

Then & Now – Living in Princeton A

By Ronnie Waters

Summer Person to Townie: Sixty-six years in Princeton.

In 1919, my grandfather, The Reverend Philemon F. Sturges, bought what was then the Jackson House on what was then called Depot Road (46 Hubbardston Rd). At the time, he was the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral (Episcopal) in Boston and was living on West Cedar Street. It became the Sturges summer home and remained so until my mother, Rosalind Sturges, sold it after my dad, Philemon junior, died in 1975. In 1919 (probably), Bishop Perry bought the house next door on the corner



46 Hubbardston Rd.



48 Hubbardston Rd.

of now 48 Hubbardston Road and Allen Hill Road. That house remained in the Perry family until recently. If memory serves me right my family started coming for extended visits in 1938 and in the early 1940's, after my grandparents had both died, my father's 2 sisters sold their interest in the house for \$1.00 each to my Dad.

Special attributes of that house were the crank-up telephone (our number was 101), the louvered swinging doors on the bedrooms, the intercom system with a "directory" in the kitchen so the maids (not in our day!) could tell who needed tending to, the big cistern in the attic where the water was stored (it came from a spring on Allen Hill Road), the sleeping porch over the driveway, built for my grandfather who had TB and the upstairs porch which led out to the rocks and which I considered my very own.

Summers in Princeton had a special magic and were an important part of my growing up. My memories are hardly chronological, but they are vivid and in them, the sun is always shining, unless there was a dramatic thunderstorm. I list them here:

- Our front yard was a lovely garden, which, I believe, had been planted by my grandmother, though I do not really remember her very well. The garden had a

bench in front of which was a small cement pool, shaped rather like a donut with a water spout in the middle. It was a great source of fun to try to direct the spray from the fountain so as to hit a brother or sister or friend. On the side that led to the east, there was an arched gateway, painted white, that contained two bench-like seats. This was to mark the path that led through the lilac bushes to the next-door neighbor's house. Lilacs and Beauty Bush surrounded the garden and made for a peaceful space set off from the road. In the garden, there were peonies that enchanted me. My mother told me if I stayed very still and watched for a longtime, I might be able to see fairies playing in the flowers. I believed her. What a clever woman she was...it kept me quiet for long periods of time! Of course, the sun was always shining.

- On a sunny afternoon, I was at home alone and, for some reason, while standing on a water pipe that ran beneath the sink in my parents' bathroom, I reached up to turn on the light which had a metal pull chain. Needless to say, I got a considerable shock. I remember getting up off the floor and going out into the front garden to lie in the sun, as I was really shaky. I remember my brother, Phil, coming home and finding me there.
- One of my favorite occupations was to play on the rocks behind the house. I played elaborate imaginary games there and even built a fire place where I would burn mini-fires with twigs. Some of those rocks extended beneath the house and there was a secret sort of place where I shared at the age of nine my first cigarette with Buddy Lyons
- Our cousins, the Perry's, were next door and I can remember their grandmother sitting in the glider swing while we children played in that little yard, surrounded by lilac bushes. There was (and still is, I think, a large tree (Maple?)) under which the glider sat. Later, I remember Kitty Perry sitting on that same glider. Sitting outside in the shade, perhaps having a glass of iced tea and cookies seemed to be a frequent activity for the "old folks". Now that I live in the South, I recognize the scene as a very Southern one. Kitty and her mother were real southern ladies.
- To this day I can see the ice truck coming to deliver ice for our icebox. There was a door from the outside leading into a back room, through which he could put the big chunk of ice into the house. We loved it when he came as he would chip off pieces of ice for us to suck on.
- Another regular delivery was milk brought by the Fay sisters from Merriam Rd., Patience and Mary, in their old black Plymouth coupe with a huge trunk for delivering the milk. The milk was in glass bottles and the cream was on the top. This milk was not pasteurized, which accounts for my good health even to this day.
- Tennis was a constant entertainment. There was a court to the rear of our house. Labor Day matches were played there, and we all grew up playing regularly on

that fine old clay court. Weeds in the back corners were a constant battle and pulling weeds was a punishment when little girls misbehaved.

- Another regular diversion was blueberrying. I do not remember all the places we went, probably Little Wachusett for one, but one spot that was close by was what we called Blueberry Hill, the property 2 houses up on Allen Hill Road. It was an easy walk and we could go on our own. Of course, we were more interested in stuffing our faces than filling the tin milk cans that we used to collect the berries. The Petersons' house now stands in that place (55 Mountain Rd.). When I was a little older, my friend Janet Hamilton, and I would plan to sleep out there and would drag all our paraphernalia up with full intention of spending the night. Not long after darkness descended, we would find our way back down the hill.
- I do not know how old I was when I was allowed to leave the house on my own and go off until mealtime, but I have vivid memories of spending many hours at Dr. Stimson's farm down the road (4 Goodnow Rd.). I would collect eggs from the hens, follow Gus, the hired hand, around endlessly and call the cows in the afternoons. I truly believed they came



4 Goodnow Rd.

because I called them, but it was not till decades later that I learned they were desperate to be milked and would have found their way to that barway whether I had called them or not. On many Sunday afternoons, knowing that Dr. Stimson's son would come to take his horse (named Rex) out for some exercise, I would hang around hoping someone would lift me high up onto his back and lead me around the circular driveway. And playing in the hayloft was the source of great pleasure. The loft was dusty, warm and had that deliciously sweet aroma of new mown hay. To this day the smell of new hay evokes images of that barn and that loft.



35/37 Hubbardston Rd.

Most of these activities were done on my own or with my family. I had so much unstructured time to fill, and I got rather good at inventing games and stories to play. I do believe that the greatest gift my parents gave me were those endless hours of having to invent my own play.

More scenes:

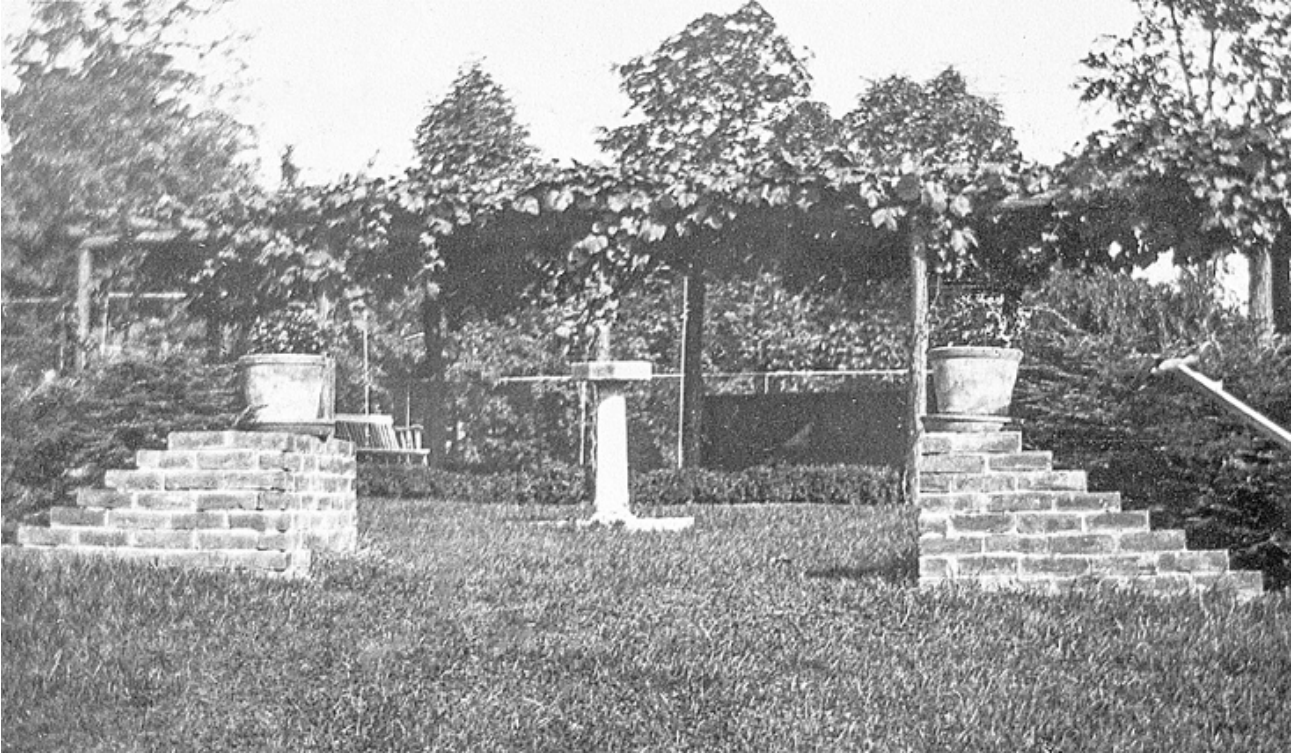
- When I was 9, I got to know Janet Hamilton, who became my best buddy and our summers were filled with adventures. I was enchanted by the fact that she had a pony. It was kept in Buster Simonitis' barn on Depot Road (35/37 Hubbardston Rd.). I well remember helping Janet get the pony groomed for horseshows. My job was to wash Friskes' tail with Breck Shampoo. There was a small pony cart that we would drive about town. At one point we were driving up Thompson Road on a very steep road, and I had to get out and walk as Friskes could not pull us both (and I was skinny then!). When we were not attempting to sleep out on Blueberry Hill, we would sleep out on her family's front porch (the house where Beth Mellor lives now



11 Radford Rd.

- 11 Radford Rd.) with countless blankets for protection against the cold. For breakfast we would have grilled peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and Coke. When we were teenagers and Janet had a job answering the phone in her father's office in the garage on Hubbardston road, we would play endless hours of double solitaire. On August 14, 1945 we climbed up onto the roof of that garage and set off the air raid siren to celebrate the U.S. victory over the Japanese. From there we ran to the center of town where a group of boys was busy pulling hay from the fields below the center up to the crossroads to make a bonfire. The boys (including my brother, Phil) decided it would be much more efficient to take the fire to the haystack rather than the other way around and suggested as much to Fire Chief Gendron who was overseeing this activity. He said not if he were watching...and promptly turned his back. As the parents emerged from the service of thanksgiving at the Congregational church, the fire trucks were racing down the hill to extinguish the fire. The minister's son was living up to the reputation of PKs (Preacher's Kid) everywhere!
- Thunderstorms were a source of thrill and excitement and we would delight in watching the storms approach. The best view was from the roof of our house and there was excitement in crawling/walking on that roof as well as watching those amazing thunderheads approach. Our father was not so pleased!

- And then there was tennis. It was a constant in our summers. Dad would get out t



Brick Entrance to Sun Dial, Grape Arbor, and Tennis Court behind that at 46 Hubbardston Rd.

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pes at the beginning of each summer and put the court in order. There was a grape arbor next to the pump house (a great place to play) and a lawn with a big tree in the center of it. When I was too young to play tennis, the arbor, the pump house and the lawn which was good for croquet, provided good diversion. Mother would often bring iced tea for the players. Labor Day matches were played there for as long as I can remember. Dad wore long white pants and all the racquets were wooden. I learned to play at 7 or so and was mainly taught by my brother. He drilled me on my backhand, which remained my strong suit till I gave the game up about 5 decades later. At some point, after the war, Joe O'Connor, Dan Hart (they lived on Radford Rd.) and others came to Dad and asked if they could use the court as a place for people in the neighborhood to play and offered to set up and dismantle the court each season and even put lights on the court for night-time play. It sounded like a deal to Dad and there began the Princeton Tennis Club (which eventually moved to Goodnow Rd.). The lights were put on a meter and it cost \$.25 for an hour or so of light. Imagine! Our court became the evening hot spot (or so I thought) much to the delight of Phil and Helen and me (I think Libby was too young to appreciate the benefits of being a good place for teenagers to hang out).

- Another distinct memory is of the Fernside “Girls” (162 Mountain Rd.). We would see them walking into town from their house up on Mountain Road and wonder about their lives. We were not really aware of who they were, just that they appeared every summer and seemed to spend a good deal of time walking.
- Climbing the mountain: a regular event at least once or twice a summer. I seem to remember the Mountain House trail the best, so I imagine that was the standard route up.



Fernside Ladies Doing Their Dailey Chores



52 Westminster Rd.

Fast forward a whole bunch of years, to 1962, when Tom and I were married at St. Stephen’s Church in Holden and the reception was in that beautiful house and bush-enclosed front yard. We left for our first home in the Virgin Islands, to be followed by Long Island and then Hingham, MA. It was from Hingham that we put down our own roots on 52 Westminster Road, buying the Murphy house in 1973. We summered there with our two boys for fourteen years and those summers were filled with many of

the activities that had filled my childhood in town: tennis, blue berrying, climbing the mountain.

When Tom retired in 1987, we became townies... a really good feeling. We got to watch what happens to a town in the shadows of Mount Wachusett in all seasons and it was all wonderful. We could watch the shadows of evening or approaching storms cross the mountain from our back window and saw rainbows, resident and migrating birds, various mammals and even the Aurora Borealis. One summer afternoon, a coyote attacked our fearless dachshund, but gave up as I think he found the dog heavier than he anticipated. Regular walking was added to and eventually replaced tennis as our main physical activity. I walked that mountain almost every day and learned the trails and off-trail secret places like the back of my hand.

We both got very involved in the workings of the town; Tom primarily with the Library and Wachusett House and I with the Arts Society and the Historical Society. I also helped with the development of the Princeton Center (Boylston Ave.). Part of that included such things as painting the bathrooms in the basement, pulling up a rug in a room on the second floor to make it appropriate for a dance studio, moving countless objects from Wachusett Meadow to the Historical Society room and painting the walls and washing the windows in the Arts Society room.

Our circle of friends widened and thanks to email, we are still in touch with so many of them. Once a year, usually in October, we invited our friends into our home for an evening of conviviality enhanced by food brought by our guests as well as a baked ham and good drink provided by us. I have so many warm memories of those evenings as they were symbolic of why Princeton was so special to us. It is people who make that town so very large in our hearts.

Memories of Princeton in those townie years include:

- Whopper snow and ice storms of incredible beauty....Tom calling the light department when the electricity went out.
- Being “rescued” by Lisa and Eric Rauh after 3 days of no power following a really nasty storm.
- Birthday gatherings of the “Art Ladies”
- Walking behind the official participants in the Memorial Day parade...and one year listening to Robbie Cadwallader sing the Star Spangled Banner
- Following tennis matches around town on Labor Day weekend, eating lunch at Pine Hill and sitting on the hillside to watch the finals at the Catholic Church.
- The annual Fernside art sale at Christmastime
- The Friends of the Library Christmas concert at the Congo Church
- The summer concerts on the common
- Hey Day at Wachusett Meadow and on one occasion the PAS art exhibit on the common (both on the same weekend which caused some consternation).
- Portrait Group at the Princeton Center
- Cataloging the collection on Saturday mornings for PHS
- A wonderful good-bye party at the Princeton Center

The focus of my life became the studio. I started out on the screen porch, moved to the former science room of the Princeton Center, then home to the porch and the cellar and then back to the center, to the “dentist’s office” (a room in the Center School) then home again for last year or so of our time in town. Teaching classes to

both kids and adults kept me busy for a number of years as did my own sculpture, which I was able to exhibit at several Princeton venues.

We were proud that Princeton had been early in the process of going green by putting up the original 8 windmills and had a good time watching the process of their being erected. And now we are equally proud of “our” town as we watch from a distance the process of the new windmills going up.

This may be wordy, but is only a small sampling of so many years of sunshine in that town. It will always be our true home. Woodlawn cemetery will be our final resting place...right there in the midst of our friends!

From Princeton Historical Society:

If after reading this, please feel free to send us your remembrances of growing up or visiting Princeton. Be sure to include the years you are describing.

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