

CHAPTER XXI

MEMORABILIA

"That thou among the wastes of time must go." — Shakespeare

Every New England town has had its unrecorded events and things that have moved the hearts of its earlier generations, which even tradition has failed to preserve. The yield of time includes many things, some that have added importance to the purposes for which they were designated and beyond that an intangible meaning to life and living for countless people. These are the memorabilia, worthy of remembrance, which dimming tradition often fails to save from oblivion. It is the purpose of the following pages to keep a few of these things in Jaffrey from becoming lost in "the wastes of time". Some, perhaps, are unimportant in themselves, yet they have added meaning and dignity to life in this country town and have stirred the souls of its people.

THE VILLAGE ELM

Long before the beginning of the village, the old Village Elm at what is now the corner of Main and North Streets, was a mere sapling, but growing taller and stronger year by year. From the growth rings counted in 1934, it appeared that it had its beginning in the early 1730's. When, nearly two hundred years ago, John Borland bought the land that is now part of the village, it had grown into a tree. He must have looked upon it with an approving eye as he let it stand. Then came the mills, and the houses, one after another, clustered around it. Ax-men who were used to cutting down trees as all in a day's work, spared it. Somehow, it commanded respect and most people have a sentiment for a stately tree.

The Billings house was built in its shade. It stood on the north side of the tree and almost against it, and nearby was a well long since filled in. The story is told that one day Mr. Billings came out, ax in hand, with the avowed purpose of cutting down the great tree. But it turned out to be a case of "Woodman, spare that tree." The villagers protested so loudly that Mr. Billings dropped his ax. That elm tree was no one man's tree. Somehow it belonged to all the people in a way that few trees do. It stood like a guardian over the village square, as beloved in Jaffrey as was its famous counterpart, the Washington Elm, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Billings house grew old and went the way of outworn things. And only the memory of its replica, built for the town's Sesqui-Centennial, remains. But the elm tree remained, tall and stately, with wide spreading limbs above a tall trunk. It gave comfort to man and beast. For years it cast its noonday shadow over the watering trough above which it towered. In the olden summer days horses, as they passed by, paused for a drink of the cool water and were glad of a brief respite from the heat of the sun, and the village folk sought comfort on the wooden benches within its shade.

It was a landmark that for two hundred years withstood the ravages of time, defying the storms and the fury of the winds. Much history was made around it. But there comes a time when even the strong must yield, and thus it was with the great elm. Little by little the elements took their toll. And when at last, lightning-scarred and bereft of its former grandeur, its turn came to go with our yesterdays, reluctantly we let it go.

The month of July, 1934, was a stormy month, with seven more storms counted than is normal for the month. It came to a close with a terrific electrical storm on the 31st. While the old tree had withstood the storms and gales of two centuries, its hold on life was already weakened by the construction of the sidewalk at its base which damaged its root system. It no longer could defy the elements. Lightning struck again that day, ripping a large limb from the top down and left it a scarred skeleton. Twice before it had been struck by lightning, but now it was time for the tree to go.

The removal of the old elm tree was a difficult task, even for experienced men. There were the overhead wires for the public utility companies to reckon with. The contract for the removal of the tree was awarded to Arthur Boulanger of Gardner, Massachusetts, at a cost of \$171.85. Its seventeen foot circumference presented a problem for a crosscut saw. Samuel Blanchette, one of the local men employed by the contractor, relates that the saw had to be circulated around and around the tree.

When at last the tree was felled, the contractor counted 198 growth rings on it and so concluded its age to be about two hundred years. It measured about five feet in diameter at the butt, and it was estimated that the stump weighed between eleven and twelve tons. The stump was loaded on eight foot skids behind a truck and hauled to the town dump by Octave Bernier.

The following spring a new elm tree was planted a little north of the spot where the old tree stood, as part of Arbor Day observ-

ance. It was donated by James B. Perry and came from near Squantum. It was removed by M. G. Perry of the CCC camp, assisted by three CCC boys. Tree Warden Charles E. Chamberlain was in charge of its planting. The dedication and planting exercises, May 3, 1935, opened with a prayer offered by the Rev. G. Gerald Parker, pastor of the East Congregational Church, followed by remarks by the Rev. P. J. McDonough, pastor of St. Patrick's Catholic Church. Trombone and cornet numbers were rendered by Alfred Towne and William Naramore. The dedication ceremony was performed by the Girl Scouts.

THE VILLAGE SMITHY

Like the village smithy of the poet's theme, Jaffrey had a village blacksmith shop in the heart of the village for nearly a hundred years. There are those living today who recall standing at its open door on their way home from school and watching the smiths, Seymour H. Austin and his son, James W. Austin, shoeing a horse or forging a piece of red hot metal. There was a strange fascination about the sparks flying around, and the clang of the anvil answered youth's inordinate desire for noise.

The village smithy stood immediately north of the present fire station on River Street. It was built in 1857 by Orford Capron, a leading figure in the village for many years. Five years later David Adams Coburn came to Jaffrey from Lowell, Massachusetts. He was a blacksmith and wheelwright and plied his trade until his death in 1887. It was carried on by his son, Edward Adams Coburn, until the early or middle 1890's when Seymour H. Austin took over. Except for a ten-year interval while living in Peterborough, he continued the business into the late 1920's, after which the building was little used. In August, 1935, the Coburn heirs decided to tear down the building and fill in the cellar hole, and gave the contract to Lawrence Harper. And thus, within the memory of many persons still living, another familiar Jaffrey landmark passed into history.

THE LAST PASSENGER TRAIN

Saturday, August 27, 1870, was a great day in Jaffrey. Something new was coming into the lives of its people and anticipation ran high. For weeks they had waited for the completion of the laying of the railroad tracks to the village. And now it was done. Even the frustration they had felt when part of the tracks had sunk out of sight in the quicksand by the "spile bridge" was forgotten as

they gathered at the railroad station to see the first locomotive, the famed "Monadnock," come puffing in. The occasion was observed in due fashion. (See Vol. I, pp. 454-5.) The sensation of the day developed into drama and romance to last four score and more years.

The glamor of the old railroad days and the haunting sounds of the steam locomotives' whistles at the grade crossings became nostalgic memories for many people for whom the romance of the railroad never died. Such sentimentalists gathered at the railroad station one March afternoon, 1953, for a final chapter in Jaffrey railroading.

As the automobiles increased in numbers, travel by train declined, and in the 1930's and 1940's passenger trains were discontinued one after another. Finally, on March 7, 1953, the last passenger train left the station, bound for Worcester, Massachusetts. The roll of its iron wheels on iron rails combined with the purr of its diesel engine into a swan-song that lingers in Jaffrey memories.

Still standing, however, is the old railroad station, its former use gone. As one passes by today one may hear the pounding and rolling of printing presses within instead of the sound of train wheels screeching to a stop without. Only an occasional lonely freight train moves past the former station now, carrying raw materials of manufacture to the factories down the track and in Peterborough and picking up manufactured commodities for the outside world.

THE MILL CHIMNEY

When in 1966 the first rumor was heard in Jaffrey that the old brick mill chimney was going to be taken down, many an audible and inaudible "Oh, no!" was expressed by the people who had come to look upon it as a permanent landmark in the heart of the village. Although it had out-lived its usefulness, all felt that in its destruction something vital to the village scene would be lost. During its later years it bore a "scar" near the top where lightning-damaged bricks had been replaced some years earlier. It stood like a sentinel tower, tall and symmetrical, visible from every approach to the village.

In bygone days it belched forth sooty black smoke, in which, as it wafted over the village, one could envision coal miners toiling in the bowels of the earth, growing old before their time, their faces grimy and black. That was in the days when coal provided

power for the mill. But now oil had taken the place of coal, and its usefulness had come to an end.

During the summer of 1966, to the wonderment of many an observer, down came the bricks, one after another, until the 125-foot structure that had dared the lightnings of the sky was no more. It will take some time to get used to the emptiness of the site. The tall chimney somehow belonged to the village scene and without it even the mill looks forlorn.

THE OLD SCHOOL BELL

Even the most reluctant feet took on an accelerated pace as the fast tempo of the school bell in the belfry of the old Union Hall building began pealing across the village, telling the arrival of the nine o'clock hour when the seats of learning within the walls must be filled. Every pupil knew that an ugly "tardy mark" after one's name was something to be avoided if possible.

The old schoolhouse, which stood on the site of what is now the north wing of the grade school building, was erected in 1853. No doubt, the old bell in its belfry was of similar vintage, and, through nearly ninety years, its ringing had been a familiar and revered sound in the village life, where generations had heeded its gathering call.

In 1937, in the name of progress and the growth of the younger population of the town, additional and more modern school room was needed. (See Schools.) So the old Union Hall building was torn down and a new school erected on its site.

The war soon came and in the frenzy of scrap metal salvage, the old bell, too, was to be relegated to the scrap heap to be melted down for materials of destruction. What to do with the old bell led to arguments, pro and con, sometimes almost bitter. There were many to whom the old bell was a matter of sentiment, and sentiment is sometimes strong. It was a link between their present and a vanished youth, a common bond in a homogenous society. To them it was a valuable relic of bygone days, and, having once served the noble purpose of education, it must not be melted down for the grim purposes of war. But how to circumvent it remained a question.

Among these champions of the old bell was Selectman Ralph E. Boynton, who made the prediction: "Sell it, if you must, but mark my words, it will never reach the junk pile."

Time passed as time will and through it the fate of the old bell

remained shrouded in mystery. And then one day, years later, it came to light again, for "friends had rescued it." For some years it had safely rested in the barn of Roscoe A. Sawyer. It was there that the selectmen, Ralph E. Boynton, Jason C. Sawyer, and Homer J. Belletete, on their annual spring inventory rounds, chanced to come upon it. They lifted the bell and rang it. As the sounds reverberated, memories of their boyhood came to each of them as all three had answered its call to classes many years before. And Mr. Boynton was pleased that his prediction of the war years had come to pass and the old bell had been saved from the scrap heap.

Interest in the bell as a relic of a bygone day was rekindled and its possession became an objective of the historical society. At first reluctant to part with it, the Sawyer sons, Alfred and David, finally in 1966 presented the old bell to the Jaffrey Gilmore Foundation. Today it has a place of honor on a stand in the middle of the "Bell Room" in the new Civic Center.

ICE HARVESTING

In the days when electrical service was limited to the villages and populous areas, ice harvesting in midwinter was an important function on every farm even as late as the 1940's. Ice was the only means of refrigeration and every dairy farm and country home had its ice house for storage of ice for cooling milk, for shipping to city markets, and for storage of food. These houses were usually small buildings, the size depending upon the volume of the dairy output or size of the household. They usually had a double outside wall, with the space between filled with sawdust for insulation.

It was an era when the necessities of today's living were the luxuries of a privileged few. Instead of refrigerators, most homes had "Ice Boxes", some of them upright, others insulated rectangular boxes that sat on the floor. The latter were especially inconvenient. When the ice man came with a new supply of ice, all the food in them had to be removed before the ice could be placed inside. This type of box was often found in summer cottages.

There was a certain timeliness about ice harvesting. Ice had to be cut when it was at its best for storage and keeping qualities, usually about and after the middle of January. As the wane of winter grew nearer to the approach of spring, ice lost its crystal clearness and became porous, a factor for poor keeping and easy melting. And with pockets of "rotten" ice forming on the ponds, they become unsafe for man and beast. Ice harvesting was a looked-for

winter event. There was a romance about the forest surrounded ponds and lakes across which the winter wind blew to make men's faces ruddy. And, if it was real cold and the wind was from the north, the breath of the oxen and steeds formed frost and small icicles about their nostrils. At best it was hard work. But the joy of seeing the crystal bluish cakes of ice come out of the water hole made amends for all the discomfort. When the day's work was done, doubly appreciated by the cold and weary workers was the warmth of the home fires and the evening repast after the oxen and horses were snugly tied in their stalls and fed. There was an indefinable romance about the old way of life that is not found today. It was a way of life which measured in terms of its hardships, its joys and recompense were doubly rewarding. There was a soul-satisfying fullness to living then that today's mechanization and automation fail to produce. And yet, would we want to go back?

There was a routineness about ice harvesting. Even in the 1940's, when the harvest of ice began to disappear, it was carried on as it had been for a hundred years or more. When the ice on ponds and lakes had attained a sufficient thickness of clear ice, it was cut into blocks or cakes with an ice saw. With the means of an ice tongs, still to be found on many farms, these were lifted from the water hole and loaded on sleds, and later on trucks, and carted to the ice houses where they were carefully placed in rows. The spaces between the cakes, rows, and layers were banked with sawdust, a process continued until a sufficient amount of ice was stored. Sometimes the farmers worked together, helping each other lay in a supply of ice for the summer ahead.

In the summer the cakes were dug out from the sawdust as needed, washed, and put in water troughs or tanks where milk cans and jugs were placed for cooling and into household ice boxes. Many of the summer homes had ice houses to furnish refrigeration for food.

With the extension of electrical service to the outlying areas, ice harvesting began to disappear during the 1940's. The A. M. Deschenes ice business was the last one in Jaffrey.

Besides the tongs, a necessary tool for ice harvesting was a "pike". This was a pole with two sharp pointed metal spikes at one end, one to push the cakes of ice along, either to the sled or to the runway in case of large ice houses like the one of A. M. Deschenes on Contocook Lake and the huge Boston Ice Company

ice house on Pool Pond in Rindge. The other prong pointed back so that the man in the ice house could pull the cakes inside.

Ice harvesting had its problems, too. In the early 1900's Benjamin G. Wilson bought the milk business of Delbert A. Arel who lived on the present McSkimmon farm and moved to Massachusetts in 1904. Wilson was not in the habit of putting in ice and now realized that he had no means of keeping his milk from turning sour in the summer. It was past the middle of winter when he decided to cut ice. During an ordinary winter it would have been a dire prospect but that year the ice was unusually thick—thirty-two inches—and could not be cut into cakes with an ice saw. With Yankee ingenuity, he decided to cut the ice into strips, ten or fifteen cakes long. These he pulled out of the water with his oxen. Then the strips were sawed into cakes of proper dimensions with an ordinary two-man crosscut saw.

The Sawyer farm stored ice even after the installation of electrical service until the early 1930's. Jason C. Sawyer, to whom we are indebted for these anecdotes about ice harvesting, recalls that ice sawing was a backbreaking job and not without its hazards. The process of sawing ice brought ice particles or sawings to the surface which had to be shoveled off. He recalls one time when cutting ice at the mill pond in Squantum with Oren Lemay, he stepped on a cake of ice while shovelling the ice sawings or shavings off. The cake suddenly went down and he was waist deep in frigid water. But the shovel, which was nearly new, was never found.

To lighten the work of ice cutting, the larger ice dealers soon made use of ice plows. These plows had a steel blade instead of a share as farm plows have. First the ice field was marked off and one man led the horse along the mark while another held the plow. The blade cut about one third way through the ice, after which the cakes were separated with a heavy ice chisel. The cakes cut in this manner were not so smooth as those cut through with a saw. The uneven sides presented a storage problem, too.

For years the ice man's wagon was a familiar and much awaited sight along the streets. To prevent the ice from melting it was covered like a prairie schooner, and had a scale hanging over the tailgate. The ice man was an obliging fellow who would give his customer the exact amount of ice ordered. If a customer wanted five or ten pounds of ice and the nearest cake available weighed thirty pounds, he chopped off enough to bring the weight down to order. It was a familiar sight to see small boys following the ice

wagon, picking up the scattering chips to suck on. Even today for many of the older inhabitants, the slow clop-clop-clop of the ice man's horse along the streets and the clang of the bell on its collar are nostalgic memory-sounds of an era that will never return.

THE BELL RINGER

When on January 25, 1942, Jaffrey's octogenerian bell ringer, Charles S. Phelps, rang the bell in the steeple of the Old Meeting-house for the first air raid signal test held in Jaffrey, its reverberations were heard across the continent. The news of the feat was flashed across the country by the Associated Press, and for a long time afterward Mr. Phelps received news clippings from various parts of the United States, some from as far away as the west coast.

As a function of preparedness during World War II, to Mr. Phelps was given the task of ringing the bell at Jaffrey Center. In spite of his four score and more years, and nearly blind, he hurried across the Common to the Old Meeting-house. He was used to ringing the ancient bell for he had rung it since boyhood. He had rung it on the occasions of the deaths of two presidents, James A. Garfield and Warren G. Harding. He had rung for fires; for twelve o'clock at noon before there was a clock in the steeple; and often in his earlier years he had been called upon to toll it for a death in the community, four times four for a man, three times three for a woman, and two times two for a child. He had rung it for the glorious Fourth of July and for that first Armistice Day in 1918.

But to ring it for an air raid signal test, for the preservation of humanity and for victories on VE Day and VJ day were the crowning events of a lifetime of bell ringing. No doubt, memories of the first downward pulls of the rope ran through his mind when as a boy he rang it for the first time, seventy odd years earlier. Yet, he derived the greatest joy and the feeling of fullest satisfaction from these, his final tollings of the ancient bell.