

Fading rhythm of the woodsman

By Gordon B. Seavey

A century ago railroad locomotives in this area depended on wood to fuel the hungry fireboxes — which in turn, of course, developed the steam to turn the wheels and pull the cars.

Westford, with its thirty square miles or 20,000 acres of land surface, was covered mostly with woodlands, particularly those sections not suitable for cultivation.

The common species of trees growing then and now are pine, both white and "hard" pine, the maples, birches, ash, and especially the oaks. The chestnut was a most useful variety, both for firewood and construction, but the blight decimated the species many years ago.

The Boston & Lowell and Nashua & Lowell Corporations purchased great quantities of cordwood to feed their locomotives. This was stashed away at the terminals and also along railroad sidings.

Sale of wood to the railroads was important as a ready cash crop to the farmers. Cutting it occupied their time during the quiet winter season and when the stifling summer heat had gone from the woods. Also, snow provided a much easier roadbed over which to haul timber over the rocks and stumps from the cutting area.

An interesting document has just come to light, supplied by Harvey B. Adams who lives in the 240-year-old Fowler Prescott homestead at 46 Lowell Road.

It covers an agreement by Noah and Nathan Prescott with the railroads to provide the latter with about 200 cords of good merchantable wood to be delivered to Westford Station at Stony Brook by April 1, 1871.

The hardwood could be round but no larger than four inches or less than 2 1/2 inches in diameter at the smaller end. The soft wood was to be all split and from sticks of four inches in diameter and upwards. All was to be "cut in four foot lengths and free from rot."

For every fifty cords stacked at the railroad yards, the company would pay in cash. The agreed price was \$5.12 1/2 per cord. Compare this with today's charge of around \$120 per cord.

To assure the fireman of well-seasoned, free-burning material, the contract insisted that if any wood had not been delivered by May 1, it would have to be split and piled so as to allow time to be properly cured.

White pine then and now is our most valuable commercial timber. The woodmen, therefore, were required to "reserve" this species if larger than eight inches in diameter, measured at breast height.

As the Prescotts were one of the larger families in town, and the custom of naming youngsters after their parents or other ancestors, it is not known if "N & N Prescott" was a father-son team, or made up of brothers or cousins.

Noah Prescott was an enterprising person and in the winter also manufactured granite paving blocks, cutting them from

huge boulders or exposed ledges. These were shipped to Lowell and Lawrence for streets, transported by rail with possibly N & N Prescott wood firing the locomotives.

There were no power saws in those days so that a tree could be levelled and cut up in minutes. If the timber was large, a two-man cross-cut saw was used. A sharp axe was the weapon needed to fell the trees in those days. It was also used to mark the logs for the cutting into the required four-foot lengths.

Cutting by axe was a skill and required a hearty stroke for this work. Perhaps one of the most noted woodsman that old timers would remember was Joe Perkins of Carlisle Road. During the Depression right after World War I, his long legs took him to the other side of the town to Millstone Hill, where he cut firewood all day long for \$1 a cord. And then the long walk back home. A cud of chewing tobacco was his only companion.

Gone are the days when one could hear the steady rhythm of a gang of woodchoppers as they felled tree after tree. Gone also is that sonorous sound of the steam locomotive whistle as the engineer played his particular melody at all crossings.