

Colebrook River in 1914

The following is an account written by Herbert T. Nixon, a former resident of Colebrook River, some thirty years ago:

“Our house was next to the last one on the Riverton Road below the Spencer Bridge. From our windows we could look down the river, which flowed past our back yard and see in the distance through a gap in the trees, the house on the other bank, which was on the farm that later became the Gilbert Home camp (Happy Valley). I do not know who owned the property during those years, but that information of course may be found in Colebrook land records, nor do I know what years the various occupants lived there.

The William Spindler family was there when we first moved in, during the summer of 1914. The Children used to wade across the river sometimes when the water was low, (those were the days when you went everywhere barefooted in summer) and with the Seymours, who lived in the last house down the road, we walked to school together, a distance of a little over a mile. When the river was frozen, they sometimes crossed on the ice. Otherwise, they had to walk up the road on Woodruff Hill and down and across the Spencer Bridge. The private road from the house to the Woodruff Hill Road must have been nearly ½ mile long. The land around buildings and along the river and back to the foot of the hills was quite a large area of flat, mostly tillable land. It was probably the largest such flat area as any farm in the village. It was sometimes called ‘the flat.’ Mr. Spindler farmed it with a team of horses. He had cows, chickens and pigs. He wove baskets from the willows that grew along the riverbank for children to carry their lunches to school in.”

“The next family was that of Charles Gernaunt. I believe he had one daughter. They used to joke about him mowing his potato patch before he could dig the potatoes, the weeds were so high. They eventually moved up into the village to a house on the Tolland Road.

I think the next family was that of George (Tim) Bull. I believe he had five daughters and one son. He moved down to the farm from a house in the center of the village. He was a teamster who hauled lumber from the sawmills around the area to Winsted. One of his daughters was Florence Albrecht, who lived in Riverton. I do not know his other married daughter’s names or where they lived.”

“I never knew the name or much about the last family who lived there except that it was a Polish family. It must have been a Saturday in the autumn of 1924 when my mother looked out our kitchen window and saw flames coming out around the eaves of their house. She called out that the house across the river was on fire and ran to the telephone, which was on one of the party lines of which there were then two in Colebrook River. The line was busy, so she broke into the conversation with the news. The word quickly spread all through the village. I jumped on my bicycle and pedaled up to the Euerle’s house just above the bridge. Fred Euerle was just cranking up his truck to go, and I jumped in with him. We got to the fire with Arthur Vonn and Wilfred Roy from Vonn’s Garage right behind us. Mr. Seymour came wading across the river. People were standing in the yard looking helplessly at the burning home. Calvin Humphrey handed a stack of water pails to men in his store and they were put to use bringing water from the river to throw on the woodshed to keep the fire from spreading to the barn. We

carried most of the furniture out of the first floor before burning plaster falling from the ceiling drove us out.”

“Then Wilfred Roy and I picked up a two by four that was laying inside the woodshed and used it as a battering ram to knock the boards off the end of the shed nearest the house. The chimney was all that was left of the house, but the sheds and barn were saved.

The family moved to Robertsville and we later heard that the Gilbert Home had bought the property for its summer camp. Edwin Merritt put up a large building where the house used to stand for the camp. A year or two later the barn burned while the Home children were in the camp. A fire truck came out from Winsted that time.”



This photo shows the west side of the main cottage that Ed Merritt built at Happy Valley Camp, owned by the Gilbert Home in Winsted. Several hundred children, residents of the home, attended the camp throughout the years.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg