Soon they crossed the river into the Nebraska Territory where Dodge had staked a claim in the Elkhorn River valley. The claim was beyond the fledgling town of Omaha and just north of the old Mormon ferry where, where two years before thousands of Brigham Young's followers had crossed the Elkhorn on their long trek to Salt Lake. The Dodge's cabin was the westernmost cabin in the territory.⁶

If it hadn't been for trouble between the Pawnees and the Poncas, Lettie Dodge might have been born in that cabin. Biographer Hirshson relates:

One day two Pawnees demanded food from Dodge and became argumentative after receiving it. The following day fifty braves in war paint appeared at the cabin and, shouting "Ponca, Ponca," pushed their way inside. With Anne pregnant, Dodge was particularly concerned, but the Indians left after searching the house and discovering nothing.

That same week a group of Pawnees instructed Dodge to come to their camp, where he learned that Ish-got-up, the head of the tribe, had died, presumably from a medicine recently prescribed by

Dodge and Fifield [a neighbor]. Dodge was taken into the council house and shown the body of the Pawnee he had supposedly killed. "All the squaws were in it," he remembered, "yelling and tearing their hair" in "the most fearful scene I ever saw. That alone was enough to scare a person pretty near to death." Then Dodge was brought before twenty chiefs and told to drink a bottle of the medicine. After he showed no ill effects from his ordeal, the Indians argued among themselves for an hour and finally released him. Dodge then "put the river between them and me very quickly."⁷

Soon afterward he rented a log cabin in Council Bluffs where Anne gave birth to Lettie on June 17, 1855. Ten days later the family was back in Nebraska.



Courtesy of the Historic General Dodge House, Council Bluffs, Iowa

Lettie Dodge When She Was About Fourteen

The Omahas and the Souix began to war and the white settlers lost an important ally when the Omaha chief, Logan Fontanelle, was killed and scalped. Indians began killing the settlers' cattle, and in July killed and scalped settlers, three men and a woman. Leaving his crops behind on August 1, Dodge, temporarily moved his wife and infant daughter and his livestock to the comparative safety of the village of Omaha and finally settled in Council Bluffs, where Lettie Dodge grew up.⁸

The noted railroad attorney, Abraham Lincoln, came to speak in Council Bluffs in August 1859 and one of the community's prominent men pointed out a twenty-eight-year-old engineer, Grenville Dodge, who knew more about railroads than any "two men in the country."⁹ Many years later the Union Pacific section of the transcontinental railroad would be built along the route that Dodge recommended to Lincoln on that day.

Lincoln was inaugurated president in March 1861 and the Civil War began in April. Dodge immediately volunteered to serve in the Union Army and was appointed a colonel in command of the Fourth Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment. During the course of the war he rose to the rank of major general.

General Dodge's contributions to the success of the Union Army are too numerous to describe here. A summary of his service, both military and engineering, is in a book about his alma mater, Norwich University, that he sponsored in 1911. A section on his military years begins, "During his service in the Civil War, 1861-66, he was often called upon to use his engineering skill in destroying and reconstructing railroads and bridges that had been destroyed by the Confederate army."¹⁰ This was essential to moving troops, food and equipment. One particularly stunning feat occurred during General Sherman's Atlanta campaign, when the general ordered General Dodge to build a bridge across the Chattahoochee River. The summary says, "Dodge's corps arrived there on Sunday evening and on Wednesday evening, three day's time, had built a bridge 14 feet high and 710 feet long upon which the Army of the Tennessee crossed that

evening. Material for the bridge was obtained by tearing down some factories located at that place.”

During his various commands, the troops under Dodge engaged in a great many skirmishes and battles. During the Battle of Pea Ridge, Dodge was wounded and had four horses shot from under him.¹¹ Dodge was wounded most seriously during the siege of Atlanta. A Confederate sharpshooter sent a bullet through a loop hole in the Union fortifications that fractured a bone in his skull and caused a severe concussion. It was widely reported that he was dead, but the wound only invalidated him for three months. During that time his wife Anne tended him, eventually bringing him home to Council Bluffs.¹²

Lettie Dodge Montgomery was a child of five when the Civil War began. J. R. Perkins reported in his article based on his interview with her:

When she was 8 years old she went with her mother to Corinth, Miss.—this was the summer of 1863—and paid a visit to General Dodge’s headquarters. While there she met Grant, then at grips with Pemberton before Vicksburg; also Sherman and Sheridan. In later life she recalled the visit and told the writer a story of the execution of a deserter from her father’s command.

As a matter of fact she was the innocent cause of an hour’s delay in that execution, for when the condemned soldier was placed in a wagon, seated on a coffin, and driven out of town to be shot, she climbed into another canvas-covered vehicle that trailed the death wagon, hid under another piece of loose canvas and jumped out to witness the proceedings. The provost marshal, who was really acting under the orders of her father, was amazed. He had her lifted to the rear of his saddle, ordered the military preparations to cease until he returned, and galloped back to Corinth with the general’s adventurous daughter.”

Biographer Perkins then asked her if she had ever seen Abraham Lincoln and she replied that she saw him only once.

She was about 10 years old and was in Washington with her parents not long before the close of the war. Her father, the general, had gone to the White House in what proved to be the final conference with Lincoln on the building of the Union Pacific. Lincoln and Dodge conversed “out of office hours” while Lettie played with the Lincoln children on the White House steps. By and by their fathers came, Lincoln accompanying Dodge to the waiting carriage in which Mrs. Dodge sat. There were introductions and then the tall, homely man, in a characteristic gesture, pinched playfully the cheeks of the soldier’s child. This was all. But in the long years that followed, Mrs. Montgomery ever remembered the scene on the White House steps.

At the end of the Civil War Dodge was in command of the Departments of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and Utah and charged with subduing hostile Indian tribes on the plains and in the Rocky Mountains. Immediately following the war, General Dodge and his troops continued to subdue the hostile tribes in the west so that the mail routes and telegraph lines could be maintained, the transcontinental railroad could be built and Americans of European origin could safely push westward. The general’s wife, Anne, who was described as a “splendid horseman and a fine shot with either a pistol or a rifle” joined him at his headquarters in Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, bringing along their daughters Lettie and Ella.¹³ On March 7, 1866, their daughter Anne was born at the fort.¹⁴ Later, while building the Union Pacific railroad through Wyoming’s Rattlesnake Hills, he named three peaks Lettie, Ella and Little Annie.¹⁵

In May 1866 General Dodge resigned his commission and accepted the position of chief engineer for the Union Pacific railroad. The drama of the competition between his railroad, originating in Omaha and the Central Pacific railroad, originating in Sacramento, has often been told. Is there any American who doesn’t know about the celebrations throughout the nation on May 10, 1869, when the Golden Spike to join the two railroads was driven at Promontory Summit, Utah? Telegrams to President Grant and the Associated Press announced: THE LAST RAIL IS LAID! THE LAST SPIKE IS DRIVEN! THE PACIFIC RAILROAD

IS COMPLETED! THE POINT OF THE JUNCTION IS 1089 MILES WEST OF THE MISSOURI RIVER AND 690 MILES EAST OF SACRAMENTO CITY.¹⁶ Dodge and his Union Pacific were the victors.

In Simsbury Lettie Dodge Montgomery told biographer Perkins:

After the completion of the Union Pacific, May, 1869, she went with her parents on a trip to Salt Lake. There she met Amelia Folsom, a Council Bluffs woman, sixteenth wife of Brigham Young. The Dodges were entertained lavishly, all the railroad difficulties between Young and Dodge having been ironed out, and his 14-year-old daughter, Lettie, came in for a great deal of petting and received many gifts. Her recollections of the Mormon leader were always clear, vivid, and she remembered him as a strong personality with a constant half-smile that could, if the situation demanded, turn quickly into a rather fearful scowl.

General Dodge was involved in many enterprises, including banking and politics, but he never ceased building railroads until he retired. As she matured, his daughter sometimes accompanied him. "She loved to rough it and was one of the few young women of her time who saw actual railroad pioneering, especially along the great southwestern system," Perkins wrote. During the summer of 1872 she went with her father on one of his surveying jobs for the Texas & Pacific, a line that became part of the second transcontinental railroad.¹⁷

Perhaps it was that summer that Lettie Dodge met Robert Elington Montgomery. An Englishman, he worked for the Texas & Pacific.¹⁸ Their wedding on November 24, 1874, in the Dodge mansion in Council Bluffs was a splendid social event. Robert Montgomery was a lawyer and business associate of General Dodge.¹⁹ The Montgomerys had three children: Grenville Dodge, Eleanor and Robert Langford.²⁰ In 1896 after twenty-two years of marriage, she separated from her husband and in 1908 divorce proceedings were instituted.²¹ Mr. Montgomery died in 1913.²²

After he retired from actively building western railroads and then a wealthy man, General Dodge and his wife began traveling through Europe and spending part of most years in New York City until he died in 1916. Eventually, his three daughters became residents of New York. Two of Lettie Montgomery's children also resided there.

It was in New York that her daughter Eleanor met John Stoughton Ellsworth, son of Lemuel Stoughton Ellsworth, an officer in the Ensign Bickford Company in Simsbury. By 1920, Eleanor and John were married, a second marriage for both, and they had an apartment on East Eighty-Sixth Street next door to Lettie Montgomery and her son Robert.²³ Robert Langford Montgomery had attended the U.S. Naval Academy, Class of 1907, where on the football team he had been dubbed "Babe" Montgomery. Serving eight years of active duty as a navigator, he gained the rank of lieutenant, j.g.²⁴

Eleanor's husband, John Stoughton Ellsworth, had graduated from Yale in 1905, where he was captain of the baseball team. Immediately after college he had worked for The Arlington Company which manufactured pyralin, a type of plastic.²⁵ Both he and Eleanor were heavily involved in work for the American Red Cross. Among his many offices, he was chairman of the Board of Directors of the New York County Chapter during World War I and a member of the national board of Red Cross trustees.²⁶

Eleanor Ellsworth and another woman organized the Red Cross canteen service on the embarkation



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piers in New York City during World War I and she directed the canteen service in the city during World War II. In later years she became a charter member of the Simsbury Garden Club and a trustee of the Simsbury Free Library.²⁷

In 1920 John S. Ellsworth and Lettie Montgomery both began buying property in Simsbury. In July the *Farmington Valley Herald* reported:

The G. B. Holcomb farm, one of the best on the east side of the river, ... has been sold again and the purchaser this time is Mrs. L. D. Montgomery, of New York city. Mrs. Montgomery will come here to live and will improve the house greatly. The farm just purchased adjoins that of John E. [sic] Ellsworth, recently purchased by him and known as the Buckland farm.

Mrs. Ellsworth is a daughter of Mrs. Montgomery. The farm purchased by her has many acres of good tobacco land and much pasturage as well as extending well up the mountain side to the east. It is one of the best farms in East Weatogue and combined with the Buckland farm the mother and daughter will have extensive land holdings, probably from 500 to 600 acres.²⁸

Lettie Montgomery eventually sold this property in the Simsbury section known as East Weatogue to her son-in-law. In his later years John Stoughton Ellsworth bred prize winning Jersey cattle there and he called it Folly Farm.

In June 1923 Lettie Montgomery purchased a property in Simsbury's village of Weatogue from the Hartford lumber dealer Louis J. Korper, who was using it as a summer home.²⁹ That was her intended use, also. The property was known as "Fountain Side" because it bordered to the south the small plot where the White Memorial Fountain had been placed in 1892 in memory of Dr. Roderick Adams White. When Mr. Korper had purchased the property some years earlier from Charles A. Ensign it included a house, stable and ice house. The newspaper reported, "The house is a big one and is in fine shape ... and there is land enough for a chicken farm."³⁰

Robert Langford Montgomery married three years later. His bride was Miss Anne Elizabeth Bacon, daughter of Mrs. James Bacon of New York and the *New York Times* announced that the couple would live in Simsbury, Connecticut.³¹ The young couple set about becoming an active part of the town. The name "Mrs. Langford Montgomery" appeared in news of Congregational Church functions and the memorable "Pageant of Wedding Gowns" in 1933 in which more than sixty gowns, from recent to some worn in colonial times, were modeled.³²

Langford Montgomery, meanwhile, began a poultry farm. The state had quite a number of poultry farmers at this time. A typical report in the *Farmington Valley Herald* stated, "The Connecticut Poultry Association made a tour of poultry farms in various sections of the state last week, and among the other poultry farms visited was that of J. C. Eddy, Riverside, and that of Robert Darling on the mountain east of Simsbury. There were about fifty automobile loads of poultry raisers from all parts of Connecticut who were glad to see what the other fellow was doing."³³

Mary Pringle Mitchell visited Mr. Montgomery's poultry operation often when she was a young girl. Her uncle, George Pringle, was Lettie Montgomery's chauffeur and he lived in a small house at the back of her property. He and his widowed mother, Mary Oliver Pringle, had emigrated from Scotland in 1920 and she kept house for him. Mrs. Mitchell's father, Robert Pringle, ran the Pringle Garage on Canal Street and her family lived nearby. Mrs. Mitchell recalls how pleasant the breeze from the ice house was in the summer and how fascinated she was when Mr. Montgomery would kill a chicken. "He would chop off the head and it would run around," she said. "He was a gentleman farmer, [but] he was out there all the time," she said. "He loved those chickens."³⁴

When Lettie Dodge Montgomery died in 1935 she left her property in the Weatogue section of

Simsbury to her three children, giving the use of her homestead to her son Langford.³⁵ He sold the property in September 1947.³⁶ At the time of his death in 1963 he was living on the Folly Farm in East Weatogue. He was survived by his wife, Anne, and two grown children. His sister, Eleanor Montgomery Ellsworth, had died in the previous year. Lettie Montgomery Dodge and her two children who made their home here are buried in the center of town in Simsbury Cemetery.

By Mary Jane Springman

Notes

1. Jacob Randolph Perkins, *Trails, Rails and War: The Life of General G. M. Dodge* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1929).
2. J. R. Perkins, "Lettie Dodge Montgomery Delayed Execution, Met Abraham Lincoln," *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, February 8, 1935.
3. Stanley P. Hirshson, *Granville M. Dodge: Soldier, Politician, Railroad Pioneer* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967).
4. William Arba Ellis, comp. and ed., *Norwich University 1819-1911: Her History, Her Graduates, Her Roll of Honor*, 3 vols. (Montpelier, Vt.: Grenville M. Dodge, 1911), 2:477. The complete text of this book is available online through Google Books. See also www.Norwich.edu
5. Hirshson, 16-17. Lettie Montgomery used her descent from Spaulding and others to qualify to become a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She was regent of the chapter in Council Bluffs, Iowa, from 1911 to 1913. See *Nonpareil online* "The Lincoln and Dodge Legacy," August 16, 2009.
6. J. R. Perkins.
7. Hirshson, 20. He quotes from Dodge's handwritten personal biography and Dodge records in the Iowa State Department of History and Archives in Des Moines.
8. Ibid.: J. R. Perkins.
9. Stephen Ambrose, *Nothing Like It in the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, 1836-1869* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 23-24; Jacob Randolph Perkins, 51-52.
10. Ellis, 2:478.
11. *Report of the Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth and Forty-Fifth Reunions of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee* (Cincinnati: Society of the Army of the Tennessee, 1922), 44-45:23. The full text is available online through Google Books.
12. Hirshson, 104-105.
13. Ibid, 17.
14. Almira Larkin White, *Genealogy of the Descendants of John White of Wenham and Lancaster, Massachusetts, 1638-1900*, 2 vols. (Haverhill, Mass: By the author, 1900), 1:231. (Google Books)
15. Hirshson, 154. The name of these hills is now Saddleback Hills.
16. Maury Klein, *Union Pacific, Birth of a Railroad: 1862-1893* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1987), 226.
17. J. R. Perkins; Hirshson, 209.
18. Hirshson, 207. The 1900 U.S. Census gives Montgomery's birthplace as England and says he emigrated in 1871.
19. Joseph Thompson Dodge, *Genealogy of the Dodge Family of Essex County, Mass., 1629-1894* (Madison, Wis.: By the author, 1894), 398; (Google Books); Hirshson, 211.
20. Grenville Dodge Montgomery was born in 1875, Eleanor Montgomery on November 28, 1879 and Robert Langford Montgomery on December 29, 1886. The latter two dates, on their gravestones in Simsbury Cemetery, differ slightly from dates given in some genealogies.
21. Hirshson, 227. The 1910 U.S. Census shows Lettie Montgomery living in her parents' house in Council Bluffs.
22. The obituary for Lettie Montgomery in the *New York Times* on January 23, 1935 says that she was the widow of Robert E. Montgomery who died in 1913.
23. U.S Census, 1920.
24. *New York Times*, December 12, 1931, Sports24.
25. Obituary of Robert L. Montgomery, *Hartford Courant*, November 5, 1963.
26. *Hartford Courant*, February 4, 1905, 8; Murray Sargent, ed., *History of the Class of 1905, Yale College* (New Haven: Yale University, 1908), 2:140. Items like vanity sets made of pyralin are collectibles today.
27. Obituary of John S. Ellsworth, *Hartford Courant*, March 7, 1969, 4; March 8, 1969, 4.
28. Benedict Crowell and Robert Forrest Wilson, *The Road to France: The Transportation of Troops and Military Supplies, 1917-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), 269. Obituary of Mrs. John Ellsworth, *New York Times*, September 28, 1962, 25; *Hartford Courant*, September 28, 1962, 6A.
29. *Farmington Valley Herald*, July 22, 1920, 1.
30. Simsbury Land Records, 63:132-133; 62:280. This is 313 Hopmeadow Street, a private residence.
31. *Farmington Valley Herald*, May 5, 1916.
32. *New York Times*, June 6, 1926, E6.
33. *Hartford Courant*, Nov. 17, 1933, 28.
34. *Farmington Valley Herald*, September 6, 1923, 4.
35. Interview with Mary Pringle Mitchell by Mary Jane Springman, August 26, 2007 (digitally recorded). See also, "Robert Pringle of Edinburgh and Simsbury: Pioneer in the Automobile Business in the Farmington Valley" by Mary Pringle Mitchell, SGHRL newsletter, Spring 2005.
36. Simsbury Probate Records, 47:508-517.
37. Simsbury Land Records, 85:112-113.

Two Faraway Historic Houses With Ties to Simsbury

The Historic General Dodge House, Council Bluffs, Iowa—If you're in Council Bluffs, or in Omaha, Nebraska, just across the Missouri River, you can easily tour the Victorian mansion built in 1869 for Major General Grenville M. Dodge. The fourteen-room, three-story house stands on a high terrace with a view of the Missouri Valley. Carefully restored, it has features such as parquet floors, cherry, walnut and butternut woodwork and a ballroom on the top floor. Many of the furnishings are original. On the 130th anniversary of Lettie Dodge Montgomery's wedding the dining room was decorated just as it was in 1874.

Now a National Historic Landmark, the house is open to the public six days a week, except in January and on holidays. For information about the house, tours and special events go to the Web site www.dodgehouse.org, call (712) 322-2406 or write the Historic General Dodge House, 605 Third Street, Council Bluffs, IA 51503.

Grey Towers National Historic Site, Milford, Pennsylvania—The recent talk in the library by Bibi Gaston, author of the *The Loveliest Woman in America*, generated much interest in Grey Towers. The three-story stone chateau-style house was the summer residence and eventual home of several generations of Pinchot family. Gifford Pinchot was born in Simsbury in the home of his grandfather, Amos R. Eno, who donated the Simsbury Free Library to the town. Mr. Pinchot was governor of Pennsylvania and the founder of the USDA Forest Service. He was also the uncle of the subject of Ms. Gaston's book, the actress Rosamond Pinchot who was the author's grandmother.

Run by the U.S. Forest Service, the home and gardens are open for tours from Memorial Day weekend until early November. There are also interesting smaller buildings and many trails throughout the 102-acre property. It's just a 150-mile drive west from Simsbury on I-84. For a virtual tour of the house and information go to the Web site www.fs.fed.us/gt, call (570) 296-9630 or write Grey Towers National Historic Site, PO Box 188, Milford, PA 18337.

SGHRL Updates

Heartfelt thanks to Mary Mitchell for the newspaper clipping of J.R. Perkins' 1935 article on Lettie Dodge Montgomery that served as the basis of the article in this newsletter. Mrs. Mitchell's grandmother, Mary Oliver Pringle, had carefully preserved the clipping in her scrapbook. Thank you also to Lorraine Curtiss for copying the article, Assistant Town Clerk Anita Schwager for providing assistance with town records and Celia Roberts, reference librarian at the Simsbury Public Library, for her help.

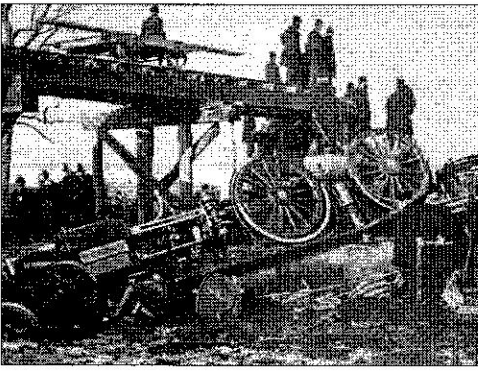
All of us at the library thank Jackson Eno for bringing Bibi Gaston to the library last fall and urging her to present her August 6 program here, which was attended by an overflow crowd. Simsbury Community Television is airing the program "Simsbury Free Library Presents: Bibi Gaston" during September on Channel 5 every Wednesday at 3:00 and 10:00 p.m. SCTV also is showing the video on its Web site: www.simsburytv.org. Click on "video" at the top of the screen.

Thank you to Lynn Charest, Conservation/Inland Wetlands Zoning Compliance Officer in the Planning and Land Use Department, for arranging for the library to use the town hall's new large display cabinet to mount an exhibit of our history and programs. We hope all of you saw it in July and August.

Robert M. Ellis, M.A., has donated a copy of his 2002 Trinity College paper "The Tariffville Bridge Disaster of 1878," the inspiration for the documentary to be shown at the library on September 12.

Frank Pinney has donated many back issues of the magazine *New England Ancestors* and a collection of Littlefield Family newsletters. Our thanks to both for their thoughtfulness.

Correction: In the Spring 2009 newsletter, page four, line nineteen, "bookmark" should be "bookplate."



The Simsbury Free Library is pleased to announce the premiere of a new documentary film produced by students at Simsbury High School.

Tariffville Train Wreck of 1878

Saturday, September 12, 2009

Shows begin at

11:00 A.M. & 1:15 P.M.

In the library ❖ Free admission

This program is being held in conjunction with the
Home Improvement Show

Sponsored by the Simsbury Chamber of Commerce.

In case of rain, the event will be held September 13.

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