

Before buses, students barged into school

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
Sun Correspondent

WESTFORD - English dictionaries define the word "barge" as a vessel of various descriptions which plies the seas or, more commonly, is towed on rivers.

To Westford natives of at least three generations, a barge was the vehicle in which youngsters were transported to school. Is this meaning colloquial to the town?

In the early public school days of Westford, it is presumed the few students walked to the nearest school, usually held in residences in four districts, called squadrons. In 1733, squadrons were at the Center; the Parkerville area; the West, corresponding to the Forge Village section; and the North, in the region about Long-Sought-For-Pond.

An early law compelled the town to hire graduates from Cambridge to take charge of the local school system "to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the University (Harvard)." School was in session for six months yearly.

By 1851, the town had 10 district schools, the Graniteville area being number 10.

At the turn of the century, roads were much improved, making for better and faster

transportation. Gradually the process of consolidating the schools began, with the smaller schools being phased out.

Contracts were arranged with farmers, usually living in outlying districts, to bring grade schoolers to the nearest conveniently located schoolhouse. By 1914 the cost of transporting children amounted to \$2,700, the second largest item in the school budget of \$14,000.

The late George Kimball, owner of the well-known farm of that name near the Littleton line on Route 110, held a contract for many years - and also had many kids.

His "barge" was a common two-axle farm wagon with a canopy top, the fabric sides of which could be rolled up during good weather. At the rear was a flap of the same material but was rarely used. A set of steps extended at the rear. The barge was usually hauled by a pair of horses while the driver, with a child or two by his side, sat up front.

In the winter, as hard-packed snow made traveling easier, a pung with sides was substituted. This was a converted flat-bed carrier with runners used for hauling cordwood. A liberal bed of hay made for a somewhat warmer and more comfortable ride.