

Steam locomotives ran on wood, at \$5 a cord

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — The warning blat of a diesel-powered locomotive, leading a long string of freight cars along Stony Brook Valley, is nothing to compare with the melancholy sound of whistles on the old steam locomotives, as the engineer would play his own special tune when sounding two long, one short, one long blast as his rocking iron monster approached each crossing.

And the price of fuel, especially when these steam locomotives were burning wood to keep up the needed pressure, is not to be compared with the current price (around \$100) for a cord of fireplace wood.

For its fuel supply a century ago, a railroad purchased wood along its route, generally from farmers who found it a profitable sideline to general farming, and one that could be worked in the dull

winter season. An old contract, dated January 9, 1871, shows the going price was \$5 per cord (eight feet long x four feet wide x four feet high), delivered to the nearest railroad station.

THE RAILROADS concerned in this contract were the Boston & Lowell, and the Nashua & Lowell corporations. The contract showed species of wood classified to the amount of heat value each

would produce. For the lighter woods (pine, white maple, grey birch and beech), the price was the lowest. Next came spruce, hard pine, hemlock and chestnut, given a higher rating. Choice was rock maple, black and yellow birch, walnut and the oaks.

The wood was to be split into sizes not larger than four inches in diameter, nor smaller than two and one-half inches. The softer woods were

split smaller and were used for kindling the boilers.

Since the railroads had purchased 12 acres of woodlands in Westford to be harvested, in this contract they did not break-down the various woods into classifications. They did state, however, that the "pine timber down to eight inches in diameter" was to be reserved, probably to be sold to a sawmill operator.

NATHAN P. PRESCOTT and his son, Noah, agreed to furnish or cut 200 cords of "good merchantable wood" from this lot, prior to April 1st, so it could "cure" during the summer, for \$5.13 per cord, delivered to a siding.

If piled in a continuous line, 200 cords would stretch nearly one-third of a mile and would weigh in the vicinity of 5,000

tons. A lot of hard work for two men, armed only with axes and a crosscut saw, for \$1,025! Payment was to be made after each lot of 50 cords had been stacked and measured at Westford Depot.

It was not always easy to team wood from a woodlot inasmuch as they were usually located in very rough terrain, mostly filled with rocks and boulders, or was hilly or swampy. In wet areas, unless frozen, a corduroy road of timbers, laid side by side, formed a bridge over the soft ground. Horse-drawn pungs were used if there was snow on the ground or in the woods.

• WITH COAL, a fuel more compact and with higher heat content, becoming more available, locomotives were converted to coal burners. Although the smoke stacks

contained spark arresters, many woodland fires erupted along the rights-of-way caused by these fire-eating monsters which belched smoke and soot, as well as sparks, as they puffed and rattled along the route.

After a woodlot had been cut clear, it offered little opportunity for further farming for many years to come. Naturally, it was left full of stumps and to reclaim this land would have been time-consuming. Lumbermen in this area usually were forced to purchase tracts of land outright from farmers to obtain supplies.

If left to nature, the deciduous trees which produce seeds every year would get a head start on the conifers which grow seed cones spasmodically. What had been a white pine forest,

the most valuable species for lumber, if cut clean would probably revert to hardwoods in a shorter space of time.

OSCAR R. SPALDING, one of the larger operators in this area, died in the house in which he was born on Leland Street in 1941. It was his policy not to cut a woodlot clean, but to leave "seed trees" scattered about the tract. It was usually a rough and gnarled white pine of little commercial value. In due time, it would produce pine cones from which winds scattered the seeds.

It could be said that Spalding, who for many years was a selectman, was the town's first major conservationist. He started the town forest program in Westford when he donated some 122 acres of woodlands in 1935.