

Then & Now – # 4 Interesting Oral Tibits From 2009 Bicentennial Celebration

Phil Rand

Audubon: I loved walking or biking down Goodnow Road and through the Wachusett Meadows Farm property. It was a beautifully kept farm, a gentlemen's farm owned by CT Crocker from Fitchburg. He owned a paper mill, so was fairly well off.

They raised Milking Shorthorn and Brown Swiss cattle. The sheep were to keep Brown Hill browsed of brush, keep it clear for the view. CT had a stone chair - a "throne" actually at the very top of Brown Hill that he could sit in a look at Wachusett and Little Wachusett.

The fences along the roads edge were white board and the cows would come to the fence to get their ears scratched. There were a long line of American elms - "tulip elms" we called them that stretched from before the large barn to the caretaker's house and formed an arch of leafy green shade during the summer. They'd be alive with Baltimore Orioles all summer.

In the woods, you could still find the remains of American Chestnut, huge old impervious stumps. The farm pond in the field in back of the main house had bull frogs so large Mark Twain could have used some for his jumping contests.



I understand that Mr. Crocker never spent a night in the main house. He loved to come and ride horseback, though... a very elegant, dignified man. In 1955, he received the town tax bill for an amount considerably higher than it should have been. When he challenged it, he was told that he could afford it, so pay up... or words to that effect. He turned

around and gave all that property to the Massachusetts Audubon.

Gregory Hill: In the summer, we'd start, on our bikes, at the top of Meetinghouse Hill, pedal just enough to get started, take the turn in front of Chase's Store, coasting, feet off the pedals, and try to make it to East Princeton without pedaling.

Outhouse: There was a boy in town named Buddy Byrum who lived up on Meetinghouse Hill, I believe in the house Ed Camp (58 Mountain Rd.) eventually bought. He had money and collected old guns. He called one day. "Hey, Phil. I've got a new one. Come 'on down and try it out."

I went over. It was a Revolutionary War musket - a Brown Bess - huge bore and wildly inaccurate beyond twenty-five feet. We went out back and down the hill a bit. There was an old 2-hole outhouse back in the trees with a target painted on the door. His shooting range. We stood off at 30 or 40 feet. He loaded and cocked it. "Ok," he said. "Just line up with the bullseye and pull the trigger." I did.

What a noise. What a cloud of smoke! Very satisfactory. The shot blew a hole in the door almost a foot in diameter. We were standing there admiring the result when we heard:

"Ommigod!! Ommigod!! Don't shoot, please, don't shoot. I'm going!!" Out from the shack hobbled a vagrant with his pants still down around his ankles. Off he went through the woods still trying to pull his pants up. He'd been sitting in there, relaxed, enjoying a moment of peace when the world literally exploded. If he'd been perched on the other hole, he'd have been killed.

Tennis: We played a lot of tennis, as kids. Then, the balls were white, the clothing was white, and the game was subdued - didn't allow cheering... The Sturgis Court (46 Hubbardston Rd.) was the only one with lights, so we'd go over for an hour in the evening and hit some balls with Joe O'Conner and maybe one of the Perry's if they were around.

Malcolm Chase: Malcolm Chase ran the general store. Two gas pumps, the Post Office, and groceries. He was a tall, spare man with big ears and a dry wit. Perfect for a small New England town. A bunch of us were sitting in front of his store one fine day when a large, black car with New York plates pulled up.

Out stepped a man dressed in a business suit and smoking a large cigar. He looked at Malcolm: "Hey, Pop! You got a phone in this town??" Nobody ever called Malcolm "Pop" and got away with it!

Malcolm smiled and leaned forward a bit. "Well, I'll tell ya," he said. "You go up the hill by the church. Go all the way to the top. About a quarter of a mile on the left, you'll come

to a road. That's Allen Hill. You take a left and go to the next intersection. There, you take another left. Keep going and pretty soon you'll come to a big grassy area on your left and a bunch of large white houses. Keep going around to the left and through the next intersection. You'll see a phone booth on the right."

The man said, "Thanks, Pop!" and off he went. About ten minutes later, here comes the black car. Malcolm, of course, had sent him around in a circle. The man drove through the intersection, never noticed us, and pulled up to the phone booth. As he got out, Malcolm leaned forward, again: "Well, sonny, I see you found your telephone!!" The man spun around, looked at us and then the phone, climbed in his car, and drove away in a spray of gravel. I laughed so hard my sides hurt for a week. Nobody ever called Malcolm "Pop".

Antique Auto Museum: The Antique Auto Museum was a going concern back then. It was owned by Rusty Sampson's great-uncle Al Garganigo. He lived at the Red Fox Farm (363 Worcester Rd.). Rusty's dad, George, and brother lived with Al for a while at Red Fox Farm and Al promised that they would inherit the museum when he died.

Rumor has it, that he was finally was convinced to make it official and the day he was supposed to drive to Worcester to sign the will, he died.



It was known as one of the largest privately owned collection of cars on the East Coast. He'd made his money as a junkyard owner in Worcester and owner of the land where the White City Amusement Park was. We kids could get in to the museum for free if we'd agreed to polish the brass on the cars. There were antique cars, car engines, pinball machines, one or two full sized steam locomotives and a Jap Zero. Even had a miniature train that took visitors on rides around the property.

Every June he'd pull a bunch of cars out of the museum, fire up either the Stanley Steamer, or Duryea Electric, can't remember which and lead a parade of antique autos up the mountain. When he died, his sisters got the place and offered it to the town for a couple of million. What an opportunity!! Some of Princeton's citizens sniffed at it and said, in effect... Why should the town own a bunch of old cars?? And, the town passed up the chance. What a huge loss!!!

Buster Simonatis:

Alexander 'Buster' Simonatis recalls walking to schoolhouse #8 at the corner of Thompson and Rhodes Rd., when he was about five years old. "As young as I was, I'll always remember the time the teacher went to the outhouse and the big boys tipped it over when she was inside," says Buster.



School House #8

Doctors: Doc Paterson was the town physician (234 Thompson Rd.). He made house calls or you could go to his office, in the living room of his house.

Brooks Stimson's brother was the town veterinarian and lived in the big house at the corner of Hubbardston Rd and 4 Goodnow Rd. With twelve farms in town, he kept very busy.

John Laporte:

John Laporte owned the bus company. A sweetheart of a guy and a great role model for us kids. He also had a bus line he drove into Worcester that ran every day four times a day and then a late bus on Wednesday night.

School Bus: The first year Wachusett opened, I believe, that there was only one busload of us kids from Princeton. The last day of each school year, John always treated us to ice cream at the little snack bar next to the Auto Museum. Then, we knew that summer had started.

Nellie Gleason Chamberlain

Snow & Mud:

"The roads were dirt then and sometimes there was mud up to the wagon hubs after a snow melt. It was a very bumpy ride," adds Chamberlain. "I remember horses dragging a V-shaped wooden plow to clear the roads. Sometimes we couldn't go to school because the snow was drifted so deep across Old Brooks Station Road (at Matthews Lane). Girls as well as men helped clear and shovel snow."

"At first we went to school in an old wagon, " recalls Nellie. "It was like an old cracker wagon, very boxy and closed in with a settee on each side.

Signs of Spring: There were two signs of spring, back then, which don't occur any more: so many male Robins on the lawn that they seemed a living carpet (we counted two hundred one morning!) and so many "spring peepers" - *Hyla crucifer*- in the swamp that at night if you tried to talk with someone on the back lawn ,they literally could not hear you. The noise from that crowd was deafening.

In the pond, at one time, or another, I identified - Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, American Bittern, Least Bittern, Black Crowned Night Heron, and the Snowy Egret. We had Mallards and Black Duck, Wood Ducks, and Mergansers. The woods abounded with thrush and warblers, woodpeckers and hawks. It was paradise.

Summer – Keeping Busy: If I was bored, it was my own fault. We had none of the stuff



kids have nowadays and yet we kept pretty busy. I earned money by mowing lawns, or working for Harry Prescott, or Jim Smith (110 Hubbardston Rd.), or picking and selling berries. I earned the magnificent sum of \$0.30 per hour for heaving hay bales, helping cut corn, or whatever. Thought that was good money.

Sylvia Hultgren Lee

Sylvia Hultgren, class of 59: "My first job was at the Summit House on top of Mt. Wachusett where I worked for several seasons on weekends - the only time it was open. The huge House, with its massive fireplaces was a beacon for travelers from near and far. On cold days, we always had fires lit in those fireplaces to keep warm. The fragrant smell of fir souvenirs and hamburgers cooking permeated the house. The secret to our fabulous Hamburgers? Celery salt.

"In Princeton, we lived on what I called the back side of Mt. Wachusett, five miles from the center of town, at the end of the paved portion of Thompson Road. Most folks from

Princeton have probably had never been to this part of town, but it was country at its best. I knew every inch of woods for a couple of miles around and would often wander off on my own or with our dog, for a day in the forest."

The most exciting day on the mountain came the day Martin Milner and George Maharis (sigh) of the hit tv show, Route 66 came to visit. They were the heartthrobs of the nation and it took some doing to recover from that much excitement."

Carrie and Ben Nelson lived across the street from us. I always considered them "grandparents", grandma Nelson always had an after school homemade treat ready for me. They always invited us for breakfast on Sunday mornings. Their two room house was heated by their big black, cast iron, wood burning kitchen stove. Their privy was outside in the shed and always had a stack of Sears Roebuck catalogs handy. Once a week, Mr. Chase from the only store in the center of town, would bring them fresh produce and meat for them to buy, out of the back of his antique black truck."

"Our neighbors were few but memorable. At the end of the road were professor Lawrence and Louise Chapman. Mr. Chapman was an avid bird watcher who annually hosted a bird watching event that drew people from all over the nation. Mrs. Chapman was an artist and I still cherish the painting she did of our home with the big red barn, which is no longer there."



Further up the road, on top of the hill, lived the Thompson's and Stimson's (207 Thompson Rd.) in a huge sprawling farmhouse. They were dairy farmers and the cow barn was my favorite place in the world to play - often to their chagrin since I often managed to get in some sort of trouble, like the time I fell into the empty silo and couldn't get out. When Mrs. Stimson made donuts and invited me to have some, it took

every ounce of strength not to eat them all. Charlie Thompson also had a working team of beautiful Clydesdale horses - before tractors came along."

Plenty of swimming choices around:

- Comet Pond was the main choice.
- For a quick dip we went to Echo Lake (Pond) towards the mountain. It was icy even on the warmest day – spring fed.
- Then, there was the pond at the junction of Westminster Road and the old Down Road, (some called it Matches Corner) just beyond where Murphys used to live (the wind-farm entrance is there now) also very cold,
- A swimming hole on Brooks Station Road south of the junction with Ball Hill, towards Clarks (Rutland).
- And, oh yeah, the pond at the foot of the hill beyond Chapman's house on 5 Thompson Rd.. Malcolm Chase bought it when he built his cabin there. It was super cold, but deep enough for a rope swing.

Louise Hubbard

Born in Princeton in 1898, Louise Hubbard attended the one-room schoolhouse (#5) on Ball Hill Road at the junction of 6 Schoolhouse Rd., before going to the Center School. "There was a round, pot belly stove for heat and the outhouses were out back," she recalls.

"I remember it poured on graduation day," says Louise. "I was having a fit because I was getting my new dress all wet. We went to graduation in a two-seater horse and buggy. And all we had was an umbrella."

Joe O'Brien & PHS

The house below, at 30 Mountain Rd, was Built in 1889 by Charles F. Washburn of Worcester and owned through the years by: Charles G. Washburn – son, Mrs. C.G. Washburn (Caroline Slater), John Coonley, Roy H. Wall 1950 - The Meeting House (restaurant), Deming S. Cross 1961, John A. Knutson and Donald Warnock (1970) – "The New School", Susanne Reed and Elizabeth Sjogren opened the Inn at Princeton, Don and Maxine Plumridge - County Inn at Princeton, Richard Brooks, Henry Cabot, Cheryl & Donald Ervin.

The house was struck by lightning and burned in 2017 and the fire retardant used to keep gas tanks from exploding eventually contaminated the underground aquifer. It was known previously as the Princeton Inn, there was a "Free School", which taking some liberty, was a bit of commune. My memory is that the children of the group were home schooled, and though I am not sure some local children were also able to attend.

Linda Kolbek

I am a New Jersey born and raised woman and now, a Pennsylvania resident for 35 years. I live in Berks county which, along with its beauty, is home to the Amish and Mennonites. It's common to see horse drawn carriages with bonneted women and babies. Just wonderful!



Washburn House - 30 Mountain Rd.

But, I remember Princeton just as well.... a beautiful historical town that I could have very easily seen myself staying in for many years. I resided there in the early 70's. My memory, can't remember all the details, but I was living in what people (back then) called a "commune".... (Ah, the good old hippie days!) It was also called "The New School" and from what I remember it was housed in a wealthy industrialist's mansion.

I remember the Warnock's (Donald and Serenella) resided there. Serenella was a teacher and concert pianist and Donald worked for the Smithsonian. It was one of the most magical times in my life. Sheep grazed in the backyard whose property went on forever.

I will always remember Princeton as a magical far away place. You are so fortunate to live there!

This was compiled by William "Bud" Brooks in 2024-5 with descriptors and images added to enhance the readers understanding of site locations.

If you have any additional memories of life in Princeton, please send them to princetonmahistory@gmail.com.