

Westford wanderings

School budget 75 years ago was a very different picture

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WESTFORD — The annual process of budget planning for various town departments is now under way. Wouldn't the School Committee and other officials be happy to deal with the financial problems and costs of, say, some 75 years ago?

From the attic of an old Westford home came a bundle of receipted bills, dated 1911, which in part represented what it cost then to operate Westford Academy for the 40-week school year.

When great-grandfather attended the school, the trustees — with interest from accumulated funds — supplied the money for much of the operating school costs. The trustees named a "standing committee" to supervise the expenditures and at least two members were required to OK every bill, no matter how small. This committee included Sherman H. Fletcher, George T. Day and John C. "Jack" Abbot.

Coal \$6.50 a ton

The largest item, for building maintenance, was the fuel needed to heat the sprawling building which is now the home of the Roudenbush Community center. Oil and gas were not available.

The committee shopped at home as much as possible so for that year the fuel — coal — was purchased through the local grocers, Wright & Fletcher at the Center. Coal was shipped from the mine to a side track at Pine Ridge Station on what is now the Nashua, Concord & Boston RR's abandoned "Red Line," at the junction of Forge Village and Pine Ridge roads. It was unloaded by the shovels full, all 54 tons, into horse-drawn dump carts — and then the long, hard haul up by the Coolidge farm to the Academy. Delivery cost of the "broken" coal was \$6.50 per ton.

Janitor a Civil War vet

The man engaged to fire the hungry hot air furnace was Al Bicknell, a Civil War Veteran. His salary for the entire year

was \$150, paid in monthly installments of \$16.67 with a treasurer's check signed by Abiel J. Abbot. One check contained \$2.50 in addition for extra duties such as splitting two cords of wood to "perk up" the coal fires. Oscar F. Spalding furnished the wood, sawed to proper lengths, for \$5.50 a cord, delivered by horse and cart.

The upper floor of the building, an open room where the principal held forth from a platform, as well as the two other classrooms on the ground floor were swept after classes. Mrs. John Perkins received \$3 a week for this duty, paid monthly.

Naturali, there was the usual wear-and-tear on the equipment. Bill Sutherland was paid 30 cents an hour for carpentry work and the same for painting the entrance porches. Paint was \$2.40 a gallon, including the lead contents.

The Westford Water Company, privately owned, had No. 33 for the Academy's account. For \$25 the school received the "second best water in the state" using 13 outlets in various locations. There was no hot water in the building.

At times, specialists were brought in. One was Charles E. Woodhull of Boston who cleaned, tuned and regulated the piano for \$3. At no extra charge, he camphorized the striking pads to foil the moths.

The company which originally installed the heating system when the building, the Academy's second, was erected in 1897, sent two men from Fitchburg during the summer to clean and repair the system.

Aside from a few fittings, the Brownell-Mason Co., charged \$5.40 for six hours labor plus \$1.84 for car fares. No travel time charge then. Our house just paid a serviceman \$18 to rescue a small sock which had jumped over the tub in our washing machine only to land in the wrong place.

Teachers' salaries

And now came the question as to what to pay teachers — or what teachers tell the taxpayers to pay them.

The Academy had an enrollment of 55, with girls in the

majority. When grade school students entered the Academy for the first time, they found that the young ladies were addressed by the teachers as "Miss Hildreth" for example; the boys by their surname.

Parents were warned that "continued absences would very likely lead to non-promotion," reported Principal Dexter E. Coggeshall. Educated at Tufts, his salary per month was \$120. Since the nearest bank was in Lowell or Ayer, one of his paychecks was honored for groceries by Wright & Fletcher, who in turn endorsed it over to Holbrook-Marshall Co. of Nashua, wholesale grocers.

Coggeshall was an excellent teacher and popular. He lived opposite the Civil War monument, but when the death of their first child occurred the pain was so great that he and his wife left the familiar surroundings at the end of his contract. He was succeeded in 1912 by William C. Roudenbush who dedicated 25 years of his life as head of the school.

Old time Academy students, too will remember Coggeshall's two outstanding women assistants, Bertha H. Norris, a graduate of Vassar who came from Portland, Maine, and Edith M. Lawrence, an alumna of Mt. Holyoke whose home was Campbell.

Students who were fortunate to be in their classes will remember that these young ladies were most dedicated instructors and had no hesitancy in asking a student to remain after class or school hours if they needed extra help or encouragement. Nor did they hesitate to detain a student for disciplinary reasons.

Their salaries were a miserable \$60 a month, just half that of the teaching principal. Where was ERA in those days? Women still didn't have the right to vote, and the school committee was composed of all males.

It could be said, however, that these attractive young ladies were compensated in other ways. Miss Norris married Arthur G. Hildreth and Miss Lawrence, Harold W. Hildreth, both local young men. Their children were destined to graduate from the Academy in later years.