

## Beech Hill Recollections – M. R. French (1950)

[This is part of a letter written to Mrs. Edward Ransom of West Hartland in January 1950, when Rev. French was 77 years old. The reader must remember that the location of their farm was in Sandisfield, Mass., not Colebrook. The road leading to Simons Pond (Lake Marguerite) from our Beech Hill Road is named “Simons Pond Road”, while the portion continuing northward into Sandisfield is named “Beech Hill Road”. Because the French family had close and long associations with Colebrook River, they would traverse Beech Hill Colebrook to go from their farm in the uplands to “The River”.]

“You can probably tell Mr. Vining all that I could tell and more too, unless it should be a few details of the French family history in connection with Beech Hill.

As for the name “Beech Hill” I do not know its origin. Beech trees used to abound in that section, whole thickets of young beeches could be found in some places on the old farm. Father used to cut his “whipstocks” from such thickets and make whips with long lashes that he used in driving his cattle. I am glad to say that he never used them to drive me, for they were capable of inflicting cruel blows. I never knew any people of that name on or around Beech Hill. You probably knew Sam Beech or knew about him, - a famous storyteller and the Winsted cyclone gave him good material for one story, as it blew him some distance together with other debris – perhaps it is not polite to call Sam “debris”, but anyway he was mixed up with it. But as I say, I never heard of any Beeches who had lived, at any time, ancient or modern, on our hill. So I suspect the place was named for the trees, of which there were so many, not only on Beech Hill, but on Beech Hill Mountain.”

“That was some mountain, too! Do you remember when Fred Cotton was killed by being thrown over its rocky sides? And Father’s runaway horse “Old Charlie” ran with him once, I think, on that perilous road, but that was before I was old enough to know much about it. [He is referring to the present-day gravel-surfaced Beech Hill Road.]

We moved to The Hill when I was three years old, in 1876. A man named Dennison Crane (I am not sure I have spelled the first name correctly) had owned it and it consequently bore his name, “The Crane Place.” But Father bought it from Caleb Camp, of Winsted, and did so with the intention of cutting off the timber, sawing the best of it into timber in the old “up and down” mill that stood on the stream that drained the pond, (Simons Pond) and then cutting the rest into cordwood to be burned by French Canadians into charcoal to be sold to the Canaan Company. [The foundations of this mill can still be seen downstream from the point where the road crosses the exit stream of Lake Marguerite.]

I remember riding on the carriage of that old mill while it carried the log to the saw. It was slow progress, the carriage inching its way along, but when the cut had been made and the carriage was “gigged” back to its starting point – my, that was a wild and hair raising ride! The progress was slow and very unlike the more modern circular sawmills, that Charlie (my brother, and your brother-in-law) used to run in later years. The old mill lay in ruins for years before Father was able to dispose of the place and leave it, as he at first expected to do in a few years from the time of purchase.”

“The reason for this delay was the death of Ida, your sister, by drowning in the pond. You and Mary, your sister, were present and saw that tragedy. Charlie was never the same after it and could not bear the thought of staying on Beech Hill and helping Father in the limber and coal business as at first planned. The family moved to Colebrook River for three years, in fact we were living there when the drowning occurred, Father, Mother and I; but afterward we moved back to the old farm, where I lived until I was grown.

Mr. Vining might be interested in the “wild cats” that infested the region when we lived on the farm. They were really not wild cats, but bay lynx, not very dangerous to human beings, but great killers of small game and of poultry, as we learned to our cost. The ledges over east of the farm [the south side of Bull Mountain, on top of which is located the Iron House] harbored these animals and they preyed on our Plymouth Rocks and broke into the hen house to get at them. I trapped several of them and we caged two or three of the smaller cats and kept them for some time, but it was impossible to tame them. In this respect they were “wild cats” and remained wild. Their wild natures resisted all efforts to tame them.”

“The old house was said to have been a hundred years old when we moved there in '76. I suppose the ruins are largely gone now.” [Ed Simons, whose family owned it beginning in the eighteenth century, told me that it was built sometime during the 1760s. The early presence of the Simons (it should be spelled “Simonds”) family is the reason for the name of the pond, although this was changed early in the twentieth century when the McClave family purchased all the land surrounding this body of water, which they renamed Lake Marguerite, after the eldest McClave girl. I photographed the house in 1947, when it was in a state of near collapse. By 1952 it had gone into its cellar hole.]

“Beech Hill was a little world by itself, hidden away in the hills and woods, but it is only a memory to me now.”

This is all that we have of the letter written by Mr. French, but it touches upon many points of interest concerning the north central section of Colebrook known as Beech Hill. His reference to riding the carriage in the sawmill is of particular interest as it explains something that has puzzled me for years. We have accounts of more than one sawyer working in the mill non-stop for two weeks or more. Their wives would bring them their food, and they would gather what sleep they needed propped up in a corner catching forty winks while the log traversed to the end, whereupon he would awaken and set it back (known as “gigging”) to the starting point and the process would repeat itself. Apparently the progress made was slow enough to allow for catching a significant amount of sleep. The ledgers of the Lawrence family show that the father, his sons and sometimes a hired man would spell each other in the mill, avoiding having one person working around the clock for days on end.

**Historic Bytes**

Bob Grigg