



Dan Sheahan's cider mill on Old Coach Road

Tangy memories of old cider mill

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
Sun Correspondent

WESTFORD — The calendar says it's spring.

But for the nature lover, the real spring-time arrives when opportunities come to walk the woods and fields so lately covered with snow.

A gem of a spot in Westford is an interesting site where once stood a little mill active in Colonial days, busy grinding grains and sawing timbers.

Later it was expanded to house a wheelwright, the craftsman who made wagons and repaired broken wooden wheels. And it also was the home of a blacksmith.

Much later, an enterprising bachelor by the name of Daniel H. Sheahan added a rough, two-story building wherein he tinkered with steam engines, pressed apples for cider and even installed a loom to weave a blanket-type cloth used to strain apple juice.

Purchased by town

Although Dan has been dead for 60 years and the buildings have evaporated, old-timers remember the area as Dan Sheahan's cider mill.

When you visit here you will not be trespassing, for it is now part of a 30-acre section purchased by the town a year ago through the efforts of the conservation committee.

It is easy to find.

The site is at a slight bend in Lowell Road opposite the well-known Captain Peletiah Fletcher homestead built around 1720 and a small sign designates it as conservation property.

This 3-acre parcel includes an acre next to the highway, a long-abandoned apple orchard, typical of old Westford, while the middle part is a tiny body of water formed in a depression by damming Tadmuck Brook. The third acre is a woodland scene of mature pines where one soon may find jack-in-the-pulpits and skunk cabbage alongside the brook and the elusive lady's slipper poking through the pine "duff" which covers the forest floor — a great spot to picnic.

The stone dam, constructed many generations ago, also acts as a bridge over the brook. It was part of a major pathway for ox carts, stagecoaches and horseback riders on their way from southern New Hampshire through Westford and Chelmsford, and perhaps on for trading in Salem.

The road was abandoned officially by the town a century ago but its path may be followed, determined by stone walls on either side. It crossed Stony Brook Road at the one-room school house rebuilt by the late William R. Taylor and over Frances Hill, crossing Chamberlin Road to connect with the beginning of Hunt Road. At the Chelmsford town line, it becomes Spaulding Road.

This old road was a section of one of Westford's original important intertown connecting links.

A noted public-spirited townsman, Taylor sought to rebuild the dam which was to include refurbishing the water wheel. A skilled local craftsman, Henry J. O'Brien, now living at 68 Midland Street, Lowell, was assigned to the job but it was discontinued upon the owner's death.

The heavy water wheel, weighing perhaps

600 pounds, was stolen a few years ago when scrap iron became a valuable commodity.

How long Sheahan had owned the property is not known but it was assessed for \$300 in 1915. The town a few months ago paid the fair assessed price of \$32,000.

Steam boilers

O'Brien, who lived on a small farm opposite Sheahan's and across Stony Brook, is now 90 years old but he recalls many incidents of the past. He recalls that Dan loved old steam boilers and when he died his back yard was "loaded with junk."

Sheahan also installed and operated portable sawmills powered by wood-fired steam boilers for lumbermen in the nearby towns as well as locally. O'Brien as a boy would ride with him to various mills where his equipment was working, often to bring the horse and buggy back if Dan were to remain a few days.

Dan used scrap, rough-sawed boards to erect his building next to the original mill. Westford at that time had many apple and fruit orchards and here they made wooden apple boxes, also berry flats and crates.

Cull apples were usually put into cider or fed to animals in limited quantity. The apples, worms and all, were teamed up a ramp at the side building and unloaded on the second floor. Here they were crushed and sluiced to the press below.

The lower floor also contained the loom with which he wove blankets to insert between layers of the apple mush to release the juices. For the loom he used camel's hair wool procured from the nearby Abbot Worsted Mills. Some of these blankets were shipped South to use in processing cotton seed oil.

Dry mill pond

He used water power when possible, but as the small mill pond became depleted, he fired up old "Economizer," as he called the special steam boiler he had developed, to run the loom or power the cider press.

Little remains today but the foundations, the dam and the cut granite bridge.

*"I wandered by the brookside,
I wandered by the mill;
I could not hear the brook flow,
The noisy wheel was still."*

A faded photograph in the new Westford Museum shows Dan and a group of friends, in front of crude mill doorway. All the windows are of the antique, highly prized nine-over-nine sash. It is suggested that they may have come from old Westford homes, for this was during a period when owners were busy "modernizing" these Colonial gems with new sashes with larger panes of glass.

A few yards up the hill and to the right of the mill site one will come upon another interesting feature of this conservation area. Thought for years to be an Indian grinding mill is a three-foot deep pothole churned into a ledge of gneiss rock by the receding glacier 15,000 years ago. Noted geologists have confirmed this.

Try grinding some corn here some day. Maybe you can prove the geologists are in error!