



ABBOT HALL IN FORGE VILLAGE
... scheduled for demolition

Sun Staff photo by Dick Hunt

Another Westford landmark to fall to wrecker's ball

(Gordon B. Seavey, a retired newspaperman, is a local history buff who often writes on the area's people and places of the past.)

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — Another Forge Village landmark, venerable Abbot Hall, which took many months to construct at the turn of the century, was to be torn down today.

Each demolishing blow of the wrecker's ball will bring back to the town's oldtimers many pleasurable memories of past events which had occurred within the building's walls.

Abbot Hall was a social gathering place for the mill workers and the villagers. The town's first motion picture was shown here. The John Edwards Hose Company No. 3, under captain Edward Hunt, held its annual ball in the auditorium; and it was once a practice hall for the newly-organized Abbot Worsted Band.

Here there were socials of various kinds: whist parties, testimonials for returning war veterans and outstanding athletes, St. Patrick's Day parties and minstrel shows. Local churches and groups used the facilities, usually rent-free, on many occasions.

Ex-postmistress Josephine Socha Connell recalls that, just prior to Christmas each year, youngsters from the Cameron School would file down the hill to the building for the annual visit with Abbot's Santa Claus.

But the movies, the "flickers," were the big thing. City entertainment had been brought to the country.

TREASURER JOHN C. ABBOT of the Abbot Mills was the sparkplug who had the earlier hall remodelled and enlarged to accommodate these events. He was also the organizer of the Abbot soccer and baseball teams, bowling clubs, the band and excursions by train for the benefit of the employees.

"Jack" Abbot (as he liked to be called) was a friend to all. He appointed his right hand man and purchasing agent, Edward T. Hanley, to manage the movies, the company cafeteria and the band. Ed "bought" the films to be shown, bringing them from the distribution point in Boston.

There was a show in the middle of the week, and always one on Saturday evening. First shown was a reel of Paramount News, then one part of a serial such as "Perils of Pauline" or "Hunchback of Notre Dame." Then came the feature. This was the era of the Gish sisters, Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford.

While some of the reels were showing in Forge Village, the other half were being run off in the other Abbot Hall in Graniteville. Two showings for the price of one.

MUSIC ACCOMPANYING the silent film showings at Forge was superior. Cornelius Precious, a superintendent at the Abbot Mills, was the father of three musically-talented daughters. They were the live trio which performed at most of the showings: Carolyn at the piano, Daisy (Pamela) on trumpet, and Mildred as violinist. All three could play the piano equally well when called upon.

Carolyn, now Mrs. Derwood Newman of Chatham, recalls that when a real big feature was to be shown,

enough sheet music for a symphony orchestra was sent out. At other times, there was just a musical score from which the pianist improvised as the episodes moved forward on the screen.

Arthur "Spud" Daley, now retired in Florida, was the ticket taker and the person who maintained order. When the audience became too noisy or restless, he snapped on the lights, announcing the show would stop until order was restored.

That was effective. However, when the film strip broke, hooting and hollering was allowable.

Edward Delahaye was the projectionist, assisted by Thomas May. How the kids envied them in their exalted positions.

ON SPECIAL NIGHTS, the Abbot Worsted Company band, in its very somber and proper uniforms (black with black stripes), would play. The leader was James Larkin of North Chelmsford, whose three musical sons formed the initial core of the ensemble. Leo played saxophone, Bernie clarinet and Basil trumpet.

Earlier members included the Kelly brothers, Bill, John and Tom. Joe Blott and Jack Venn were also longtime members, as was Sigurd Peterson on bass. The Bakers, father and son, were on the drums. There were many others, some of whom became quite accomplished.

Villagers remember that it was in Abbot Hall that they first witnessed the motion picture, but it was also a place for romance as Dorothy Shea will attest, for it was there that she met her future husband, Roger J. Brule.

Billy Kelly, now 88, recalls that it was always a dinner-time conversation among the younger set as to what was going to happen to "Pauline" in the movie sequence the coming week.

It seems that last week she was about to be run over by a train, swept over a dam, or left hanging on a cliff.

The Murray Printing Company, present owners of the building since 1958, was reluctant to demolish the hall but it was fast becoming a problem. While its basement was used for some storage, the upper part had been idled by changing times for many years.