

# Long Island Traditions

## NEWSLETTER

www.longislandtraditions.org

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### **Editors note:**

*“Gramps” otherwise known as John K. Remsen Sr. was born in Port Chester, NY in 1900 but spent most of his life in Freeport. He was the father and grandfather of many generations of baymen and fishermen including garvey builder John Remsen, killie trapper John Remsen and bayman Thomas Remsen Jefferies. The Remsens are synonymous with Long Island’s maritime heritage. Their family is also known to many of you as the owners of the Remsen bay house in Freeport. John K. Remsen was a sanitation engineer for the Village of Freeport but after 23 years gave it up so that he could work on the bay full time. The owner of a houseboat, he used it to build the family’s bay house at Brandt Point. According to his daughter Joan Jefferies her father loved the bay, going there whenever he could. The author of this article is Linda Remsen Karp, Jefferies’ niece. She wrote it while attending Freeport High School. We thank Joan Jefferies for allowing us to publish this warm tribute.*

- Nancy Solomon

### **Gramps**

By Linda Remsen  
October 12, 1983

As the sun rises, the figure of a man standing in a boat can be seen. In the ways of the early dawn, diligently at work, he struggles to bring up from the water’s depths another killie pot. To his delight the pot feels heavy - a good catch! Picking up the last pot, he gratefully heads home.

He starts the outboard engine to the gray, wooden-framed boat weighted down by the morning’s catch. The warming rays of the early sun are overshadowed by the cool wind and water that sprays across his face as he glides through the smooth, sleek bay. Through the early morning mist he can see the outline of his house rising above the water. He welcomes the sight as he approaches the weathered bay house with its long boardwalk and tall flagpole.

Thus the day has begun like all the days have begun for this well-built old man. His face and hands look as weathered by time as his house looks weathered by the salty air of the bay. His vivid, bright blue eyes light up the tanned leathery skin of his face. His hands are tough

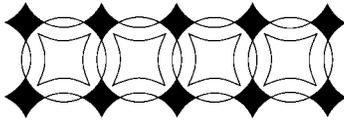
see **Gramps** on page 3

### **Los Hermanos Fernández to Perform in Stony Brook**

Bachata group *Los Hermanos Fernández* will perform at 2:00 PM on Sunday, February 16 at the Long Island Museum of Art, History, & Carriages. The group is led by César, Alex, and Isidro Fernández, who were born in the small town of Sabana Grande de Boyá in the Dominican Republic and now live in North Babylon. Among the youngest of thirteen brothers and sisters, they enjoyed playing music together as children. As teenagers they formed a group called *Los Insólitos* to play *merengue típico*, or traditional merengue music from the Dominican countryside. After moving to the US in 1992 they decided to focus instead on bachata, a style of romantic guitar music. Now known as *Los Hermanos Fernández*, they are currently working on their fourth CD of original songs. Their performance in Stony Brook will be the second in the museum’s 2002-2003 Latino Long Island series. The 2:00 PM event is free with museum admission (\$3-\$5) and includes complementary Dominican snacks. For more information call 631-751-0066 x212. ■



John K. Remsen is flanked by his grandson John (left) and son John (right). 1980.



## Long Island Traditions Inc.

Dedicated to the documentation and preservation of Long Island's living cultural heritage.

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## Reverend Raymond Haggood: In Memoriam

By Sydney Hutchinson

All those who were lucky enough to know the Reverend Raymond Haggood were deeply saddened to learn of his passing this past July. Ray touched so many lives in so many ways: through religion, through education, and of course through music. A resident of Roosevelt, he was a spiritual leader for many Long Islanders. Ray was also a popular educator with Long Island Traditions' Ethnic Folk Arts programs, teaching high school students about what it was like to grow up in the South as an African American in the 1950s. His residency at Huntington High School, where he taught choir students both the music and the deeper meaning of "Amazing Grace," will not soon be forgotten. And Ray was the vibrant center of numerous gospel singing groups on Long Island and in Brooklyn, guiding musicians with his guitar and tenor voice to produce beautiful harmonies in service of a higher purpose. Several of these groups are still working to continue Ray's work by creating uplifting and meaningful music.



Reverend Raymond Haggood

One such ensemble is The Nu Singing Aires, which formed two years ago as a reincarnation of the original Singing Aires from 1960s Georgia. The present group, which includes members William Brady, Fred Cummings, Jimmy Jenkins, Peewee Ellis, and Leon Robinson, keeps the tradition going from Brooklyn. The group considers itself special for two reasons. First, each member brings a wide spectrum of musical experience to the table, from rock to country to blues. Second, the members are extraordinarily close, sharing a unique dynamic that can be attributed to Reverend Haggood: "*The thing about [the group] that made it so good was how Ray kept everything focused on the Lord. He made sure that we were well centered. But we also had a lot of fun. We laughed a lot. It made us grow closer, and so our music became closer.*"

The Nu Singing Aires recently completed a tour of Ray's home state of South Carolina, in remembrance of that man who was and will always be "*a spark, an inspiration to us.*" On that tour, they sang some of Reverend Haggood's favorite songs, like "Pass me not, O gentle savior," and "If I had the power to live my life again." Though it has been difficult to keep the group going without Ray's strong voice in the lead, the remaining members continue to strive because of what he taught them: "*keep going and don't stop, whatever you do.*"

Joe Warren sang with Ray in numerous gospel groups over the past four decades including the Thrashing Wonders, the Elder Statesmen and the Gospel Elders. They began their careers together in 1954 when they joined the Golden Tones of Jamaica, Queens. From then on their friendship continued to grow along with their musical talents. In 1959 and 1960 they performed with the Thrashing Wonders (a new incarnation of the Golden Tones) at the Apollo Theater's famous Amateur Night, taking 2nd and then 1st place. There they met the legendary Sam Cooke who invited

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the young singers to Chicago to record an album. Though family and job commitments meant the group had to forego the offer, the group had many productive years together. Joe holds fond memories of their tours in the South, where new songs were often composed spontaneously: *“On the way going South, we’d pass a lot of old, country places: old buildings about to fall down, cars run down. And Billy made the statement, ‘You know what? We came a long ways from these poor folks.’ ‘Man, that’s a song.’ ‘What?’ ‘A Long Line of Poor Folks.’ ‘Well, how would it go?’ Ray came up with something and put it in the style of the Dixie Hummingbirds. By the time we got to the town, we had it.”* The group later recorded that song and actually met the famed Dixie Hummingbirds on a number of occasions. From them they learned three things neither Joe nor Ray ever forgot: neatness, precision, and always to be on time.

Ray’s talents were equally great in other areas, as Joe recalls: *“We could sense he was going to be a minister. In our rehearsal we’d have an opening prayer sing, and we could just hear the ministry in him.”* Ray quit performing for several years while he studied to be a minister with Rev. Mallette of the Greater Second Baptist Church in Freeport; he was then ordained at that same church. Rev. Haggood was always in demand as a guest speaker at churches across Long Island and Queens, since he could sing just as well as he could preach. He also served as assistant pastor to Rev. James Brown at the Community Baptist Church in Rockville Center for several years, taking over the church’s leadership when Rev. Brown became ill.

Joe joined The Gospel Elders of Hempstead in 1990, and before long, he talked his friend into getting back into music. Ray brought his own, unique style of guitar playing and singing to the group. Joe notes, *“out of all musicians, anytime I hear it - that’s Ray. I hear his keys; I hear how he plays soft and light.”* Through the Gospel Elders, whose members include Harold G. Mack, Eddie Bryant, and Leon Major, the two men became involved with Long Island Traditions’ public and educational programs. Though the group is temporarily on hiatus, they plan on resuming rehearsals in early 2003. Joe hopes to organize a tribute concert to benefit Ray’s family with the Gospel Elders and other groups Ray touched on the program.

Reverend Haggood’s funeral services were held at the Greater Second Baptist Church in Freeport, where his teacher, Rev. Mallette’s, son now presides. The Nu Singing Aires, the Gospel Elders, and other groups paid tribute in song. Ray is survived by his wife, two children, and many grandchildren, and by the wonderful music he left to all of us. ■



**The Thrashing Wonders (Ray Haggood far right)**

## Gramps continued from page 1

and calloused from years of hard work. His bald head is always shielded by a navy-blue visored cap. His muscular arms bulge under his shirt.

What more can be said about a man whose pride comes from the product of his own hands? His name is John but to most people he is known simply as “Gramps.” He is a very outspoken and stubborn old man. His main philosophy is that it is either his way or the wrong way.

Gramps started working at a young age and continued working his whole life. He is a bayman in every sense. His whole life is centered around the tide tables and the weather reports. On the high tides he killies and during the low tides, he clams. He always finds the time for his afternoon bottle of beer and a nap. This monotonous schedule is a retirement hobby for Gramps simply because he *has* to work. He instilled this work ethic into all of his children and grandchildren.

Gramps is known in many circles by many different people. He is a real character and is liked by everyone - young and old. He is very personable and most famous for his old stories, jokes, and crooked finger (a finger broken several times and never set).

His greatest joys come during the summer months; he’ll spend the entire winter preparing for them. Winter to him is merely a resting and repair session. He is like a bear, hibernating all winter, concentrating all his energies for the warm weather when once again he can go out into the bay.

I’ll never forget the morning that Gramps turned the whole bay house into a hysterical uproar. On this particular morning, Gramps, like always, was awake before everyone. Instead of his usual killie trip, he decided to burn the trash. Accidentally, he set the bulrushes on fire. Needless to say the entire family was up immediately, running with buckets of water to help extinguish the blaze. Typically, Gramps did not exhibit any of the anxiety that he had bestowed on the rest of us.

Throughout this paper I described Gramps, who I am proud to say was my grandfather. On January 23, 1983, Gramps passed away. In my heart the memories and moments we shared will always live on. ■

## Eugenio and Juan Ortega Play the Colombian Accordion in Freeport

**E**ugenio and Juan Ortega, who lead Valley Stream-based vallenato group *Los Macondos*, were awarded a New York State Council on the Arts Apprenticeship Grant in 2002. Through this program, Juan was able to study traditional Colombian accordion technique and song composition with his father, Eugenio. On Sunday, March 9 at 2:00 PM the pair will give a free lecture-demonstration at the Freeport Memorial Library, showing off Juan’s new skills. Audience members will have the opportunity to ask questions and interact with the artists to learn more about this fascinating music with a 400-year history. For more information call 516-379-3274 or 516-767-8803. ■

# EVENTS OF INTEREST

**PLEASE NOTE:** If you have a Long Island concert or program that focuses on some aspect of traditional culture, drop us a line and we'll put it in our "Events of Interest" column. The deadline is the 1st of October, January and April.

**Saturday, January 11** Scottish folksinger and storyteller Ed Miller. 8pm, Searing-Roslyn United Methodist Church, 134 I. U. Willets Road, Albertson. Call 631-321-1582 for more information.

**Saturday, January 25** Irish music concert featuring Irish fiddler Kevin Burke. Sponsored by Smithtown Historical Society and LI Traditional Music Assoc. 8pm. 211 Middle Country Road (Route 25). \$15 in advance & \$20 at the door. For info and reservations call 631-265-6768.

**Sunday, February 9** Afrodyasia Music Concert. Afro-Cuban music program. Sponsored by LI Museum. 2pm. Admission \$4. 1200 Route 25A, Stony Brook. For more information call (631) 751-0066

**Sunday, February 16** Dominican traditional music featuring Los Hermanos Fernandez at LI Museum in Stony Brook. 2pm. Admission \$4. 1200 Route 25A, Stony Brook. For more information call (631) 751-0066 or Long Island Traditions at 516-767-8803.

**Wednesday, March 5** Rahel Musleah will present a new program on the "Jews of Iraq" at the Plainview-Old Bethpage Library, 999 Old Country Rd. 8 pm. Free admission. Call 516-938-0077 for more information.

**Sunday, March 9** Lecture demonstration on Colombian vallenato music with Eugenio and Juan Ortega of Los Macondos. 2 pm. Freeport Memorial Library, Merrick Road & Ocean Avenue, Freeport. Free admission. For more information call 516-379-3274 or Long Island Traditions at 516-767-8803.

**Tuesday, March 11** Rahel Musleah "Jews of Iraq" program at the Jericho Public Library, 1 Merry Lane. 2 pm. For more information call 516-935-6790.

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