

## The Art of Direction Giving

Recently a friend of mine from grade school days called to say that he was visiting his son in eastern Massachusetts and would like to come down for a visit. Having spent several summers here as a teenager, and also having paid one or two visits in the mean time, he was reasonably familiar with our road system. The problem in this case was that instead of coming to Colebrook from central Long Island, he was now to come in from the northeast, a new route for him.

As I usually do in cases like this, rather than give the route that I use, I will simplify the directions by sending them along the major highways; for example, in this case, I recommended taking the Mass Pike (Interstate 90) as far west as Lee, then picking up U.S. 20 east to Route 8, then following along that route to Colebrook, where he knew where Beech Hill Road connects with 8 nearly opposite the boat launch site.

Now I travel the route from here to the Mass Pike (if I'm heading east) fairly often, and the route that I take is Route 8 to New Boston and Route 57, then east on 57 through the towns of Tolland, West Granville, and Granville. Just past the center of Granville there is a road going off to the left named The Westfield Road. The reason I never continue east on Route 57 to its intersection with Routes 10 and 202 in Southwick is twofold; the back road to Westfield is considerably shorter and Routes 10 and 202, as they pass through the city of Westfield contain two rotaries and other major traffic bottlenecks, whereas the route from Granville comes into the western reaches of Westfield, and by making a left turn onto three block long Washington Street, you find yourself on U.S. Route 20, only one block west of Routes 10 and 202. A left onto these routes will lead directly to the interchange with the Mass Pike.

Let's be realistic though; this is no set of directions to give someone unfamiliar with the region unless you don't really want to see him.

In due course my friend, piloted by his son, arrived in our driveway and of course one of the first things asked was if they had any problems getting here. The answer was that they hadn't taken my directions, but had followed a route recommended by their GPS on board their car. That route took them from the Mass Pike intersection at Westfield south to Southwick, then west along Route 57 to Route 8, etc.

I suppose it is the fate of most of us old fogies to forget about the wonders of modern technology. The realization suddenly struck me that I had become obsolete when it came to giving directions. That thought brought to mind recollections from the past about people who were really good at giving directions (and as an aside, I do not consider myself to be in that category).

The automobile era, for all intents and purposes, began about the turn of the twentieth century. Roads then were intended for horse and oxen drawn wagons and other wheeled vehicles. In the springtime they were bottomless pits of soupy mud; in winter they weren't plowed or maintained. The average person owning a motor vehicle probably seldom ventured more than ten miles from their home base. As the highway system evolved, pleasure drives, especially on the weekends, became popular.

The earliest predecessor of what we know today as a road map did not employ maps or drawings at all, merely word descriptions such as: "Proceeding west out of town, after three tenths of a mile, find a red barn with a good-sized boulder along its right side. The road branches at this point, and the left fork leads down hill two tenths of a mile to

an intersection ....” And so on, you can see how it went. About 1932 the roadmap as we know it was invented. The first ones were printed in black and red and were in small booklet format.

Everyone didn’t have printed directions, and anyone within shouting distance of the road was likely to be asked for directions. In the days before numbered (or named) roads, this was not necessarily as easy as you might think. As is always the case, some were better at giving directions than others, and I was fortunate to have known one of the most colorful direction-givers for miles around.

Clarence Osborne was his name, and he was the miller at the Leonard Grain Company’s mill on North Main Street, across the river from the present sewer plant. He was in a particularly good spot for giving directions; it was just far enough out of town that the motorist didn’t feel rushed by a large volume of traffic, and could safely pull off the road at the mill, which had a large cleared area in front to facilitate loading and unloading trucks and wagons. It was located on Connecticut Route 8, a major north-south trunk route, as it was known as in those days. Clarence was in my youth known as “an old timer”, and spoke with the local dialect, (something else that has faded from the scene, the same as direction giving).

In the course of any day in summer, he probably fielded four or five queries. I have heard him give directions to New Boston innumerable times, and he never varied one syllable; it was as though he had a recording device in him.

“You’re headed for New Boston, are you? Well, I’ll tell you. You keep on going the same direction you’re headed now, and about a quarter of a mile from here you will come to a crossroads. There is a garage and blacksmith shop there. It’s run by the Nelson Brothers, John and Bill;(John’s the better of the two when it comes to smithing.) Go right on through that intersection. Another quarter of a mile and you’ll see two big fields on your right. One will have corn, the other is resting this year; next year it will be the other way around. Keep right on going. Another mile and you’ll cross the Colebrook line. Keep right on straight and at the bottom of the long hill you’ll cross Sandy Brook. Directly on the other side of the bridge is the farm of Homer Deming. Homer has the very best dairy farm in this area; all of his cattle are registered. Keep right on going, and a couple of miles further on and you will be in Colebrook River. There is a farm on your left, right below what’s left of the ski jump, which is owned by Fred Euerle. Fred has the best sweet corn. If you want any, that’s where to buy it”.

He continued northward, not missing anything of (local) importance, all the way to New Boston. And New Boston, as you all know, is directly north of Winsted on Route 8. Just saying to keep on Route 8 and you’ll come to it would have sufficed, but that was not the way to give directions. Not only that, at the end of the instructions you couldn’t say, “You can’t miss it.”

I can see the handwriting on the wall; my method of direction giving as well as that of Clarence Osborne is a thing of the past. The occasional first-time visitor from California is better equipped to find the smallest cabin at the end of a local dead-end road than he would be by asking one of us locals, but will it tell them where to buy the best sweet corn?