

## Telling Tales

In the course of one's life there will be a smattering of strange or humorous events that you can look back upon with either a smile or the shake of your head. Here are some of mine, not in any particular order, but rather as they pop into my head.

Back around the 1940s, the pastor of the Colebrook Congregational Church was a gentleman named Henry Wharton. He was the minister there for a good many years, and was a thoroughly well liked man by all who knew him. One of his close friends was Bob Whiting, from North Colebrook. Bob also didn't have an enemy in the world that I ever heard of. Somehow these two friends got into the habit of calling each other precisely at 7:00 every morning. If Bob was the caller, he would say "Good morning, Bishop, this is the Mayor", and if Bob's phone rang first, he would hear "Good morning Mr. Mayor, this is the Bishop". Then they would say whatever they had in mind, and then hang up and go about their daily routine. This kept up for quite a long time, then one morning at exactly 7:00 AM, Reverend Wharton's phone rang and the voice at the other end said "Good morning, this is the Bishop". Before he could finish the sentence, Wharton interrupted him with "Bishop hell!, I'm the Bishop, you're the mayor!"

Well I suppose you will guess the ending of this before you read my ending, but the situation was this: some prominent member of the religious community had died overnight, and a bishop in Hartford was contacting various members of the clergy to inform them of the scheduling of events pertaining to the funeral. Reverend Wharton thought it too good a story to keep to himself, so called Bob and told him, and Bob, always a connoisseur of good humor, made sure the rest of the town knew all about it before sunset.

My father was a game warden during the time of WWII. His exact title was patrolman, a position now long gone, replaced by "conservation officer". The reason he had the job was that all of the eligible men who had held such positions were in the service, and my father had an exemption, which I will tell you about later. He patrolled an area on the West Branch of the Farmington River from the Massachusetts line in Colebrook River to the iron bridge in Pleasant Valley and Sandy Brook from its confluence with Still River to the Beech Hill Bridge.

The district manager for the state forestlands, S. E. Parker, whose office was in the building still used for the same purpose along the river in Barkhamsted, lived in a house long since removed that sat next to the Barkhamsted Senior Center. There used to be a barn thirty yards or so south of his house. This was pulled down sometime either in the late 30s or early 40s, and in the area inside the cellar walls, (there were only two, on the south and west, as it had been built into the side of a hill) Parker had established a vegetable garden. He had a green thumb, I guess, as it was a nice looking garden.

Each day my father would go by that barn twice, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Along about mid-summer he spotted a nice, fat woodchuck happily munching away on a row of carrots. The next day the same thing; it was perfectly plain that this rodent had found himself a patch of heaven on earth and at Mr. Parker's expense. My father, figuring that he should look out for the interests of a man who was not only a friend, but also his boss, in a way, brought along his Smith & Wesson .38 and that very day popped that animal with one shot. Then he figured perhaps he should tell Parker what the gunshot had been about, so he stopped in at the office and gave out the good

news. Poor Parker sat open mouthed, and then said that the woodchuck, although wild, was sort of a pet. The garden had been planted expressly for him, containing only vegetables he liked; Parker would watch him every morning as he ate his breakfast, and it made him feel good the rest of the day.

Why didn't Uncle Sam call up my father, Paul, during the Second World War? It was because he was able to follow directions to the letter, that's why! My father had been born in 1904, so would have been 37 years old when Pearl Harbor occurred, well within the age bracket of men the Selective Service were looking for. One day he received a form from said Selective Service, the purpose of which was to ascertain the eligibility of the addressee. Part of the questions were: What kind of work do you do? If you work in a factory, don't say you work in a factory, tell exactly what you do in that factory. If you work at a bench, don't say that; say exactly what you do at that bench.

Now my father owned a small farm; we had two or three cows, a horse, a flock of hens, a goat, two dogs, several cats, both barn and house variety, and when he got done with his farm work, he did carpentry and general repairs. They want to know exactly what I do, do they? OK, I'll fill out their form. "In the morning, the alarm goes off at 5:30, I turn off the alarm, throw back the bed blankets, swing around and put my feet on the floor... (then he went into minute detail how he put on every item of clothing, how he went out to the backhouse {or do you prefer to call yours an "outhouse?}, what he did in the backhouse, how he went next to the barn, carrying a 12 quart milk pail, how he gripped the part of the cow that the milk comes from, etc, etc) I'm sure you get the drift. Anyway, off the government form went, and in due time he received a Selective Service card with his name on it and containing the classification of 1-A (H).

1-A, is it? Guess I'll be hearing from them any day now. So he waited, and waited, and no call-up notice was forthcoming. As a matter of fact, it never came. The war ended and the boys came home, one of whom was a fellow named John Samulas, who had been with the Conn. Dept. of Fisheries and Game before the war, and now had his job back. Johnny used to drop in frequently at our place, and one day my father mentioned that he thought it strange that he had never been called up, what with being 1-A and all. John said, "Do you still have that card? Let me look at it." When he saw the (H), he started to laugh; that was the code letter meaning that you were insane, or at best mentally unstable. I can still hear my father saying, "I only did what they asked me to do. I filled out that form exactly the way they wanted!" He didn't do it to be funny; he was just following directions.

## **Telling Tales II**

When I went to the Center School from 1938 until graduating in 1946, if you didn't live close enough to walk, a motor vehicle picked you up and brought you home. Notice I said "Vehicles", because Colebrook had yet to see its first bus; transportation was accomplished by means of private autos, of which there were four in service. I rode in two over those eight years; Don Brown's 1929 Ford station wagon (with a square, wooden body. It seated five, if I remember correctly), and Felix Jasmin's 1940 or 41 Chevy four-door sedan. Early on Felix had a 29 Ford exactly like Brownie's, and one of the funniest things I ever saw and heard happened in that Ford. It had a horn that sounded like "Eerga", only very loud; you could hear it from a half mile away. Felix's

wife, Irene, used to do the driving, as Felix was usually working at his carpentering job. Before going further, you have to know that there was a fellow in town who was not the most universally well-liked man. I won't tell you his name, although I don't believe he has any descendants living in these parts, but for those of you old-timers, he was referred to (behind his back) as "Fish Face". Now you know who I mean! Irene, like so many others, couldn't stand the sight of the guy. One afternoon, as she was driving her load of students home, the horn on the old Ford had developed a short circuit, and every time we went over a bump, the horn would go "Eerga"! If you think we have bumpy roads now, they were a whole lot bumpier in those days. As we drove across Phelps Flats, taking the two Passini children home on Prock Hill, we could see a car approaching, heading south. Sure enough, it was Fish Face's car! Irene got a firm grip on the wheel, stared straight ahead and prepared herself for the pass. Just as we drew abreast, wouldn't you know that we went over a bump, and the horn let out a loud toot, whereupon Fish Face smiled, waved, and tooted back. Irene's window was open, and she stuck her head out and yelled, "Not you, you SOB!!" She immediately went into a loud conversation with herself about how Felix was going to fix that GD horn tonight before he got his supper! Among her passengers were her daughter, Lea and son Paul, and all of us wanted to laugh so badly that tears were coursing down our cheeks, but we didn't dare laugh, or there would have been hell to pay! Lea and Paul are gone now, but we always couldn't help laughing the rest of our lives when we thought of that day. Years (and I mean years) later I asked Irene if she remembered that loose wire on the horn on the old Ford, and did she ever! She went off on another blast about Fish Face, bumpy roads, and Model As. She never did see the humor of it. I should add that Irene had a voice that when she got mad, you could hear her a mile up wind.

There was a time when she wasn't too happy with me, but it really wasn't my fault. This is what happened:

When we graduated from high school, the Korean War was in full swing, and most of the boys couldn't wait to graduate and enlist before the war ended. A couple of weeks after graduation, I had my father drive me down to Torrington, to the old Post Office on Main Street, to join the Navy. My father and Felix Jasmin had been working on a carpentry job together, and had just finished, and Felix had a couple of his tools end up in my father's toolbox. On the way to Torrington, we stopped at Jasmin's house to return them, and found Paul out back of the garage splitting firewood. "Where you headed?" "Going down to join the Navy." "Wait a sec, I'll go with you." So my father put Felix's tools in the garage, Paul went into the house for a couple of minutes, then came out and we went to Torrington.

When we got there, the recruiter asked us when we wanted to go in; tomorrow, next week, two weeks from now, or what? We hadn't expected that question, but after giving it some thought, figured that one week was kind of short notice, but two weeks would be about right, so two weeks it was. We signed whatever documents the Navy required, and went home, happy as clams over how easy that had gone.

My father and I had hardly got in the door when the phone rang, and it was Irene. The first thing I had to do was hold the receiver of the phone as far from my ear as my arm permitted. To say that she was angry about being left in the dark about her youngest going into the service without consulting her or letting her know what was planned, would be an understatement. How was I supposed to know that Paul never said anything

to her? He had gone right past her in the kitchen, to get something from his room, I suppose. Poor Irene had just seen the last of Paul's three older brothers successfully finish tours of duty in the Army and Navy; all had seen action. She had suffered through nearly all of WWII and part of Korea, and now she faced four more years without any time to prepare herself. Now I can appreciate how she felt, but at the time, the thought that we were planning to do something that might cause our parents anxiety never crossed our minds.

About a week after joining up, we received a notice that our induction date had been set back two weeks, so now we had to wait a month! It seemed like an eternity. Unknown to either Paul or me, our friends in town were planning a grand send-off for us. It was to be held in Fred Strampach's new house on Bunnell Street. The day before we were to leave (from Hartford at 6:00 AM!), Fred Williams dropped by to pick me up to play baseball, he said. Of course, we ended up at Fred's and half the town was already there it seemed. We had clams, beer, good times, more clams, more beer, more good times, and somewhere in the wee small hours of the next morning we were taken home, only to get rooted out of bed around 4:00 AM to meet the bus at the steps of the Hartford Post Office at 6:00. We each had a three-page set of instructions as to what we were supposed to do, and one of them said to refrain from drinking alcohol for twenty-four hours prior to reporting for duty. That really had us worried, as the guys had taken up a collection for us and we each got \$37.00, if I remember correctly. This was about what the tax collector of Colebrook could expect to gather on a good day. In 1952 it was a lot of money. Anyway, what with the party and the collection, there was no way we were coming home without joining up; if the Navy wouldn't take us, we would try the Marines, if they refused us, next would be the Air Force, and if all else failed, we would enlist in the Army. Thinking back on it, it was ridiculous how happy and relieved we were when we passed our physicals. The next day, August 12, 1952 would find us at the Naval Training Center in Bainbridge, Maryland.

### **Telling Tales III**

A person doesn't have to belong to a fire department very long before he begins to build up a collection of strange and unusual happenings. Back in the early 70s, an unforgettable set of mishaps took place in Winsted.

Mike Nicosia, who was the captain of the aerial ladder at the time, owned an old farm just south of town on the Torrington Road, now known as Conn. Route 800. The barn was of the traditional New England type, two stories high and about forty feet square. It had outlived its usefulness, and looked it. Engine One used to hold their fire practices on Tuesday nights, and one day Mike approached the captain of E-1, Clayton Webb, and held a conversation much like this:

"Webbie, I've got a problem. That old barn of mine needs to come down, but the new state regulations are messing things up. I can't have it burned down as a fire drill, because it is too close to the built up area of the town. If I have it torn down, now I come head to head with another regulation that states no piece of wooden construction material over four feet long can be disposed of in a landfill, and that would make the cost prohibitive. How about next Tuesday, you hold your drill down near Smith's greenhouse (Still River), and if you just happen to see smoke, take your time getting there".

That sounded fine to Webbie, and when Tuesday rolled around, he brought the company up to speed as to the proceedings that evening. Oh, I almost forgot one of the main aspects of this situation – Mike had an old, long-unused auto that had been parked for years between the barn and the house. There would be a couple of washtubs in the trunk containing beer on ice; don't let anything happen to that car!

The company assembled a quarter of a mile down the road, and made preparations for the evening's drill, only it consisted mostly of talk, because there was no need to deploy any equipment, because they were going to be moving out shortly. They didn't have long to wait, before long one of the guys said, "Looks like smoke coming from somewhere near Mike Nicosia's place". Everybody jumped on board the truck and off they went toward the rising column of smoke. Sure enough, Mike's barn was on fire! Then a problem arose: a passing motorist, seeing the smoke coming from the barn, quickly drove to the nearest firebox and pulled the lever. At the same time the firemen arrived, the alarm began to sound. In practically no time at all, other firemen began to arrive, followed immediately by engines three and four. Of course, Engine One put the fire out with minimal damage to the barn. Chief Porter Griffin was soon filled in on what was going on, and soon everyone went back to their firehouses, or in the case of Engine One, down the road to resume their Tuesday night practice. Engine One had been warned by the chief to keep a close watch on the barn, "because you never know about these barn fires, quite often they will restart!"

OK, so now the entire Winsted Fire Department was in on the secret; everybody stayed around their respective fire stations just in case the unthinkable should happen and the fire re-ignited. They didn't have long to wait; once again one of the men of Engine One said, "Looks like Mike's barn is on fire again". Slowly this time (there was no need to hurry, the whole department was in on it) the firemen climbed back on board the truck, and wouldn't you know it – the blasted fire alarm went off again! This wasn't supposed to happen! Now, instead of one fire truck, the whole Winsted Fire Dept. showed up, and of course along with them a fair number of civilian gawkers. Men swarmed over the trucks; hoses were deployed, and for a moment it looked as though Mike's barn would live to see another day, but wait, what's happening here? Some hoses are directed over the roof of the barn, some (more than one) were trained at the car parked between the house and barn, the house itself was kept constantly saturated, and there seemed to be an enactment of an old Keystone Kops silent movie, with everybody moving at breakneck speed, but nothing was getting done.

Eventually, the battle was lost; the barn collapsed in a huge shower of sparks, but nothing else burned, not the house, not the grass between the house and barn, and most importantly, not the old car. There must have been more than one Winsted resident that went home that night wondering about the abilities of their fire department.

The story was not quite ended, however; during the height of the conflagration, Ivan Dockum, the owner of Moore and Alvord Insurance, who held the policy on the barn, showed up. Immediately Mike went over to him and said that there would not be a claim filed, and then he filled him in on the particulars. No, Ivan wouldn't hear of it; he held the fire policy on that barn, and he was going to settle up. He and Mike then got in Ivan's car and drove over to Joes's Diner, where the Moore & Alvord Insurance Co. bought two cups of coffee, after which Ivan said, "There, now we're even!"

The Winsted Fire Dept. was and is an exceptionally well-trained group of dedicated men and women; don't get the wrong impression about them from this true story.

There was a small house fire next to Burwell's Lumber Co. Any fire near a lumber company is of great concern, because once started, they are nearly impossible to extinguish. As with any fire call, speed is of the essence, but as I said, in this case, even more so. Fortunately the fire was confined to the house with practically no damage. As the hoses were being rolled up and equipment stored, someone noticed that "Gus" Griswold's boots were on the wrong feet. Well, he took some good-natured ribbing about it, but for Gus, the worst was yet to come. They painted a large "R" on one boot, and a large "L" on the other. Both were in bright red trim paint!

Town dumps used to be constantly set on fire; in some case, they smoldered for years, what with new material being added all the time. If the wind was right, you always knew the direction of the nearest dump. Norfolk's town dump was situated right on the Colebrook town line, just off of U.S. Route 44, and sometimes, when the west wind picked up, the fire would escape and begin a new life as a forest fire in Colebrook. There was a good-sized stand of white pine on Colebrook's side, so there usually was a combustible layer of pine needles. When the alarm went out for the Norfolk dump, there was always additional equipment needed; twenty-two rifles. The out-of-control flames would scorch the rats that infested that, and all dumps, and they afforded target practice for the fire fighters when the flames were under control. Now there's a long list of things that can't happen any more!

On some days it is difficult to muster very many firemen, due to working out of town, etc. Response time for something like a chimney fire doesn't take many minutes, but once, years ago, I believe a record was set that will probably never be broken. The chimney fire was at Godenzi's farmhouse. Any old Colebrookite knew that Mary Godenzi was unequalled as a cook; her baked goods were to die for. On that day, even though it was near mid-day, I don't think any of the twenty-five-man roster was absent. It didn't take long to put out the fire, but the cleanup detail took as long as it took to clean up every last crumb!

### **Telling Tales IV**

When I was very young, before starting school even, I lived on Beech Hill in Colebrook. In the 1930s, there were very few occupied houses up there. In 1930 there were no year-round residents until Donald Brown and his wife and daughter bought the old Riou place (80 Beech Hill Rd.). My folks came three months later, and shortly thereafter my mother's brother, John Crosby, bought the old Hurd place diagonally across the road from our house. It was before my uncle was married, and I worshipped the ground he walked on. Thinking back on those times, I must have been a royal pain, but I grew up with some good memories.

A short distance up what is today referred to as Chapin Road, which ran through his property, there was a nice spring. There was a ceramic pipe about three feet long and two and a half feet wide that had encased the spring, and in those days before electricity, was used for refrigeration purposes. We usually had a cream canister along with extra butter in there. It had a wooden cover. I distinctly remember the day when Uncle John

took me over there and as we approached, took me aside and told me to be very quiet, and he would show me something. So we quietly approached the spring, carefully removed the cover, and he said, "Look down in the water and you will see a monkey". This is one of those moments that come only once in a lifetime, it can never happen twice. I must have seen my reflection in the water before, but this took me completely by surprise.

Another of his tricks occurred when he waited for me to come walking across the dirt road to his house. He had a clear shot, and the houses were only about one hundred yards apart. When I opened the kitchen door, there he was, standing on a chair in the middle of the kitchen floor, holding a broom handle that was pressing a large can to the kitchen ceiling. He was in the act of attempting to reach something on the floor, but wasn't having any luck. "Come here, Robert, you're just in time to help me. Hold onto this stick for a second". Well, you know what happened, of course, and so do I – now. At the time I only did as I was told, and ended up holding a large (I think it was a number 10 can) container full of water, it turned out, to the ceiling. Eventually, of course, I had to drop the broom handle and lurch out of the way, but failed miserably, ending up soaking wet.

Before he was drafted into the Army Air Corp at the beginning of WWII, he had purchased a new Chrysler car. It was really a beauty – light green and with lots of chrome, and it was fast! One day we were coming home along Route 183 north of Colebrook Center, and when we entered the straightaway past Mills', he poured on the gas. He nudged me gently in the ribs and without saying a word indicated that I should look at the speedometer. It read exactly 100! Then he added a little more gas and edged the speed up to 103, before slowing down to normal speed as we got to Hubbard's place. "Do you know why I went to 103? That's so you can say you went over one hundred miles per hour, but don't tell your mother"!

Many years later, when he was past 80, we were looking over a collection of old family photos. Quite a few were taken in Nova Scotia, where his mother had come from. Many of the pictures had no identification; some we knew, but a few we didn't have a clue. After a while Uncle John looked at me and said "You know, Robert, I'm the oldest survivor in my generation, and you are five years older than your next oldest cousin, so we can say that any of these photos are anybody we want, and there's nobody to call us on it"! Afterwards one of us would say out of the blue "I came across a really good photo of great grandfather yesterday." "Did you really?" "No."

Back in the 30s and 40s, there were nearly twenty summer cabins between our farm at the top of Beech Hill and the eastern end of Beech Hill Road, down in The River. We used to supply most of them with milk, butter and eggs, which I would deliver with my bicycle, equipped with three wire baskets and slivers of wooden shingles to keep things in place as the bike rattled over the gravel road. A few of these summer places had children, all of whom came from New York City. They loved to come up to the farm to see the animals and feed the chickens. My father used to tell them the tallest tales, always with a completely straight face, and most of them swallowed the stories hook, line and sinker. Take milking cows, for instance. He told them that one "spout" gave plain milk, one gave cream, one was for vanilla and the other was for chocolate. Another story about milking (none of these folks were up when the milking was done, so he was fairly

safe) was that the fastest way to milk a cow, in case you were in a hurry, was to put the pail under the udder, then pump the tail. Milk would come out of all spouts at once.

Chickens supplied some pretty bazaar explanations. He had several convinced that the rooster was the one who laid the eggs. The hens let the rooster how many eggs to lay in a day. This is why you never had more than twelve hens to one rooster; more, and it would kill the rooster.

There was no postal delivery on Beech Hill until after WWII. We had a line of boxes down on Sandy Brook Road by the bridge, and someone had to either walk down (two miles), or else pick it up on the way home. Down “the back hill”, where the summer cottages were, there was no delivery either, and they didn’t even have boxes down in Colebrook River. What they did have was one wooden box with a lid that was hinged at the back. It was nailed on top of a fence post near the little bridge over Chappell Brook, the stream that came down off of Beech Hill, and on it was written, “Colebrook River Ski Jump.” As many of the residents on that portion of the road were only visiting friends or relatives for perhaps a week or two, there was no way for them to be contacted, unless they had the four magic words on the address. The postman put any letter so addressed, regardless of the name, in that box, and most of the people on the hill would give me a nickel to pick their mail up and bring it up that long, steep hill. Believe me, all those nickels were well earned!

Another source of income derived from that steep section of road were the fees earned by extricating autos mired in the bottomless mud. In the springtime there would come the inevitable knock on the door delivered by some poor soul who didn’t know any better than to attempt to drive on a dirt road with cars having small wheels. My father would hitch up the horse and go down to the half-submerged vehicle. If it was a fairly new, shiny car, especially if it had New York license plates, the fee was \$2.00; otherwise, for an older model, probably from not too far away, it was \$1.00. Didn’t pay all the taxes, but it helped.

### **Telling Tales V**

Lots of things used to happen in and around the Colebrook Store. In the days prior to 1949, when the Consolidated School went on line, the students at the old Center School were given free reign to do just about anything we wanted to during recess and lunch hour; we just had to be back at the bell, or suffer the consequences. These consequences might be losing recess time, or in the case of the boys, clapping erasers or worse yet, ring the bell at the end of recess. These duties were the domain of the girls, and if a boy did those duties, never mind for what reason, it took a long time to live down.

One of the favorite places to visit during lunchtime was the Colebrook Store. Originally, the porch at the front was made of heavy planks, and jugged out further than the concrete that exists today. On it were two Texaco gasoline pumps and the four columns. One day George Gray, Sr. backed his flatbed farm truck up to the pumps and put some gasoline in the tank, then went in the store to settle up with “Stottsie” (Clarence F. Stotts, the owner and proprietor). At that time, several of us older boys arrived on the scene from our school down the hill, and for the first time realized that the underside of

the bed of the truck was just a couple of inches lower than the top of the deck of the porch. Well, the truck was empty, so it didn't weigh all that much, and by dividing ourselves into two teams, one on each side of the bed, we were able to lift the truck up high enough so as to set it down on the deck. It took just enough weight off the rear tires so that when George came out of the store and started up the truck, and released the clutch, nothing happened except for the rear tires to spin helplessly. We were around the corner of the store laughing ourselves silly. Pretty soon George got out of the cab, surveyed the situation, and saw (or more likely heard) us, and the jig was up. We lifted him off the deck and he was on his way.

Mr. Stotts was the kindest man imaginable. He liked people (most of them anyway), especially children. This was during the depression, and the majority of us came from homes that had lots of love and good times, but not much hard cash, especially for such frivolities as "allowance money" for children, consequently, there were times when some few children had the means to buy a few pieces of penny candy, and others had nothing. This wasn't a problem, I never remember feeling left out or deprived. But it didn't sit well with Mr. Stotts; he would wait until the "spenders" left the store, then he would see that everyone got a little something before returning to school. While I think of it, one of the products that was universally liked was "Cracker Jacks", consisting of caramelized popcorn with a prize in each box. Before the war, these prizes were all made in Japan, and they were all superior quality, we felt. When the war started, all of these toys were made here, I suppose. Anyway, the quality just wasn't there, and the luster soon wore off Cracker Jacks.

Mr. Stotts, although a kind and friendly soul, was not what you would call a good businessman. Everybody in town had a story about him, and as far as I know, all were true. Once, during the war, when canned goods were rationed, there were precious few items on the shelves. One day Nelly Mills was planning for company, and needed two cans of Campbell soup (lets say it was cream of tomato). She had one can, and called down to the store to ask Stotts if he had another. He did, but only one (which was all she wanted), but he didn't want to completely empty his shelves of tomato soup, so he got in his old car, drove the five miles or so to the foot of Lake Street in Winsted, where there used to be a First National Store, went in, bought one can of tomato soup (it would have been no more than .08 cents in those days), got back in his car, drove to Nelly's, sold her the can of soup for .08 cents, then went back to his store, where he still had one can of tomato soup on the shelf. Nothing like having a complete inventory.

There is a place in Granville, Mass., where they make a superior brand of cheddar cheese; that's its name, Granville Cheddar Cheese. It was made by one family for I don't know how long, until the family got tired of the business, and sold out to another family. Unfortunately, they developed second thoughts, and eventually started the business up again. Now there were two Granville Cheeses, and there soon developed bad feelings between the two families. Now as it turns out, the original family, being of good old Yankee stock, and thus died in the wool Republicans, as opposed to the new family who were (perish the thought) Democrats, managed to keep many of their old customers, one of whom was Clarence Stotts. One day Granville Cheese (the Republican kind) appeared on the shelves of the Colebrook Store, and in short order a large following developed. After a while, a day arrived when Sally Hale ran low on Granville Cheese, and sent her son, Bill, down to get another pound. "Don't sell it any more" said Stotts. "Got so as to

take up all of my time just selling cheese; I can't have that, so I sent it all back – no more cheese". And there wasn't, not another ounce of cheese did he sell. Of course he didn't sell much of anything else, for that matter, but at least he wasn't burdened with selling something that kept him busy all day.

One day Jimmy Otto, who lived on Millbrook Road back when it still had its proper name of Hart Street, broke his lantern, the one he used at night when he milked his cow. Now he knew, as did everybody who went into the Colebrook Store, that there were three of them hanging up high on the wall behind the cash register. Jim goes down to get himself a new lantern, "Stottsie, I need to buy one of those lanterns". Mr. Stotts slowly turned around, so as to get a better view of what was behind him, and then slowly turned back to Jimmy and said, "Can't do it Jimmy, you see, it has been so long since I sold a lantern, that I'm darned if I know where to get a replacement. No, I guess I'll just hang on to these". And he did. Those three lanterns were among the inventory of the store when the auction was held after his death in 1953.

Mr. & Mrs. Stotts lived on the second floor above the store, and on occasion I would go up there accompanied by my father, and I recall one Christmas seeing the only tree that I have ever seen that had real lighted candles on the branches. There were lots of them, too. They were really pretty, and I said to my father after we left and were on our way home that I wanted us to have lighted candles on our tree as well. I still remember him shaking his head and saying that those candles were the most dangerous thing he had ever seen, and he couldn't understand why the whole building hadn't burned down. When I got a little older, I remember thinking how fortunate I had been to witness those lighted candles, perched at the ends of the branches of Stotts' Christmas tree, because I knew that it was something that I would never see again.

## **Telling Tales VI**

Lake Marguerite lies completely within the State of Massachusetts, with the southern shore being separated by only a very few yards from the Colebrook boundary. It is a natural body of water, one of those gifts left by the retreating glacier 15,000 years or so in the past. Colebrook doesn't have such a water body; every one within our boundaries is the result of some man made endeavor. In the old days, ponds were created to supply water to power the waterwheels that ran the mills, forges and shops. The outflow from Lake Marguerite was harnessed long ago by means of a flume that supplied water to a sawmill just east of the old roadway. The lake entered the pages of history when the original settlers arrived long prior to the War of Independence and populated the area now known as the Roberts Road and Beech Hill Road section. (The Massachusetts portion of this road carries this name; when it crosses into Connecticut, it becomes Simons Pond Road, which, in turn, runs into Colebrook's Beech Hill Road.) At the east end of this body of water there is a relatively flat terrace, some two hundred feet above the surface of the water and three hundred yards or thereabouts east of the shore on which the original settling family, by the name of Simonds, constructed the first dwelling house in this section of virgin forest. What a beautiful site it was in the days when the land was all cleared and in agricultural use! Since the forest has been allowed to return, some seventy years ago (the 1930s), the view is gone, to be vaguely hinted at during the

time when the leaves have fallen. For my money, there wasn't another house site within many miles of here that could hold a candle to it for sheer beauty.

The original name, because of the first owners, was Simons Pond. You will notice that I have used two spellings, one with a "d". The family spelled it both ways in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but one of the direct descendants, Edwin Simonds, was a personal friend of mine, and he spelled it with the "d", as his gravestone in the Colebrook Center Cemetery also indicates.

The high hill immediately south of the lake in Colebrook (which happens to be Colebrook's highest point at 1552 feet) is named Pond Mountain. This did not raise questions in your mind in the old days as to why the hill was so named, but in 1903, the McClave family of New Jersey purchased all the land surrounding Simons Pond. Shortly thereafter they had the name officially changed to "Lake Marguerite" after their eldest daughter. Ever since, the old-time residents are apt to still refer to it as "Simons Pond" when talking among themselves. Now the upland is a "pond", while the adjacent body of water is a "lake".

When I was young, there was something of a mystery concerning Simons Pond: many men had attempted to determine how deep it was, but none had succeeded. Questioning various older fishermen seemed to confirm this, as I received that answer more than once. One summer day when I was in high school, my friend Quint Williams and I decided it was time to put this to rest. We "borrowed" every clothesline, piece of rope, chain or anything having length to be found on Beech Hill. We put it in the rumble seat of my 1931 Chevy, along with a window sash weight we had found somewhere, and headed for the pond. In those days there used to be a rowboat tied up near the outflow (without the oars). We felt that it was all right to borrow it as long as it was left exactly as it had been found. It worked fine when poled or rowed along with sections of black alder, which grew along the shore.

The two of us struggled with this bulky mass until we finally got it safely stowed in the bottom of the flat-bottomed rowboat, where it took up most of the room between the sides and the bow and stern. Two alders diligently applied, eventually deposited us at what we deemed to be the center of the pond. The window weight was securely tied to the end of a section of clothesline, and it was lowered over the side. As Quint began to tie on the second piece, the rope stopped! This was totally unexpected; we couldn't imagine what was wrong. After talking it over, we decided that there must be an underwater peak in the center of the pond. Applying our poles as sweeps, we slowly worked our way half way between the center and the nearest shore. Once more the weight and clothesline went over the side, and wonder of wonders, the same result! We tried all over that 39.87-acre pond, and the deepest anywhere is 38 feet! Talk about two thoroughly disgusted high school students! We decided upon one course of action though, if anyone ever asked us how deep Simons Pond was, we would answer that the majority of experts agreed that nobody had ever reached the bottom, because technically, it wasn't a lie.

Overlooking Lake Marguerite to the northeast is Bull Mountain, on top of which is located the Iron House. Today it is possible to drive almost up to this structure, but prior to 1945 or 46, very few people, mostly hunters who weren't sure exactly where they were, had ever seen it. This building had been started sometime early in the twentieth century by a man who was mentally unbalanced, (at least in the version that I was told.)

He apparently had been living with a married daughter, but stated that he was going to leave and live by himself. Supposedly a heated exchange between the two took place, and the statement was made that if he built a house for himself, it would be burned down. He vowed that by golly he was going to build a house that couldn't be burned down. He left, and for a while seemed to have dropped from sight. What he had done was to contract with Beech Hill's Orrin Oles to transport metal angle iron shaped like old iron bed frames, along with quantities of cement and small amounts of wooden building material to his property atop Bull Mountain. Nearby he began to quarry rock with which he intended to construct the inner and outer walls. Not having any previous building experience, he thought he also needed a framework such as would be employed in the construction of a wooden framed building, and he began doing so with the 2 inch-wide angle irons. He got as far as erecting the stone outer walls about one story high with the iron sticking up straight in the air for two stories when his location was discovered, and he was removed for his own safety.

During the thunderstorm season, the top of Bull Mountain is no place to hang out. I have camped out at Simons Pond (with permission, it's private property) when I was young, and while an approaching storm was still miles to the west, long leaders of lightening sought out those upright iron rods. The direct hits increased in intensity and shortened in length as the storm got closer, then began to lengthen out as the storm receded to the east. The duration of active hits was amazing. It was interesting to contemplate what would have happened had anyone ever attempted to actually live in that building.

But that never happened, and the old site still sits atop the mountain, now a moldering heap of ruins. I still wouldn't recommend going there when there is a thunderstorm anywhere in northwestern Connecticut or southwestern Massachusetts.

## **Telling Tales VII**

If you remember the account of how the Iron House was built, you may recall that I said that prior to 1945 or 46 very few persons knew its exact location. Here is why I chose those dates:

When I was growing up in the 1930s and 40s, almost every hunter in these parts had a story to tell about his involvement with the Iron House. They had come across it while hunting, and as a glance at a topo map of the area will attest, there is an awful lot of forest-covered topography hereabout. To complicate the picture, Colebrook's north boundary is the Massachusetts boundary. Years ago Connecticut did not have a deer season, but Massachusetts did. Nobody in Colebrook that I heard of ever owned a Massachusetts hunting license, but it was amazing how many times seasoned woodsmen from town, who knew the local woods like the back of their hand, used to become completely disoriented when the Massachusetts hunting season began. If apprehended, something that I never heard of happening, the excuse would have been that they thought they were in Colebrook. Well, the boundary isn't very well marked, but still and all, after hunting season was over and before it began, most could have located it to within a few yards.

I asked Ed Merritt if he knew its location. He answered with an enthusiastic yes, he had seen it several times, and it was located on top of Monument Mountain on the

state line at the north end of Colebrook River. It was right on the summit, you couldn't miss it. My father and I climbed Monument Mtn. and walked over every square inch of the summit as well as a good percentage of the lower slopes, but no sign of any building, iron or otherwise.

I asked Harry Williams, surely one of the best hunters and fishermen who ever called Colebrook home. Yes, he knew the Iron House well; it was atop Pond Mountain in Colebrook, just south of Simons Pond. It was right at the top, you couldn't miss it. Pulling on our hiking boots, my father and I again climbed a mountain to see the elusive Iron House. Combing every square foot of the summit proved that it wasn't there, and it never had been.

Felix Jasmin knew his way around and through all of our hills and ridges, and when asked replied that of course he had seen the Iron House, the latest time being last season; it sits atop a mountain just north of Simons Pond in Sandisfield. (I don't recall whether or not he knew the name.) My father and I got ready and headed out one last time. The only thing all of the people who claimed to have seen the building agreed upon was that it sat at the exact summit. They had all seen it, but most weren't sure where they were at the time, and couldn't admit to be mildly lost. When we figured we were about half way up Bull Mountain, we separated, one going to the right, the other to the left, always slightly increasing the elevation. When almost at the summit, we met, and about the time we figured that this was another dry run, we both almost barked our shins on part of the stone structure. It was so well camouflaged that you could stand a few scant feet away and still not see it. Once you became accustomed to looking at it, it was much more recognizable, but the first time you saw it was almost scary.

No part exceeded ten or twelve feet in height at the most. The building is no more than twenty-five feet square with one doorway facing south. The first time we saw the site, the door was leaning against the south wall. It looked for all the world like a medieval castle door; it must have been six inches thick with heavy, ornate hinges and latch and iron straps. There was a small pile of badly weathered bags of cement nearby. Off to the southeast about fifty yards away was the location of the quarry where all the stone had been extracted. (Incidentally, when standing at the quarry, a beautiful, clear view of the Colebrook River Dam and Reservoir can be seen.) There are three or four openings for windows. The builder had intended that there be two rooms on the first floor, defined by a stone wall with a door opening not more than one foot wide. How he intended that someone could pass from one room to the other is beyond me. It was tight for me then; I doubt that I could make it today!

As we left, we discovered that the south face of the mountain was nearly a perpendicular wall, whereas if you approached from the north, you were confronted by a very gradual slope. The trick was to approach from Roberts Road, running a quarter of a mile north of the building. Returning from the building and by going due north, you will intercept the road, whereupon you will turn left (west) and proceed to the intersection of Beech Hill Road (the Sandisfield version), and go left again (south) past the lake and eventually on to Simons Pond Road in Colebrook.

We did not possess this knowledge for long when we were in the barnyard one day and an auto pulled up at the end of our driveway. Several people were in the car, and one exited and approached us and after searching (without much luck) for the right words, asked if we had ever heard of an Iron House in these parts. When we nodded

“yes”, the fellow became almost animated, he was so happy. He turned and ran back to the car yelling as he went that we knew about the Iron House. Here is what was happening: The war had just ended. He had been in the Army in Europe and while pinned down in a foxhole with another soldier for three days under heavy fire, talked about hunting and fishing and all the things they missed doing. The other soldier was from Sandisfield, and told about the Iron House, and the fellow we were talking to was from Feeding Hills, Mass. Gradually the feeling that if they succeeded in getting out of this alive, he wanted to buy that house. It became an obsession with him, and when the gods of war allowed him to survive, he came home and immediately began searching for any information on the location. He soon found that there was precious little, as a matter of fact, nobody knew exactly where the property was. He had purchased a tract of land that the town clerk had said was known as Bull Mountain, but it was very isolated and didn't contain any building that she knew of, at least no taxes were ever paid on any structure. But he now owned it, and his family kept telling him that he had been fooled into buying a worthless piece of forestland. They were convinced that there wasn't an Iron House there or anywhere else, and had almost succeeded in convincing him that they were right. Our assertion that we knew of it made a new man of him. He wanted to know if we could take him there, and my father said that I would be happy to do so. “When could I do that?” It must have been around midday, because I said we could leave right now, if they wanted. And that is what we did, I led an expedition to the Iron House, and honestly, he was the happiest fellow I think I ever saw!

Along about 2004 or 05 someone bought the property and put in a passable road nearly to the building, or so I've been told. I don't care any more, preferring to remember the old place before the hands of modern civilization put its stamp on it.

### **Telling Tales VIII**

My folks bought the property on Beech Hill in 1931 from a Robertsville farmer named John Northway. These were the events leading up to that purchase:

My parents were married on Sept. 6, 1929 in New York City. The crash that took down the stock market occurred on October 30 the following month. My father was a quite successful marine artist, meaning that he specialized in portraying ships and water scenes. At one time he had two or three in the Metropolitan in New York, but when the economy crashes, the arts are among the first to feel the crunch, and he not only lost the money that he had in the bank, he didn't have any buyers for his art.

My mother was teaching at a high school in New Rochelle, New York, and therefore was taking home a decent salary. Very shortly after the crash on Wall Street, they realized that this economic downturn was not only going to be severe, it was also going to last a long time, and they had better make plans immediately for their future. As they wanted to start a family, it was reasonable to expect that she would have to resign her teaching job while the depression would still be in full swing. The solution was to buy a farm and live on whatever you were able to produce. My mother's family on her mother's side was from Nova Scotia, and from the time she was a little tot, had spent all of her summers there, and when she became old enough, was assigned various jobs on the large farm her grandfather owned. By the time she was in her late teens, she had a working knowledge of how to raise cattle, handle horses, plant and care for crops and

orchards, among a myriad of other bits and pieces of farm lore. In other words, it was not on a whim that she decided to risk everything by living off the land, as long as it was your land, and it was not encumbered by mortgages or liens.

So the search was on; weekends were spent driving around Dutchess and other lower Hudson River Valley counties, but without finding the right combinations to guarantee survival. Then a real estate agent who specialized in farmland told them about a large number of available farms in Litchfield County, Connecticut – did they want to look that far afield?

The end result was that the farm that John Northway had purchased the year before for the specific purpose of turning out his young stock, was now back on the market, primarily because of the economy. The agent came up Route 8 to Robertsville, picked up John and Elsie Northway, and drove to the top of Beech Hill. At that time, the 125-acre farm consisted of 40 acres of cleared land (for cultivation and pasture) with the rest in forest, about half of which had been recently lumbered. It had two streams, one of which had native trout, a two-storied barn and not much better than a shack for a dwelling. Originally, this building had started out as a one-room schoolhouse in Canaan, probably in the late eighteenth century, and had been taken to Colebrook shortly after the Civil War to act as a woodworking shop at the site of the present 21 Beech Hill Road (the first house on the right after crossing Viets Brook). There it stood for a few years, until it was taken to what is today the intersection of Beech Hill Road and Moses Road. The reason for this move was that the house at the last mentioned site had recently burned, and the shop had proven to be smaller than what was required.

What attracted my folks to the place was obviously not the house, but the land and barn. After inspecting the property, my father and John Northway were dickering about the terms. John, like most farmers at that period of time, did not want to sell the place outright, but wished to retain a mortgage. The reasoning behind this was that a mortgage guaranteed an income, at least until the principal was paid off, and perhaps more importantly, (especially in hard economic times) in the event the purchaser defaulted, the land reverted to the former owner, along with whatever monies had already been paid. Knowing this, it was the one scenario that my mother did not want to undertake; she insisted that they would pay the asking price in cash - \$1300. As the men bargained, the two women were standing off to the side, and my mother was getting nervous. At that moment, Mrs. Northway touched my mother's arm and in a whisper said "My dear, don't you worry, if you want this place, you shall have it" (and here she lowered her voice even more) "because it's in my name!"

And that's what they did, and my folks copied the ownership pattern, with the property in my mother's name. Somewhat different from these days of pre-nuptials and messy, long drawn out court battles over ownership rights. Perhaps there was a risk, but not in this case; they lived happily there for more than fifty years.

The purchase price is interesting: here is its history, such a far cry from the way real estate transactions are conducted nowadays.

After the Civil War, there was a severe economic downturn, and one result was the low value of farmland. The returning veterans who had seen what wonderful farmland existed in what is today our mid-west caused this. The railroads had blossomed during and after the war, and it was possible to travel long distances in a few short days, or perhaps even hours at a reasonable price. This immediately made the steep, rocky,

gravelly upland farms in western Connecticut and Massachusetts practically worthless. Farm and woodland could be purchased for from between \$1.00 to \$10.00 in just about any amount you wanted. Farmers walked off their now unwanted property in droves, leaving the banks and towns holding the bag, and with no easy solution.

It was the banks that came up with the idea of sending agents to New York to meet the arriving immigrants from Europe, who were arriving in ever-increasing numbers. One such agent met a ship carrying, among others, three brothers from Ireland by the name of O'Neil. They had come from a rural background, and responded to the agent's report of two adjacent farms in Colebrook, Connecticut; one had 125 acres, the other 100, and up the road a short distance in Sandisfield, another comparable farm. The result was that James bought the 125-acre farm, John the 100, and Daniel the Sandisfield property. James, and his wife, who purchased what was to someday be our place, remained the owners until 1930, when they sold it to a lumberman from Winsted named Avery, who, after cutting a portion of the standing timber, sold it the same year to John Northway for his cattle to fatten up on. Now the remarkable thing: John O'Neil paid \$1300 for the farm in 1871, Avery, in 1930, bought it for the same price, made his profit by cutting some timber, sold it to Northway for \$1300. John, who probably would have normally held on to the land for certainly more than a year, decided that the tough economic times dictated that he should sell it for the same \$1300 if the chance arose.

Our family was always pretty sure that most of the residents in town who knew them, figured that in a short time they, like so many others in similar situations, would be long gone.

My daughter and her husband now own the farm. They have a modern house and beautiful grounds, but they pay in taxes many times the original purchase price each and every year!

### **Telling Tales IX**

One of the first things my father did after moving into their newly purchased property in Colebrook was to buy a horse and cow. Now even in 1931 there were laws governing the transportation of domestic animals, especially across state lines. For some reason, perhaps because there weren't any available, or more likely because the purchase price was too high, he didn't buy anything in Colebrook, but instead went north into Sandisfield. Now the Sandisfield town line is less than two miles away, but it is in another state, so it became a little more complicated. I don't think horses needed a Coggins test in those days, but cows had to be vaccinated against tuberculosis. Once vaccinated, a small aluminum tag was placed in the cow's ear. The cow my father bought had such a tag, but Connecticut required that a local vet inoculate all cattle coming into the state. This was two years after the crash of Wall Street, and the country, especially this area, was in deep depression with many people having no money. I have on occasion talked to young people about these hard times with no money at all, and found that the concept never really sank in; after telling about the complete lack of cash, they will almost invariably say something along the lines of "Well, you certainly could buy a loaf of bread." No, you couldn't; no money means just that – no money! The rules had to be bent; the result of my father's purchase was that he "sneaked" the cow and horse down into Colebrook in the dead of night via the long-abandoned Prock Hill Road,

through North Colebrook and up on Beech Hill, where they eventually lived out their allotted years on this earth.

Immediately it became apparent that he had a problem: the horse refused to respond to commands. Tests proved that he wasn't deaf, but he might as well have been. In desperation, my father began asking around about what might the problem be. Remember, my folks had only just recently bought their place on Beech Hill, and as far as the locals knew, were just another couple from New York, so that didn't leave them much room to maneuver, if you know what I mean.

Eventually, someone suggested that he get hold of Izzy Jasmin, as he was considered to be the best man in town when it came to knowledge about horses. The Jasmins had been in town since 1897, when Isidore the first purchased the Sage farm (now the home of Jasmin descendants Jon and Sherri Gray at 23 Sandy Brook Road). Isidore and his wife Apoline, had come as adults from the Normandy section of France, where calvados is made. Isidore had this recipe in his head, and the Sage farm had an apple orchard containing the exact mixture needed for the product he intended to produce. When the four children came along, French was the only language spoken in the home. As a matter of fact Felix, the eldest boy, repeated the first grade in the Rock School because his English was so imperfect. By the time their youngest son, also named Isidore, came along, the family had become bi-lingual.

Izzy responded to my father's call for help with the truculent horse, and the first thing he asked was where my father had purchased him, and from whom. At the mention of the former owner, Izzy's face lit up, "Oh! I know what your problem is – this horse only understands French! He barked out a command – the horse instantly responded. Izzy told my father that it would be a lot quicker to teach him the French words needed to work the horse than it would be for him to try and teach the horse English.

And that's what he did. For quite a while my father could be heard in the fields and in the woods calling out "Commence!" or "Halt!" plus the terms for "Come around", "back", etc. By the time I was old enough to remember that horse, he had become proficient in English. He had a mind of his own, however, he would allow me to ride him bareback around the farm, but when he got tired of that, would walk under a big maple tree with a low branch, and scrape me off. It only took me twice to know enough to grab on to that branch and hold on until he had cleared the area, then drop to the ground. His name was "Major", and he was the gentlest horse you could ask for. When little children were around, they were perfectly safe walking around his feet and underneath him. Before he lifted a foot, his head would drop down and he would survey the situation. If it wasn't safe for him to move, he wouldn't.

This is the horse that was so good at extricating cars from the mud and mire of the springtime roads. Once he was hitched up, he would look over his shoulder at the car, and he wouldn't put one pound of effort on the traces until the driver engaged the clutch and made the wheels spin. Only then did he lean into his harness and out the car would come.

His former owner had been a lumberman and had employed him as a "snaking horse", or "snaker", meaning he was able to bring logs out of the forest to the place where they were to be piled. No horse of average intelligence could do this job, it required him to be taken where the trees were being felled, then to take those logs, one at a time, back to where they were to be piled. At that point there would be another man or

two who would unhitch the log, hook the traces up onto the harness, give him a slap on the rear end, and he would walk all by himself back to the men up in the woods. This could be a considerable distance, but the horse would keep it up all day, always avoiding situations where the log might get hung up on trunks of trees, stumps or stones. There is no doubt that such horses have a high degree of intelligence and reasoning power.

During the depression years, it was not uncommon to have men who usually would have been working at some gainful employment, to be hanging around the house or barnyard. One summer afternoon my father and two of his brothers in law were sitting around our living room, which made up two thirds of the floor area of our once one room schoolhouse. This place, which was soon to be replaced by a new house built by my father, was at that time no more than a shack, akin to what would more likely have been seen in the southern Appalachians. Beech Hill Road, which passed by the front yard, seldom had more than two to three vehicles pass over it in the course of a week. If you heard something coming, it would usually prompt a quick peek out the window to see who was lost this time. My uncle's house was diagonally across the road, about 100 yards distant. A third brother was over at that house, and all of a sudden the three men in our house heard a knock at the front door. Now nobody ever knocked at a door in those days, at most you opened the door and yelled out that the house was being invaded, or some such nonsense to let the residents know they had company. These three unkempt, unshaven mountain types (who happened to be cleaning rifles) thought it was the other brother, being funny, so one of them yanked open the door, rifle at the ready, and yelled out "Whadda ya want?" There was a total stranger standing there! He had somehow driven up without them hearing him, and he stood there transfixed, then very slowly began backing across the lawn to his car. Our side was so rattled that they never had the presence of mind to say something to the poor fellow. He never came around again!

### **Telling Tales X**

As I stated earlier, my mother had a farming background that she had gained on her maternal grandfather's farm in Hants County, Nova Scotia. As soon as we got our horse's language problem solved, gardens were established and crops were decided upon. On a two-acre lot east of the house, they planted potatoes. Potatoes store well, especially in a cellar with a dirt floor, and in hard times, in the days before electricity and its accompanying refrigeration, root crops provide the best source of nourishment. I have heard that some people had tried to dissuade my father from planting so many of them, because at that time they were selling for .10¢ per bushel, and it was thought that it was easier to buy them than raise them. We raised a variety known as "Green Mountain" which, while being a little smaller than the average russet, came from blight-resistant stock, and thus were considered more desirable. We had a wooden barrel without a top, in which there was a concoction of lime, water and copper sulphate. This was a formula developed many years in the past by French grape growers to ward off a blight that was capable of wiping out the entire crop. Nobody around here had heard of this spray, and in fact never sprayed their potato crop at all, citing the fact that there had not been any blight on potatoes hereabout in anyone's memory. I think it was the second year that they raised potatoes that the blight struck. All over the northeast the potato crop was ruined. Not so my parents two acres. At harvest time, potato prices had risen to .50¢ per

bushel, and they had a bumper crop. They paid for the entire taxes that year with more left over. Did my folks get any credit for their agricultural know-how? Not at all, my father remembered them shaking their heads and saying “beginner’s luck”! Next year however, more than one local farmer asked my father what were the proportions and ingredients of that blight spray.

Keeping perishables cool was always a problem before the days of electricity. We had a wooden icebox with chrome handles and it had four doors on the front, if memory serves me. The upper right was for ice, and it held a 50-pound block, which was good for about a week, if you didn’t go into it often or hold the doors open. The compartment was lined with porcelain-covered zinc (usually referred to as “agate”) and had a drainpipe leading to a container that sat on the floor under the unit. If you forgot to empty it fairly often, the ever-increasing puddle coming out from under the refrigerator reminded you. There were several places that sold ice around here. We used to buy ours from the man who owned Pond Hill Pond in Norfolk. He could cut a fifty-pound block with a long ice pick about eight inches long without ever weighing it. He couldn’t have cheated on the weight even if he wanted to, as the right sized block would just barely fit into its compartment. I still have the ice tongs and pick, although I don’t believe that I will ever have use for either of them in my lifetime.

Beech Hill had what was known as a local “character”. She came from old stock; her ancestors came to Colebrook in the eighteenth century, and as she was the last of her line, remained here until she finally sold her place due to advanced age and failing health. She had moved onto the hill from the eastern part of Colebrook River, up near the Hartland line. She probably would have remained there except that a couple from the city saw the place while out for a ride and made her an offer she couldn’t refuse. She then purchased a small farm of some six acres that was sitting empty on what is today referred to as Chapin Road. This farm had been carved out of the virgin forest by one of her great grandfathers in the 1820s. This was the same place that was later purchased by Dennis Chapin, who farmed it and the adjoining farm until he retired and moved to Winsted in 1917.

The reason that I have not divulged her family name is that although she never had children, and her surname is not to be found locally, she nevertheless does have relatives who might not appreciate their relative being referred to as a “local character”, and I don’t want someone letting the air out of my car’s tires some dark night!

No one to my knowledge ever referred to her behind her back by her real name; some called her “Lizzy Tish”, others, including our family called her “Betsy” (her real name was Emily).

She was the slowest moving person I have ever seen. More often than not when she decided to travel the nine miles to Winsted, she wouldn’t make it, because, even though she had begun operations by let’s say 8:00 am, when 4 pm rolled around, she wasn’t any where near ready, and the process would begin all over the next morning. She drove an old blue Plymouth with a square body and wooden-spoked wheels. I think that she had purchased it brand new, and during the years that I knew her, she never put a dent or a scratch on it. I suppose that today it resides in a collection somewhere; if it doesn’t, it should be.

The funny thing was, that as slow as she was afoot, once behind the wheel, she became a regular speed demon. Harold Morton, who used to own the ESSO station at the

west end of Winsted near the 183 intersection, used to say that it was a wonder she didn't kill herself, as many times he had seen her come down 183 and hang a left turn onto U. S. 44 on two wheels. She never stopped, slowed down or took a peak to see if perhaps there just might be some on-coming traffic.

She used to go into Morton's and fill up a gallon jug with Winsted water. She hated Winsted water, it tasted of chlorine, but it was free. Didn't she have water on her property? Of course she did, as a matter of fact, she had two sources, the original dug well in addition to a driven well that she had had drilled soon after moving there. Both had excellent water. The trouble was that the drilled well required an electric pump, and thus would cost money, and the dug well was down cellar and was inconvenient for her.

There was a nice pear tree in her yard, and although she never did anything with them, she gave them to my mother every fall to can. One year my mother was busy canning and Betsy came down the quarter of a mile that separated our houses and asked her if she thought it might be possible for her to can some also. As all of that year's crop was now in our kitchen, she was asked how many pints or quarts she intended to put up. "Oh, one pint would be quite enough". So she was given the proper amount and was soon out of sight up the road. Late that afternoon she was back, all out of breath and complaining about how dead tired she was because "I have been canning all day long!" and she wasn't done yet; could she have just one more pear? "What are you going to do with one pear?" "Well, after I canned the pint, I saw that the contents had shrunk, so I took the top off and will put in the last pear so as to make a full pint!"

### **Telling Tales XI**

After opening up the subject of our neighbor, "Betsy", I find that I recall more than can be squeezed into one two-page account, so here is "Betsy, part two".

Betsy went to Winsted not more than once a week, and if she happened to decide on going on a Friday, there was an even chance that she wouldn't make it until the following week, due to the tight time constraints. She hardly ate enough to keep a bird alive, and her sojourns to the grocery store sometimes didn't consist of more than two large carrots; one for her to cook up, the other for the woodchuck that lived under her front porch. That woodchuck had lived under there for longer than she had owned the place and rarely did she fail to buy him a carrot. The funny thing was that she used to pay me .50¢ an hour to sit on the stone wall with my .22 cal. rifle to shoot him. My father, perhaps because of what had happened to him with S. E. Parker's woodchuck, told me to sit and wait as long as she was willing to pay me, but if I did shoot, to be sure and aim somewhere other than at the 'chuck. I had that woodchuck in my sights I don't know how many times, but he always escaped unscathed. .50¢ an hour in those days was a princely sum for a young fellow, but that was what she always paid me. I mowed the lawn and kept the yard in good repair, and one time she had me clean out her cellar. The cellar wasn't in too good shape, but there was one corner that had the remains of a long-unused potato bin. One side of this bin consisted of a two-inch thick pine board that was about four feet long and nearly square. It truly had come from an immense tree. The problem was that it was completely riddled with dry rot. To look at the board, it appeared in good, sound condition, but you could poke your finger through it anywhere, as it consisted of red powder held in place by a membrane of wood no more than one

sixteenth of an inch thick. I was about to knock it apart and get rid of it as soon as the dust settled, but at that moment she came down to see what progress I was making, and immediately told me not to damage that plank, as she was sure her great grandfather had placed it there with his own hands. I tried to explain just how fragile it was, and that it was going to revert to dust no matter how gently it was handled. She was adamant – the board must be saved. I asked my father about it, and he went to take a look at the situation and said that the only way to give her the results she wanted was to construct a wooden framework and remove it that way. This I did, and was able to get it out of the cellar and into a wood shed, where I'm sure it returned to the dust that it had originally come from in short order.

Unless you had ever seen the inside of her house, it would be impossible for me to describe it to you. There were three rooms on the first floor. One was used as the living room, another of equal size, she used for storage, and the kitchen. There was an overabundance of furniture throughout, and in every drawer was packed Lord knows what for contents. Some were full of hairnets, others silk stockings, others with orange peels. She kept everything she ever owned, because she had all the hairnets and stockings she ever owned; she told me this once. The orange peels were another story. She would carefully peel each orange and put the peels in a paper bag until they were completely dry, then would transfer them into a drawer or wooden box. The purpose was that she would always have a supply of kindling in case she needed to build a fire. Actually, they really are excellent for starting fires, although not in the volume she had. The funny thing is that one cool day in the autumn, she asked me to start a fire in the fireplace, and as there was a stuffed-full drawer within arm's length, I removed a few and was almost ready to put a match to them when Betsy emerged from the other room and nearly had a batch of hairless kittens when she saw what I was about to do. I told her that she had told me that's what they were intended for, and she replied: "Yes, but only in an emergency!"

The room adjacent to the living room was piled from floor to ceiling with stacks of newspaper. I mean that literally: right up to the seven-foot three ceiling. There were two paths that wound their way through them if, for some reason you decided to go there at all. One year, while she was in Florida for the winter, she had asked my father to paint the kitchen ceiling. We went up there, cleared away as much junk as we could, and prepared to paint. Because there were so many hundreds of newspapers in the next room, he decided to use a few of them instead of using a regular drop cloth. This we did, and the clean up went well, with the newspapers safely burned to destroy the evidence. When she arrived in the spring, don't you know that the first thing she did was berate my poor father for using some of her blessed newspapers. She somehow knew which ones had been taken. We didn't use all that many, and had taken a few from several piles to make it less obvious, but it didn't work!

She had somewhat of a mean streak, although I doubt that she would have defined it as such. One day she wanted to cash a check, and wanted it cashed at her bank in Winsted. As usual, she had begun departure operations in the morning with most of her movements directed toward the goal of arriving at the bank before the 3:00 PM daily closing. Sometime after 2:00 PM she realized that it would be impossible to make the nine-mile trip before the witching hour. She then called the bank and asked to speak to the manager. It was explained to him that she had a very important document that she

had to have at the bank today, and that she wouldn't be able to arrive there until shortly after 3:00 PM. The manager told her that he would stay after hours himself and open up for her when she got there. Sometime after the closing hour, Betsy showed up at the Mechanics Savings Bank and was let in by the manager. She then proceeded to take the check out of her pocketbook and handed it to him to cash, "because she needed to have some cash around the house, and knew that they wouldn't remain open just for that, so she had concocted a little fib." I wasn't there, but I am sure the manager wasn't amused, and her supply of special treatment acts with that bank dried up.

Her house and the next one, which happened to be the last on the dead end road were only a little more than 100 yards apart. One day Oscar Riiska, our Rural Delivery man, inadvertently left a piece of her "junk mail" in the last post box by mistake. I think they were identical flyers that had somehow become stuck together. The recipient of these took Betsy's copy down and put it in her box. Betsy saw this happen and went out to see what was going on. She didn't say too much as I remember, but apparently went into the house and sent off an irate letter to the Postmaster General in Washington seeking to have Oscar fired and seeking advice as to whether she had a case against her neighbor for being an unauthorized person placing mail in a U. S. post box. I suppose a very quick "investigation" was conducted about Oscar Riiska, but as he was an exemplary carrier and citizen, nothing came of it. It didn't show itself all the time, but she did have a mean streak.

## **Telling Tales XII**

More memories about the Winsted Fire Department have come to mind since the last batch was published a while back. One I was involved in, the other was slightly before my time. I'll start with the last one first.

There used to be another building between the Central Fire House and the building where Dr. Saunders has his office. Today it is a parking lot. One of the members of the department happened to have an apartment on the second floor of this building, and he and a few of his brother firemen had card games up there on occasion.

The house man at the Central Station at that time was a fellow we called "Dutch", primarily because he had a short fuse and was a guy that you wouldn't want to cross, especially as he was completely lacking a sense of humor.

One hot summer evening there was a card game going on in the apartment while at the same time Dutch was in his upstairs apartment, sitting on a straight-backed chair in the middle of the room directly under a hanging, bare electric bulb. Apparently it was the only source of light for that room. As it was a particularly hot, humid evening, most windows were wide open, with the forlorn hope that a meandering puff of cool air might happen to wander past. Dutch's window was opened from both the top and bottom.

One of the card players happened to notice that they had a straight look out their window and into the room occupied by the houseman. Going into a closet, he emerged with a .22 caliber rifle, and told somebody to turn out the lights in their apartment, because they were going to play a joke on old Dutch. The alignment of the two open windows was perfect. Drawing a careful bead on the hanging bulb, he squeezed off one round, immediately plunging the upstairs room in complete darkness.

Wasting no time, the whole bunch of them went down the back stairs and proceeded through some back yards on Elm Street until they eventually emerged onto Elm. Their reasoning was that they weren't sure whether or not Dutch had been able to hear the shot. If he had, they would be in trouble, so they were taking no chances. As they walked down Elm St. toward the fire station, they could see Dutch standing out front on the sidewalk. This might, or might not be good as far as they were concerned. As they got up to him, someone greeted him and asked why he was standing out on the street on such a hot night. It was apparent that Dutch was agitated (but wasn't he usually?). "I was reading the paper upstairs when all of a sudden the damned light bulb blew up! Showered the whole room with glass! What really makes me mad is that I replaced that bulb not more than a week ago." It's amazing how fast the human brain can adapt to unknown situations. The words were no sooner out of his mouth when one of the firemen asked where he might have purchased that bulb last week. "Got it from Henry Holmes." Henry was an electrician, and had a store around the corner on Main Street. He was a good electrician, and was well liked in the community.

"Well, you know, Dutch, I have heard that this has been happening lately with Henry's light bulbs, as a matter of fact there have been quite a few recently. I think it's time someone put a stop to it. If I were you, I'd take what's left of your bulb back and demand a replacement." "I'm going to, just as soon as his shop is open." First thing Monday morning Dutch was in Holmes' Electric, brass screw-end in hand, telling Henry about how his cheap, no-good bulb had exploded. Henry, not one to be easily pushed over, kept telling Dutch that it was physically impossible for a bulb to explode like that. Words couldn't begin to convince Dutch, he just got madder and madder. Finally, mostly to get rid of the guy, Henry gave Dutch his replacement light bulb. A long time later, someone asked one of the card players if they had ever let Dutch in on the joke. "What do you think? Do I look crazy? The guy would kill me!" Years later Dutch went to his maker not knowing why Henry's cheap light bulb had showered him with those shards of hot glass that summer night. I don't think they ever told Henry, either.

The annual Fireman's Carnival, held in August, is the most significant fundraiser for the Winsted Fire Dept. I don't know whether or not things are the same nowadays, but 30 years ago we used to contract with a carnival company that would supply the department with several booths on wheels, as well as the Ferris wheel and other rides. Every night after closing, the money was collected from the various concessions and brought to the Holibird Ave. Station in the back seat of a Winsted Police cruiser. One August night in the early 70s the department wound down the festivities for that year. It was Sunday night and we had just had a very successful carnival; several bags of money were deposited in the back seat. Bags of money are heavy, in case you never had to carry them. I have always wondered about the getaways shown in some movies, where someone runs out of the bank and jumps into the getaway vehicle carrying several bags of money. They wouldn't have done that if a Winsted fireman had filled them!

The Carnival had ended at midnight, and by about 12:45am, we were ready to go over to the Holibird Ave. station and count the take. There were still quite a few people wandering around even at that hour, and as we sat in the cruiser, we began wondering out loud what the chances were that someone would make an attempt to rob us of the take. The policeman said that the best scenario would be for someone to stage an accident at

the intersection of Main and Rowley Streets, and during the ensuing confusion, while the police were occupied with the accident, grab the money and beat a hasty retreat.

A few minutes later we were ready to roll, and three firemen and the police driver pulled slowly out onto Rowley St. and headed north. Just as we got to the intersection right next to where Dairy Queen is currently located, a pick-up truck came barreling eastbound through the intersection, against a red light, and plowed smack into the side of a passenger car. Our driver said something like "hang on!" and we accelerated around the two wrecked vehicles and went directly to Holibird Ave, station, where we promptly locked the doors and peered out the windows. We heard people running past the station, and down the hill, at the bridge across Still River the aerial ladder was fully extended with a bright spotlight swinging back and forth. The officer, handgun drawn, told us to get back from the windows and keep the doors locked.

Eventually, the commotion died down and we counted the money, which amounted to several thousand dollars. More police officers came by and told us what had happened. The accident had been real, and by coincidence, someone started robbing the cigarette machine in a filling station where the new pharmacy is today. The silent alarm had gone off, and as most of the entire duty section of the police dept. was there, they were immediately in hot pursuit. The thief ran down the banks of Still River, and actually ran right past the firehouse and continued down to where the vacant Gilbert Clock buildings are, where he was arrested. The crook escaped with something like \$6.00 in change and a few packs of cigarettes, and had run no more than ten feet past several thousand dollars piled on card tables.

I forget who the other three men in the cruiser were, but I'll guarantee that they never forgot that night!