

9/13/1979

Ancient weathervane returns to Westford printing plant tower

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — Seven years ago an unusual old friend mysteriously disappeared from atop the 80-foot bell tower of The Murray Printing Company.

It was a handmade copper weathervane, light for its size, which had shown the direction of the winds for seventy years. One day there was nothing but a lone spike on the highest point of the Murray complex.

What happened?

It was during a brief period when antique vanes were disappearing from the countryside, principally from old barns. It seemed that helicopter pilots had taken a fancy to the horses, sheep, cows, deer, roosters, eagles and the usual arrows and swallow tail designs which were rather plentiful on big buildings. That is, until some of these thieves were caught.

Localites assumed, therefore, that a helicopter had hovered over the merino ram and with ease lifted it from its lofty perch. The Abbot Worsted Company, owners when the tower was erected in 1910, had especially made it to crown their largest mill.

But not so. It was a daring human spider who had thrown a ladder over an 8-foot fence, somehow carried it to the roof and made the final ascent by ropes. Was it a movie stunt man?

Solving the mysterious disappearance took a long time, so extended that most people had forgotten the incident.

It was solved by the good work of the Connecticut State Police. In checking out antique shops in that state, an investigator spotted the unusual and large piece, for which a search warrant had been issued.

The thief was soon caught and is still in jail, according to President John A. Walantis. The latter jokingly said that the only way he knew how to get the sheep back to its lofty pinnacle was to wait until the prisoner is released and then "make a deal with him!"

The antique dealer had such a hefty price tag on the article that Walantis is considering having a duplicate made in order to keep the original for display in the plant's lobby.

The symbol of the merino sheep, with the tightly curled horns of the ram, was very appropriate for the Abbots for a trademark, which they used liberally.

CURFEW BELL

The tower on which the sheep symbol was used as a weathervane also holds the bell which rang nightly at nine o'clock as a curfew. Mothers would inform their children that "no good child would be on the streets after the bell had sounded."

In the early days, the bell was rung usually at 5:30 a.m. to awaken the mill workers. At eventide, the melodious sound was a "good

night" message. When Abbot closed, the custom was dropped.

At the suggestion of the Historical Commission, however, Murray Printing has reactivated this practice at nine at night, much to the pleasure of the villagers.

Abbot Worsted Company, founded in 1855, during its century of manufacturing yarns for a wide variety of use, bought wool from all over the world. They also purchased camel hair which is extremely soft and light. But their principal product was knitting yarns which they supplied to other mills. This required a fine wool. And the Spanish Merino, raised in that country as far back as history has been written, was found to be the best variety. Since improvement of the breed, merino wool is now considered the best and is grown in practically all parts of the world. And Abbot's used the best.

Synthetic fibres killed the demand for this material and Abbot Worsted closed their mills in Forge Village, Graniteville and Brookside, also Lowell, in 1956.