

Local country boy made it big in textiles

By Gordon B. Seavey

Life in a rural community 150 years ago was not for a local farm boy who, with 850 in his pocket and dressed in a homespun Freedom suit left his father's farm at the age of 21 for the big city Boston.

The brilliant energetic youth realized he couldn't make his fame and fortune in a tiny town of 1,300 competing with five brothers and sisters on the 150 acre farm where pots of gold were not to be found.

When he died at 73 he was a millionaire and a highly respected businessman.

His name was Abijah Edwin Hildreth, a descendant of one of Westford's oldest families. In 1687 Ephraim Hildreth built one of the earliest homes in Westford. Abijah Edwin was born in this old Hildreth landmark located - where else but on Hildreth Street - in 1809 the eldest of the children. He entered Westford Academy in 1826 to receive his book learning. This gave him the background to teach a district school in Stoneham for several winter sessions. He always spent his Sundays on the old farm.

Having reached his majority, he found it time to leave the family nest. His mother, Susan, made a complete suit, probably his first, from materials grown, spun and woven on the farm.

In Boston he met an old friend, George Cummings, and together they formed a wholesale business in printed cotton goods. The firm prospered, became well known, and soon was exporting goods to the West Indies.

One of their specialties was a bandanna kerchief, usually of a blue or red background on calico with bright figures imprinted thereon. Natives in the Caribbean went wild with these as headpieces or neckerchiefs.

Times were not always lush for this company and on an occasion became insolvent. Yankee thrift and hard work soon changed the picture.

An interesting anecdote is told that Cummings and Hildreth invited their creditors to an elaborate dinner, the latter not knowing the purpose. To their amazement each creditor found beneath his plate a check in the amount due him. This act so established their reputation for honest dealings that it was said Cummings & Hildreth could get credit for any needed amount from any business firm in Boston.

By this time Abijah dropped his Biblical name (he was deeply religious) and was called Mr. Edwin. He was married to Eliza Parker White, a descendant from the Mayflower Pilgrims, and possibly a Westford girl. They first lived in Chelsea, moved to Boston's West End and then for a number of years on Cambridge's ritzy Dana Hall section.

He had become a successful businessman and also made wise financial investments. He was a stockholder and director in several railroad and manufacturing companies in New England. Perhaps his most worthy business status was to be found in his position as president of the flourishing Bates Mills Manufacturing Company at Lewiston, Maine.

He was president of the Cambridge Gas Light Company and was deeply interested in the lighting of the city. This was prior to the more general use of electricity.

Although he moved about quite a bit, he loved his Bay State and never settled far from his many relatives in this area. He purchased a fruit farm of 18 acres in 1847 in the center of Groton, now the home of the Sisters of the Holy Union, a long time school. He remodeled the Farnsworth house extensively. His introduction of running water, hot and cold, with bath room conveniences was the envy of the townspeople. Perhaps he had no fond remembrances of the primitive facilities on the farm

and the necessary house attached to Westford Academy.

During his twelve years in Groton he took an active interest in local affairs and was trustee of Lawrence Academy for 33 years. He also served one term as state senator.

By 1860 the Hildreths with their ten children went back to Cambridge, living near the ruins of Fort Washington overlooking the Charles River. The move was made for better educational advantages for his growing family.

Mr. Edwin was a quiet, unassuming man who loathed publicity. Nevertheless, he gave generously to many private charities, rarely mentioning the act. Following his death a century ago, a daughter presented a bust of his likeness to the Groton Public Library of which he was a benefactor.

At his decease his family was scattered but all comfortably provided for in amounts of \$100,000. Two sons, Edwin and Stanley, were engaged in the town of Harvard manufacturing for a number of years various agricultural machines, mostly horse-powered, such as saw rigs.

The period that Mr. Edwin rose to fame and wealth was during the prolific writings of Horatio Alger, whose many books had as heroes boys whose virtues were invariably rewarded with success and riches.

Perhaps Alger used Mr. Edwin's success for one of his subjects.

A Westford native and historian, Gordon Seavey is a former newspaper editor who now is a freelance writer.