

Oral History of Frank DeMars

The Colebrook Historical Society has been doing oral histories for over twenty years, and when we acquired the old town offices, room became available to better display and preserve our town treasures. The preliminary preparations led to a large box labeled "Oral Histories". Among the tapes were several transcripts dealing with them, and on top was the one that we will present now.

All who have enjoyed old photos and picture cards from this corner of Litchfield County knows Frank DeMars' name; most recently on the new web site demarsimages@aol.com, which is a "must see" for anyone interested in the premier collection of photographs of our area a century or more ago.

Here is the oral history of Frank DeMars (1872 – 1942) as told to his daughter, Martha Ruth DeMars Richards. Cynthia Baldwin interviewed Mrs. Richards on February 22, 1989.

"My father was born in Robertsville, Connecticut on August 21, 1872. His father was Peter DeMars and his mother was Harriet Holcomb Cook DeMars. He had a half-brother John, a brother Edmond and a brother Henry, who died at the age of two months. No sisters that we know of.

He didn't live in Colebrook all his life, but moved to Winsted, I'm not sure when. Hr went to high school at the West Winsted Academy, because there were no regular (public) high schools then.

He worked in Davidson's, the dry goods store, after school. He pumped the organ at the Second Church on Main Street, as well as working in C. K. Hunt's printing office, and continued working there after his mother bought out the business.

Later my father owned an art store in Winsted. I wish I knew the date, but I don't. He started the store after working a summer in Bristol. In his art store he employed Howard Deming, who later started Sterling Name Tape, and Pearl Hosking, who later became his wife. He also employed her mother, Martha Harrison.

Around the time he owned the art store, my father began taking pictures all over Winsted and the surrounding towns. He made post cards of many of those pictures, which he sold in the store, and he framed all kinds of pictures as well. Many of them can still be found around town.

All his pictures were black and white, but he would send them to Germany and they came back as colored cards. There are thousands of post cards; some I have, but not all of them, and thousands of glass plates."

"Of course, these cards were sold to many different stores in the towns where they were taken. I think he would go out about once a month to the different stores and take orders and come back and make them. The printing was done upstairs in the attic, on a printing press that had belonged to his mother. He did all the work himself.

He wasn't the owner of the store for a long time. He sold it to Mr. Holcomb, after which he went into gardening.

We moved up to the Grant Farm on Route 44 in Colebrook. We lived there a couple of years, after which my father decided he really didn't want to go into farming; what he wanted was plant selling.

So we moved back to Winsted, on Williams Avenue, but all his vegetables that he had planted were on a five-acre piece up to the Grant Farm, which had been rented. We had to go up there to weed them.

He raised all his own plants from seeds – most of the time from Burpee seeds. He also bought shrubs and trees to resell. They came mostly from Yalesville and Bristol nurseries, but also other nurseries in the area. Now that I think about it, what he really had up at the Grant farm was his own nursery.

Many times when trees didn't grow after he had sold them, he would dig them up, take them back, replant them and nurse them back to health, then sell them once again.

My father did landscape gardening, too. He put in gardens for people and made rock gardens. He went around in the winter and tried to sell shrubs, trees and plants to people for the spring. I remember that some annuals were .35¢ a dozen!

My father kept busy not only with his business, but was also very much involved with Winsted community activities. He started the Parent-Teachers Organization in schools in town. I'm sure he did for Greenwoods, and I'm pretty sure for Pearson. He was kept pretty busy with all that, and was active in different programs that were put on by the PTO.

Father was on Winsted's Planning and Zoning Committee. It was he who started the "Laurel Festival", with the crowning of a queen. That ceremony was usually done on a laurel-covered hillside up in Winchester at Cornie Johnson's Platt Hill area. He also wrote a history of Winchester.

Winsted became known as the "Laurel City" because Dad went to Hartford and asked for the name, and he got it.

My father gave lots of talks in different places about the history of Winsted and agriculture. After helping to establish a joint Horticultural Society in the towns of New Hartford and Winsted, he became its first president.

He was easy going, public minded, very religious and a popular speaker."

End tape.

In the Sept. 16, 1930 edition of the *Winsted Evening Citizen*, appears the following article: "Find Diamond Mine in Mountain Laurel, DeMars tells Club." "Speaker Before Rotarians Would Make This the 'Laurel City' With Largest Crop in World Nearby."

"Frank DeMars gave an interesting talk on 'Winsted's Diamond Mine' at the Rotary meeting today. He told of the mountain laurel in this section and suggested that Winsted adopt the name 'The Laurel City'. He said more laurel grows within 20 miles of this city than anywhere else in the world."

Frank DeMars left his family the legacy of a loving husband and father, and left to his community the legacy of a defining name and a large collection of truly wonderful photographs. Residents of the area owe it to themselves to visit the site demarsimages@aol.com

