

The Sounds of Yesterday

While compiling the series “Tools of Yesterday”, it occurred to me that there were probably as many sounds that have passed into oblivion as there were tools. Sounds and tools, at least when speaking of rural settings, have a definite regional flavor; go a few hundred miles in any direction and there would be (and still are) noticeable changes, some subtle, some not so.

Colebrook has undertaken a program of replacing most of the old bridges. Today, State mandates come into play - for example, the width of a bridge must be wide enough to accommodate an automobile and a truck with a snowplow attached. Not so in years past; I remember coming down the old Tolland Road into Colebrook River either during or right after an ice storm, and the car began to slide just uphill from the bridge crossing Sawmill Brook, producing a situation with the car stuck broadside between the iron sides of the bridge. Eventually someone had to walk down to the next farm and have the farmer and his team come up and pull us free. This probably resulted with the farmer going home some two dollars richer.

But I’m digressing; this is supposed to be about sounds. The two bridges at and near the confluence of Viets Brook and Sandy Brook are now both concrete, but when I was a child, the Sandy Brook bridge was constructed with steel I-beams covered with two-inch thick planks; Viets Brook bridge used old railroad tracks laid parallel to the roadway covered with the same two-inch planks. As a child, I never checked to see how (if at all) these planks were secured to the metal underneath, but they were probably just laying there, held in position by their own weight. The reason for this is my recollection of the sounds they made when a vehicle passed over. Our house, at the intersection of Beech Hill and Chapin Road, is about a mile and a half east of these bridges, and on certain days, when the humidity was high and sound carried further, the clatter of the planks could easily be heard. In those days in the 1930s, very few vehicles passed those bridges. Except for a couple of summer people, my father and Don Brown were the only permanent residents, and few travelers used Beech Hill to gain access to Colebrook River. I could tell the difference between the cadence made by my father and Mr. Brown, and therefore knew two minutes before he would be home. Two other “regulars” that had markedly different rhythms were two of the Gray boys. George and Bill were courting the two Moore girls, whose parents’ farm was on Harvey Mountain in Tolland, Mass. When their chores were done in the evening, they would high-tail it to the Moore farm via the most direct route, namely Beech Hill Road. The clatter created by George had a quicker cadence than did that of Bill, although neither of them wasted any time!

Different brands of automobiles had recognizable differences; a Model A or T didn’t sound anything like a Chevy, which in turn sounded nothing like a GMC or International. We didn’t have to worry about most of the other brands, as those mentioned covered the vast majority of anything likely to be encountered in Colebrook, especially up in the hills.

Farm machinery containing movable parts also had unique sounds. We had a John Deere single horse-mowing machine, and when backing or making a tight right or left turn, made a distinctive rapid clacking sound. The same was true for the one horse trip rake, which had a more rapid and less raucous clicking sound when it radically changed direction. Wives could sometimes have an idea when her husband might be in

for lunch by the position of these sounds coming from whichever field he was working in, even though out of sight

The cutter bar on a horse-drawn mowing machine had a sound now absent from our fields, it had a cadence not unlike that of the sewing machine in the parlor. Usually the fellow doing the cutting knew the position of major stones or other hidden obstacles that might be lurking in the hay field, but if he was unlucky enough to encounter one of them high enough to come in contact with the wooden pitman bar that drove the cutter bar back and forth, the pitman would break, and the immediate silence would make looking down to see the damage totally unnecessary; he knew that a trip to the barn, if he had a spare, or to town to purchase a new one if he was unlucky enough to be without one, was the next order of the day.

A sound now absent from town that was a perennial until sometime in the 1940s, was the sound of the Whip-poor-wills in the summer. I know, these birds are not extinct, but I have heard them only once in the last sixty years on Beech Hill. These are night-flying birds, and when they perch on a branch, align their bodies parallel to it as opposed to the method employed by every other arboreal avian. Shortly after sundown their calls would begin, and if you were lucky enough to be close to one, you could hear the loud “click” separating each Whip-poor-will call, if the bird was fifty yards or so distant, the click sound became inaudible.

Their migration back south used to occur around September, and when they suddenly ceased to reappear each spring, no one could offer an explanation as to the reason. My father thought that perhaps the flock that came to our location were caught by a hurricane and wiped out. Whatever the reason, I miss them.

The sound of a spinning wheel was to me the most soothing way to go to sleep at night. We had what was known as a great wheel, used to spin wool. When the New England Knitting Mills were in operation in Winsted along Mad River, a bale would occasionally split open, and a certain amount was lost, probably not worth the effort to recapture it all. My father would then bring home a few armloads of wool, which would then be spun into whatever type of thread my mother required for her next project. These wheels required six turns per “twist”, three to establish the size and put the twist in the yarn, and three to wind it on the spindle. This operation, on the first, or spinning phase, would sound like a “woo, woo, woo” followed by three more, but one octave lower. Often this operation would take place after I had gone to bed. As my bedroom was directly above the living room, where the wheel was, I probably never stayed awake long enough to have heard the entire sequence.

Many years ago my folks donated their wheel, along with the drying rack and skeiner to the Colebrook Historical Society, where it may be seen in the fabrics room on the second floor. Incidentally, my father was a better spinner than was my mother. My maternal grandmother had taught him on this wheel, which she said was particularly well balanced, and he became quite adept at it. The balance of labor worked out well, as my father wasn't worth beans with a set of knitting needles!

Historic Bytes

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