Hardscrabble Road, Sandisfield, Mass.

*This text was written in the 1930s by Edwin A. Simonds and entitled "*Then and Now*". Throughout the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first, it has been called "Roberts Road".*

North of the border in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, only a few miles from Winsted, Connecticut, is the Town of Sandisfield, an area where history was in the making many years before the exclusive "Boston Tea Party" was a topic for animated conversation. In the early springtime of the long ago, a few hardy settlers from eastern Massachusetts journeyed to this area, then a wilderness, bringing supplies, tools and equipment, hoping to make permanent homes for themselves in an uncharted reservation.

They first constructed log cabins necessary for shelter from the well-known inclemency's of the New England climate. This was followed by removing the timber and undergrowth from the rough and rugged terrain – thus opening a space for the planting of a variety of seed to produce necessary food for the long and dreary winter in prospect. The winter supply was to consist of potatoes, turnips, carrots and other vegetables. Later came the removal of stones from cleared spaces, which were skillfully laid in stonewall formation, thus forming fences where needed. These stone fences, some of which were built one and one-half centuries ago, are still in fair condition, no longer needed, but remain a memorial to the skill and know-how of the builders.

During the months of patient waiting for the crops to mature, some of the food required was provided by nature, and consisted of fish from the pond now known as Simons Pond,[now renamed Lake Marguerite] and nearby streams, with an occasional wild duck or wild turkey. Cowslips were plentiful in the early spring.

Following the autumn harvest came a change in menu; potatoes were baked in the hot ashes of the fireplace, vegetables boiled in an iron pot suspended from the crane over the open fire, and after the corn was dried – as a grist mill was not at hand – the corn was crushed in an iron mortar and pestle. This substance was moistened and then kneaded into a bread formation and baked in a shallow iron pan placed on the coals in the fireplace. This finished product was known as corn bread or corn cake. However crude the preparation, it was said to have been good eating.

During the summer months berries had been gathered in generous quantities, dried – not canned – for winter use. The assortment consisted of raspberries, blueberries, blackberries and native wild apples, which were sliced and dried. A part of this supply was reserved for special occasions, presumably Thanksgiving and Christmas. When the corn was at its best, much of the surplus was cut from the cob and dried for winter use. During the late sap season, maple sugar and syrup had been made, but unfortunately in limited quantity.

As a doctor and medicines were many miles away, the settlers had a knowledge of the medicinal properties of nature's plants and roots, prepared for the time of need by storing catnip, wild sage, smartweed, slippery elm bark, wild turnip, ginseng, sassafras, pine pitch, wild

mustard, wintergreen, blackberry root, black cherry bark and pennyroyal, also jewel weed, known by a blue and white blossom, which was, and is, a sure cure for mercury poisoning. Nature provides remedies for the majority of the ills of mankind, and when used as intended by Mother Nature, are doubtless as effective – sometimes more so – than the synthetic compounds procured at the drug store on prescription.

With the coming of the autumn frosts, quantities of shagbark walnuts and butternuts were gathered and stored for winter use. As the weather became much colder, venison was added to the food supply.

In preparation for the short days and long nights ahead, the matter of lights was given consideration. No candles or lard oil for cloth wicks was to be had; therefore, the only light within the cabin was that reflected from the fireplace, which shown with the greatest brilliance when least needed – usually when the time arrived for retiring. Torches for outside use were made from pitch and pine cones, assembled with punk wood and securely wound with birch bark. During the season for spearing fish at night, the light given by these torches was all that could be desired.

With the winter weather came the snarling wildcats and howling wolves searching for food. While in the grip of winter, more timber was cut, more brush burned, and as far as possible, land cleared in preparation for more extensive planting, so that more cows and sheep could be added, and a flock of laying hens. With the coming of sugar season, numerous maple trees were tapped and the production of maple sweets commenced; also the brewing of sap beer, which was said to be a stimulating beverage.

In those so-called "good old days" of strenuous toil, the hours of labor were sixteen daily six days in the week, but the Sabbath was religiously observed as a day of rest. It was the established custom to ask a blessing before each meal, and to have family prayers following the breakfast. On Sunday, a community religious service was held – with every member of the community attending – unless illness prevented.

In early summer, the sheep were sheared, the wool carefully washed and dried, then by hand process fashioned into rolls that were spun into yarn by a know-how operator of the old-fashioned large spinning wheel. The yarn was then knitted into mittens, socks and wristlets, also woven into cloth by veteran operators of the cumbersome handloom. The mittens are worthy of special attention, having been knit double, with two skeins of yarn in use during the operation, one white, the other blue; thus forming an alternate pattern of small blue and white diamonds, which required exceptional skill with the needles.

In early autumn the flax was harvested, passed through the process of breaking to permit the extraction of the center fiber to be spun into coarse linen thread on a small spinning wheel operated by foot power. The thread was used for sewing, also woven into cloth for clothing, table spreads and linen sheets, so invitingly cool in summer, so chillingly cold in winter. Imagine if you can being a mid-winter guest of the old-time family and at night being taken into the unheated spare room with an outside temperature of several degrees below zero, and after a

pleasant “good night” from the smiling hostess, sink into a feather bed between linen sheets, and with teeth chattering, pass into a troubled sleep while dreaming of polar bears engaged in an ice escapade in their far north home!’

The dyes used to produce the colors desired were made by the women from barks, plants and roots, they knowing the compound of elements necessary to produce the desired shades. Some of the cloth woven in alternating colors was worthy of more than passing attention.

Each year came the transient shoemaker bringing with him the necessary material and tools. This service, known as “whipping the cat”, was looked upon as an innovation, as the skilled workman was made a welcome guest while making and repairing the footwear for the entire family. The material from which the boots were made was heavy cowhide, with the thick soles held in place by wooden pegs, and when treated with a coating of melted tallow and resin, were storm and waterproof. To remove them from the feet after hours of exposure to the cold and snow, it was necessary to use a bootjack. For description of this article, see Webster’s Dictionary. This footwear was durable and longwearing, and many times was known to survive the wearer.

After living many months midst primitive environment, and being in need of some supplies not provided by nature, it was decided to make a journey to a distant base for supplies. In early morning the oxen were yoked to a crude conveyance carrying for barter a bundle of pelts and a bundle of wool. The destination was reached late in the afternoon, and an exchange of commodities consummated, they receiving in exchange selected patterns of colored and decorated cloth for the women, tea, spices, black molasses, dark brown cane sugar, tobacco, black snuff; used by a few men and many women of that day and generation, and last of all was a jug of rum from the West indies; a medical remedy for snake bites. Starting homeward, a location was soon found for the night encampment. After a restful night in the open, but before the break of day, they were homeward bound and arrived several hours later, weary, but happy and contented midst primitive home environment.

[Note: the probable destination was New Hartford Connecticut, which was the nearest source of supplies. This is the reason the Old New Hartford Road in Sandisfield is so named.]

As the months passed into years, the little colony was increased by births, and new arrivals looking for home sites, and who were cordially received in the select family circle. To the names of Simonds, Bailey and Thorp were added Crane, Smith and Seymour. With the increase in numbers came expansion; more homes were built, more land cleared of timber, more ground broken – thus increasing the cultivated acreage needed for crop production; livestock increased in numbers.

With steady prosperity came that which permits a more abundant life, but the long days of strenuous labor still continued. After the evening meal was over and the dishes put away, the women sometimes met to discuss family affairs, continue with the knitting, and as a social gesture, pass the snuffbox. While the women were thus engaged, the men enjoyed their pipes, but refrained from the use of the snake bite remedy while the game of “Fox and Geese” was

being played. The game was very similar to checkers in objective, but was played with corn units.

Within this community circle unified cooperation was in evidence at all times. Contentment reigned supreme with never a thought being given to anything but the indefinite continuation, but suddenly came the news of Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill, which completely changed all plans in contemplation. In response to the call to military service, every able-bodied man in the settlement at once enlisted, leaving only the old men and women to assume the burden, little was it thought that for the next four years, greater hardships must be endured than ever before. The necessities of life became less as they patiently waited for the aid promised by the state, which promise was either intentionally repudiated, or was beyond the scope of performance.

After the term of enlistment was completed, the soldiers were discharged, and one by one returned to a life of peaceful contentment, and the task of conquering the wilderness. Having had contact with a world far different than their home environment, they began to take thought concerning the schooling of the children. Heretofore, the mother, who had patiently taught them the alphabet and primer reading, also several of the multiplication tables, had done this in the home. After some discussion as to location, the school houses were built; one being deserving of more than passing notice. The outside covering of this structure was unseasoned hemlock boards placed edge to edge in an upright position. The process of seasoning opened wide spaces between the boards, thus insuring an air-conditioned room both summer and winter. The children were seated with backs to the wall with long desks in front. By this arrangement, the children faced both the teacher and the center of the room, and the teacher occupied a vantage point too. The heating plant was a huge log fire in the stone fireplace at the end of the room; thus warming one end of the structure while the other extremity could have been used for winter recreation during intermission. The teachers of the period were selected more for brawn than brains and discipline was maintained by force instead of by diplomatic measures.

The reader in use at the time was the “National Preceptor”, a reader, encyclopedia and biography combined, containing as it did valuable instructions for reading and elocution, many excerpts from the classics, both poetry and prose, also extensive footnotes on biography. Among the excerpts mentioned were: “Story of Goffe, the Regicide”, by President Dwight of Yale; “Battle of Lexington”, by Weems; “Battle of Bunker Hill”, by Charles Botta; “Alexander and Septimus”, by Goldsmith; “Address to Patriots of the Revolution”, by Daniel Webster; “Questions of War with England”, by Patrick Henry; “Speech on Death of Caesar”, by Shakespeare; “The Battle of Blenheim”, by Robert Southy; :Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard”, by Thomas Gray; “The Battle of Linden”, by Campbell; “The Burial of Sir John Moore”, by Wolfe; “Cassabianca”, by Mrs. Hemans; “Alexander Selkirk”, by Cowper; “Bunker Hill Address”, by Warren; “Antony’s Speech Over the Body of Caesar”, by Shakespeare; “Battle of Waterloo”, by Lord Byron; “Death of Marco Bozzaris”, by Halleck; also a sketch of Major Andre.

The arithmetic in use was said to be an American revision or version of an English arithmetic published in Paternoster Row, London, England, in 1769. Doubtless this edition was the best obtainable during the period used, but does not compare favorably with present day methods, which are shortcuts when compared with early English methods. "Olney's Geography", published in Hartford, Connecticut, by Goodwin & Company, and D. B. Robinson & Company, presented to the boys and girls of those early days, a description of the world as then divided. *[A copy of a book titled " The Worlds As It Is", published in 1842, and the former possession of Ed Simons' grandfather, is in the possession of Robert Grigg, to whom Ed gave it in the 1950s.]* Great has been the change in world domination since that time. It may be our good fortune that we cannot envision the changes to take place during the next one hundred and fifty years. However, we look with gratitude upon our past, and from it we take a full measure of encouragement for the future.

Following the return of the men from military service, many changes were made in the colony, bringing increased prosperity; also the names of Clark and Belden were added to the roster. More acreage was cleared, more ground broken for crops, more stone wall laid in fence formation, and with the coming of the sawmill, some of the choice timber was converted into rough boards by the old fashioned up and down saw, and at least two families contemplated building houses and abandoning the cabins.

Ten miles distant a grist mill had been built, where corn, rye and buckwheat could be ground into flour, also housed in the structure was a machine to card wool into rolls for spinning. With the coming of the sawmill and gristmill, new families were welcomed to the progressive settlement, who soon joined the others in long days of strenuous labor, which in due time brought the reward which honest toil deserves. With the passing of time, the contemplated houses were built, new barns for the housing of the ever-increasing livestock, which included many sheep. Wells were dug near the houses, and the location of them can be seen at the present day.

In addition to the large fireplaces in the new houses, there were brick ovens beside them to be used for baking bread, loaf cake, pies and all kinds of meat. Food baked in a brick oven was, and still is, considered superior to that baked by present-day methods. The sleeping rooms were without heat in winter, and the custom of warming the beds with a warming pan containing hot, or live coals just before retiring, had to be continued. In explanation: a warming pan is a shallow brass pan containing the hot coals, having a hinged cover and attached to a long wood handle.

Ever increasing prosperity was in evidence, with some more prosperous than others, such being the case with all chance ventures. Tradition is the authority for the statement that this time a favored few with their families were owners of three hundred acres of land; this acreage providing for two hundred live stock to each land holder; presumably many of which were sheep, as wool was accepted as a unit medium of exchange. Some of the wool was sent to a small factory many miles distant to be woven into cloth – the manufacturer retaining a part of the manufactured product in payment of production cost, and then returning the remainder to the

owner of the material used. The cloth was gray in color, closely woven, long wearing and like the boots before mentioned, many times surviving the wearer. This cloth was commercially known as "wool satinet".

When the first cook stove came, it was viewed with curiosity, but not favorably received. The owner, while enumerating its several merits to a neighbor said, "It will save half the wood." To which the neighbor answered, "Why not have two stoves and save all the wood?"

The impatience of youth now became manifest, and several of the young men departed for distant destinations; namely Ohio, Minnesota and Alabama. The south at the time was an inviting prospect; much more so than the others mentioned.

For several years there had been no change in community routine, with the exception of an occasional exchange of social visits between distant neighbors by ox-cart transportation, and at intervals attending church service a few miles distant, by the same method of transportation.

Soon came the news of the "War Between the States." A few of the young men responded to the call for volunteers, but with less patriotic fervor than was manifested in 1776. Some of them made the supreme sacrifice on the field of battle; others came home suffering from wounds and disease, and later, one by one entered the encampment where "Comrades mute stood at salute, and gave them a soldier's due."

Shortly after the cessation of hostilities between the north and south, and while farm products still commanded a high price, especially cheese and wool, it became evident the prosperity enjoyed for many years had reached its peak. Later, when it became a certainty that this condition existed, many of the young men departed to join those who had emigrated several years before. Shortage of man power became evident; less acreage was kept under cultivation; livestock decreased in numbers; buildings disintegrated for need of repairs; many entire families moved to larger towns and cities. As the remaining aged and infirm passed on, Mother Nature moved in, and has continued the encroachment for many years, 'till at present time she is in undisputed possession. It matters little to the town where the property is located, where an old-fashioned house is repaired and made comfortable for a "summer hideaway" from the heat and noise incident to city life, as the new owners make no effort to improve the land, but instead, encouraged the encroachment by nature 'till the "hideaway" is in the midst of wildwood enchantment.

For the purpose of reviving memory concerning the departed pioneers, it becomes necessary to visit a "silent city", so why not the South Cemetery on the hilltop where it is unprotected by fence from what was once a colonial highway. Entering through a rank growth of weeds and grass, and pausing for a moment to disentangle the feet from running vines and moss, them moving with caution, lest a possible nest of unfriendly yellow jackets be disturbed, or the entrance to a woodchuck burrow be invaded. Many memorials are there; some in upright position, others at a slanting angle, and a few flat on the ground, in some instances with the inscriptions underneath.

Numbered with the honored dead are the resting places of three soldiers of the Revolution; namely Kneeland, Persons and Simonds, the latter being the great-great grandfather of the writer. On Memorial Day, these resting places are decorated with the most beautiful flag in the world.

Among the memorials erected to the memory of families once prominently identified with the growth of the country and the defense of the liberty that we enjoy, is one that has been used as a target. As approach was made to note the place where the missile made way, thoughts concerning the miscreant who desecrated the memorial erected to the memory of the honored dead will not permit of record expression. However, there is said to be a climate where he would not be misplaced. Here, in the dim and distant past was laid to rest several worthy citizens with only a fieldstone to mark the place of internment; even the names have long been forgotten; others were left without even a fieldstone to mark the place of rest. The condition of this unit of "God's Acre" cannot be considered a credit to the Town of Sandisfield or the State of Massachusetts to which the soldiers there interred responded in time of need. *[Note: This cemetery is well maintained these days, and has been for many years. The damaged tombstone looks the same today as it looked to Ed Simonds more than three quarters of a century ago, and it is assumed that by now the miscreant who did such a deed has gone to the place that Ed describes so aptly.]*

"Perhaps in this neglected spot, is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the red of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre."

Leaving this tangled labyrinth, the course was set over what was once a connecting highway, but now abandoned to the extent that sometimes the invading growth of nature is almost within touch. Slowly moving along the ancient highway, past the old Samuel T. Chapel homestead, where the writer was born, then descending Chapel Hill to the valley, where a partridge, followed by her brood was seen leisurely making her way through the thick undergrowth; evidently not aware that the silent sanctuary had been invaded. Still admiring the restful peacefulness provided by nature, and continuing along the valley, where the pioneers built the first cabin; where they lived for a time without the necessities required for their welfare; where the evening meal was often potatoes baked in the fireplace and served with salt on birch bark. However, they survived and eventually prospered.

Beyond the valley, where the gentle slope surrounded by heavy timber was entered, lilacs in bloom were seen at intervals, marking the cellar excavations over which stood houses once occupied by tenants whose names have long been forgotten. The land once under cultivation, and the once open pastures are now covered by a timbered growth; a habitat for the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Less than a mile distant was found the site of the schoolhouse of the long ago faulty construction. The building is now gone and the site covered with growing timber and underbrush. *[Note: The site is at the eastern side of the road that branches off the Hardscrabble Road (now called Roberts Road) and goes north to New Boston. There is a cool spring a little to the northeast of the old school site.]* From here the old colonial highway continues through

a section once tilled and productive, but now a forest reservation. More lilacs in bloom are seen marking cellar excavations, indicating a lost and forgotten generation – gone without a trace.

"For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care;
No children run to lisp their sire's return.
Or kiss his knees the envied kiss to share."

Leaving this abandoned section for the more open country, and thumbing a ride, the search for information concerning the past continued. *He now proceeds south along the road known as the Beech Hill Road in Sandisfield, past what we now refer to as the French Place, and, after crossing into Connecticut, where the name changes to Simons Pond Road (notice the misspelling), passes the site of the Beech Hill School in Colebrook, and ends his journey at the intersection of Simons Pond Road and Colebrook's Beech Hill Road.*

Entering a back road, once closed to traffic, but now passable for any vehicle except the present model of the low hung speedster, riding over a back country road far removed from congested traffic, when the car is piloted by a veteran driver, is a restful pastime. *[This road was severely damaged during the hurricane of 1938, and was not made somewhat passable until the Gerondo Fire in 1947. Today, the bridge over the outflow from Lake Marguerite is gone.]* Moving slowly along this seldom used road it was apparent that within a few years the right of way would be challenged by nature's forces opposing the invasion of man. Less than a mile from the entrance, at the right of the road, stands an old farmhouse 'midst a beautiful woodland setting, evidently now a restful retreat from the city summer heat and noise of traffic. From this place, more than 100 years ago, a young man, James Lawrence, said farewell to farm life, and as an incentive to a more exciting life, enlisted in the United States marines; received merited promotion from time to time, and finally reached the rating of a non-commissioned officer, at which time he was assigned to duty on a United States cruiser, which was later stationed in the Far Eastern waters for several years.

Having much time from routine duty and frequent shore leave, he took notes of the experience, and observation of the life and customs of the people. Later, while on an extended furlough spent at home, the manuscript was revised and proof read by Edward Adams, a teacher at the old brick schoolhouse on the New Hartford Road, who lived with the Byron Persons family, a short distance from the school. Then came the publication of the book "China and Japan", which was published at his own expense. This book is interesting reading, but has long been out of print, and is only available from libraries featuring out-of-print publications.

Continuing onward up and down a winding road, which as far as the eye could reach, a picture of forest green unfolded to view. For a short distance the overhanging branches formed a canopy over the line of travel. While passing through this bower of restful beauty, a continuous

stone wall fence could be seen in the growth bordering the highway, and bearing mute evidence of a generation inured to hardship and unceasing toil. However, they brought nothing into the world, and took nothing out, but left as a heritage a record as manly men, honorable associates, and law-abiding members of the community.

"Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield;
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield;
How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!"

As evidence of wildlife within this timbered area, a mother woodchuck followed by three little chucks hurried across the road ahead of the car and safely reached their objective – presumably their burrow.

While slowly proceeding through the wooded lane, the site of an early schoolhouse was passed, but nothing remained of the structure but the step stone that was visible midst the dense undergrowth. Here, for a long time, the quest for information and evidence relating to pioneer days ended, and the searcher wended his way homeward.

In early summer, this area presents an extensive vista of natural beauty seldom seen in New England. However charming and alluring the summer may be when the autumn mingles the green with red and gold, a panorama unfolds of brilliant color that is beyond comparison by any landscape artist. Will this area, once prominently identified with the march of progress, from which went forth men and women who eventually received enviable recognition, ever return to the former status and resume an onward march, or within the next half century will it again revert to an unbroken forest where the foot of man will seldom tread; where the wildcats will snarl and the wolves howl at night, where the moose, caribou and bear will invade from the north; where the coyote outlaw may appear; where the timid deer and sly fox may rest in fancied security; where the birds sing evening vespers at twilight, and birds of brilliant plumage flit from tree to tree midst a sanctuary paradise which only nature can provide?

"Beautiful paradise which nature has sent;
Beautiful skies where the rainbow oft bent,
Beautiful woods echoing whippoorwill song;
Beautiful streamlet running zig-zag along."

As we begin the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is interesting how well Ed Simonds predicted the return of the wild animals; with the exception of caribou, and perhaps the wolf, every one of these species now live in this area. This copying of Ed Simonds' writing, in addition to the comments made in italics, were done by Robert Grigg, Municipal Historian for the Town of Colebrook, Connecticut, and lifelong resident of Beech Hill and friend of Mr. Simonds.