

Voices From the Past: Harold Phillips Recalls Church As Social Center

Years back, the Colebrook Historical Society invested in a tape recorder that enabled us to capture the thoughts of some of our older and more interesting citizens. This recording was made of Harold Phillips in 1979, during Colebrook's bicentennial year. Harold was a native Colebrookite, having spent his early years in the Robertsville section and was one of the select few who had attended the Sandy Brook School, which was in operation from 1857 through 1905. He had held several positions of responsibility in town, one of which was assessor, a position he held along with Homer Deming and Paul Grigg. His wife Genevieve (Gene) served as town clerk from 1955 until 1974, a span of 19 years, the fifth longest to hold that job since 1779. Here is what Harold had to say about his recollections as a youth:

“When I was a young child, about ten or so, the Colebrook Church was the center of all activity.

The Sunday morning service was at eleven o'clock. Then after the morning service came the Sunday school and there was a group of very small children, a group I guess they would call nursery age now. Then there were the young children in grammar school, which included me at that time, then a class of older boys, Mrs. Cooper was their teacher; Jim Allen was my teacher. The minister always had the adults for Bible study in his class. Each of these different age groups would be in different corners. These classes were held after the church service. Many was the time church would be over at twelve, but these classes didn't break up until after one o'clock. Then the people would go get their horses from down under the sheds and go home.

Each Sunday evening there was a vesper service, probably around seven o'clock. In early days, my Dad was sexton, and he used to go up early and light the kerosene lamps on the big chandelier in the center. I can still remember standing there in the door watching him put them out later. He would pull the thing down with a long stick with a nail in it that hooked into a ring in the bottom of the chandelier, which was weighted upstairs somehow. Then he'd start in turning it very slowly, holding one hand over the lamp chimney cupped, and he'd blow in his hand and the air would go down the chimney until each light was out. I can still see him blowing those lamps out.

They used to have the Tuesday night musical entertainments, they might have been monthly, I'm not sure, except they were frequent. These were put on by Mrs. Wilber Cooper, Ralph Cooper's mother and Mrs. Stotts; both of these women played the piano.

John Willis, the son of William Willis, who lived up where Richard Dublons now own, was a very clever musician. He used to play the coronet, violin and piano at times, then in later years he played the French horn. He could play just about any type of musical instrument.

We had a minister named Mr. Griggs who used to play the trombone. There was a family named Surdam that were quite well known as vocalists. There was Mrs. Surdam, Ida Surdam who later married Roy Stanard, Beth, who married Ralph Smith of Winsted, another girl named Phoebe, who married Winthrop Smith, Lester Smith's son. These women used to sing solos, duets and so forth. Mrs. Milan Gilman had studied elocution, and she was a great one to give monologues, various accents, interpretations,

etc., and was very entertaining. It was really very enjoyable even for young squirts like I used to be. Afterwards we went down into the church basement and had refreshments and played games. Musical chairs, I think at that time, they called 'Marching Through Jerusalem'. They also had a game called squirrel. We'd all join in a circle and one person would be the squirrel on the outside, that person would walk around the ring and tap someone on the back and then start to run one way, didn't make any difference which way he went, but the person who was tagged had to run the other way and try to get back to the gap in the ring first. That was quite a game, used to almost break your neck sometimes going around those steel posts that stood around there; you used to really swing around them.

The minister used to come to the homes quite often then. About the first minister I remember was an old gentleman named Mr. Hedges. He used to stay with Mr. & Mrs. Lester Smith in the big house behind the church where the Thompsons live now. [467 Smith Hill Road]

Then there was Mr. Griggs; he lived with the Smiths, too. I don't think he had the use of the parsonage either. The parsonage was empty for quite a few years. Ministers were all unmarried during those years."

I don't know who the interviewer was, but I have the feeling that he or she was not originally from around here, because I knew Harold quite well, and he had a large repertoire of really interesting stories, some of which were pretty funny, and he probably would have come out with some of them if prompted by someone he felt comfortable with.

One point that some may find interesting in this interview is the lengths we used to go to in order to tell where someone lived prior to road names and house numbers. You will note that Harold had to use family names, most of which are lost on those reading about them in the twenty-first century. It was not often that we had to tell a stranger how to get somewhere in town, as there were few outsiders driving around in the early years of the twentieth century. Even road names were apt to change over time, as the old families died off, or moved away. Many roads were referred to as "Smith's Road", until Smith left the scene and was replaced by the Jones family, then it became "Jones' Road", and so on. With our new system, however, this won't happen any more.

His observations about the chandelier are interesting. Originally, it was operated by a type of windlass, operated from the base of the belfry, which is still up there, although disconnected. The modification of allowing it to be kept up by a counterweight was a significant laborsaving innovation.